
THEY LOOKED THE PART

BY LAURA KIPNIS

When Henry Kissinger famously said that power is the ultimate aphrodisiac, what he actually meant, I think, is that power makes an unattractive man more alluring. Attractive men don't need aphrodisiacs: Physical attractiveness is its own aphrodisiac. In Kissinger's formulation, power is a fungible currency — interchangeable with beauty, and sufficient quantities of it offset shortfalls in physical appeal.

The question is whether Kissinger's premise has reached its expiration date.

Or that's what I found myself wondering following the first round of sexual-harassment revelations, as conversations with friends inevitably turned, often with dark hilarity, to the physical hideousness of so many of the accused men. Of course, the hilarity was tinged with a bit of guilt, voices were lowered — because we weren't in high school, right? Having been subject to the brutality of appearance rankings ourselves, we should refrain from imposing them on others, right? Still, surveying the photo arrays of the accused, you suspected that these were not the sought-after guys in high school. Now, old and smug, bloated with power and fine cuisine, their physical unloveliness gave the unfolding story a pleasing Grimm-like quality: They'd acted monstrously, and they looked the part.

As friends shared their own episodes of harassment and gross come-ones, I noticed a theme emerging, something I hadn't considered. Being hit on by someone you judged unattractive was regarded as more insulting than being encroached on by someone decent-looking. A friend who'd had to

physically fight off a drunken but not uncomely movie star with whom she'd shared a limo described the ordeal with amused outrage, but a mild overture from an aging, balding editor who looked like a potato in horn rims (her description) left her fuming. It was a sudden glimpse into a complicated set of internal sociosexual calculations that I suspect we all perform. Clearly it's the harassing behavior itself that's wrong, but being harassed by someone from a different attractiveness echelon compounds the affront. Perhaps it risks lowering you in your own esteem — does he think he's in my league? — yet you feel guilty for making such reckonings.

Everyone knows the principle of “assortative mating,” even those who aren't familiar with the phrase. It refers to the tendency to pick mates who are similar to ourselves in characteristics like class and education, and also, of course, attractiveness. There's nothing random about such choices, and obviously I'm saying nothing a user of Tinder or Grindr would find surprising. The more attractive you are — or perceive yourself to be — the more attractive you want your mate to be, other things being equal.

But other things aren't always equal: power and money allow people — male people, mostly — to jump the queue, so to speak. At least that rogues' gallery of unattractive harassers suggests this has been the operative fantasy. In the worst cases, it's a fantasy that power overrides consent, in the way that handsomeness or charisma wins female favor, “sweeps a girl off her feet.” Like how being a rock star must feel — and were the harassing men rock stars in their imaginations, I wondered? “He's a rock star,” people now say fawningly about every C.E.O. with a good fourth quarter. Do some of them start to believe it, misidentifying every woman they meet as a compliant groupie?

When I decided to crowdsource the attractiveness question on Facebook, my female friends were eager to weigh in. “I think it's important for female humans to express their distaste for such male flesh,” one wrote. “Men like these have long lived with the assumption their flesh is tolerable, and some may believe it's desirable.” Someone who knew one of the accused harassers long ago recalled him as exceedingly brilliant but exceedingly homely; bent on seducing women to get back at the girls who ignored him

in his youth. For the women, talking about male appearance leveled the playing field; letting men experience the same kind of vulnerability women have long endured felt like a small victory.

Many of my male friends, however, were bristling, especially male progressives. They never thought about women in terms of appearance, more than a few said righteously. I was accused of body shaming, as well as superficiality, to which I retorted, summoning my inner Oscar Wilde, “Nothing is less superficial than appearance.”

Here’s something else I found curious, but no one was exactly saying: there were not a lot of good-looking men among the accused harassers. Do those guys refrain from harassing women, or is it that they’re less likely to get reported? Apparently men themselves believe it’s the latter. A male Facebook friend directed me to an old “Saturday Night Live” sketch titled “Sexual Harassment and You.” Shot in black and white, in the style of a 1950s educational film, it depicts two different men, one an ungainly dork (Fred Armisen), and the other a handsome stud (Tom Brady), coming on to two female co-workers. The dork is threatened with harassment charges; the stud gets dates and phone numbers. I noted that the writer and director were both male.

“Male power” has acquired a sleazier connotation than in Kissinger’s heyday. If some men have operated on the principle that women’s bodies were there for the plucking, regardless of niceties like consent, at least they’ve been getting away with it somewhat less lately. Which is not to say there isn’t still plenty of transactional sex and mating; plenty of “arm candy” at the side of powerful unsightly men. It’s not as though women haven’t been complicit in propping up these arrangements. Let’s be honest: We, too, have been known to leverage what we have, where we can. The question, obviously, is whether female versions of power would be less sleazy than male versions have been, especially because we keep hearing that the solution to the sexual-harassment problem is to put more women in positions of power. But even if men act out sexually more than women typically have, do we gain anything by playing the women-as-men’s-betters

card? Moral smugness isn't a great look, either. According to my informants, attractiveness matters plenty to women; we do our share of ranking and assessing, inequitable as that may be. The point is not assuming that your attractions are reciprocated. And that whatever obliviousness certain guys have displayed on that front ends — right around now.

