

FROM THE DESK OF DAVID L. SCHUTZER

[800 WORDS]

THE LOOK OF LOVE

When she's a beauty and he isn't, it's no fairy tale.
By Dan Neil, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

On Feb. 2, French President Nicolas Sarkozy, 53, freshly divorced from his second wife in October, married supermodel and singer Carla Bruni, whom he met in November. The couple's impetuous courtship had been front-page news in France all winter, which is too bad. I have always thought of France as a nation of grown-ups, where a politician's bed-wrecking could be held apart from public discourse. And for most of the Fifth Republic, it was: President François Mitterrand fathered a daughter out of wedlock and managed to keep it out of the media. Presidents Giscard and Chirac are alleged to have rogered more groupies than Aerosmith, and nobody cared. Like the sign on the doorknob says: *Ne pas déranger*.

On the other hand, Sarkozy's is no ordinary dalliance. Bruni, 40, has a staggering pedigree: Italian heiress, supermodel, pop star and A—ist succubus. She's knocked boots with Mick Jagger, Eric Clapton, Kevin Costner and France's former Prime Minister Laurent Fabius. Declaring herself "bored with monogamy," Bruni has said she prefers "polygamy and polyandry." Surely part of the French public's fascination derives from seeing so smart and worldly a man as Sarkozy step on so well-marked a land mine.

To my American eyes, though, the affair is captivating because Sarkozy is short, swart and not very attractive, and she's Carla Bruni. Let's not get bogged down in the subjectives of what constitutes beauty: She's ridiculously hot and he's ridiculously not.

The question is why? Why do beautiful women get together with unbeautiful men? The subject has aroused academic scrutiny lately, and I can only surmise it is due to recent prominent cases of what I'll call beauty asymmetry. The American analog to Sarkozy–Bruni is Dennis Kucinich and his ravishing redheaded wife, Elizabeth, who is 31 years younger, half a foot taller and seemingly of an entirely different species than the congressman from Ohio. Science wants to know, and we do too: Just how the hell does that happen?

In September, cognitive scientists at the University of Indiana released a study that was, in part, thundering in its obviousness. Based on an analysis of speed-dating behavior, comparing what people said they wanted in a mate with their actual selection, the study found that men choose women based on looks while women "leverage their looks for security and commitment." The results would seem to ratify the stereotype of women as gold diggers, a la Kanye West's song. But the dynamic is subtler than that. Women, the study suggests, select mates based on how they appraise themselves. That makes sense, because it's not uncommon for smoking-hot women to have poor self-images and to hook up with wealthy losers. We all know it. Why not say it plainly?

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And yet, the gold-digger model has limitations. Consider Donald Trump's wife, the celestial Melania Knauss. I can't imagine any amount of money being worth it when the Donald emerges from the shower, the comb-over draped like Sargasso seaweed over his right shoulder. In 2006, evolutionary psychologist Satoshi Kanazawa proposed that the phenomenon is a matter of supply and demand. By a quirk of Darwinism, he argued, beautiful parents are more likely to have daughters (inheritable beauty being advantageous to girls), and therefore there are more beautiful females in the world than handsome males. Now that's intelligent design. Last September, Kanazawa and Alan S. Miller amplified that idea in a book, "Why Beautiful People Have More Daughters." Beauty asymmetry, they suggested, is the result of the Savanna Principle. Females have limited chances to reproduce, so they favor those males (older, more prosperous, higher-ranking) who are more likely to invest in their offspring. Anna Nicole Smith may have thought she was taking billionaire J. Howard Marshall for a ride; instead, perhaps she was being hijacked by her genetic programming.

Researchers at Newcastle University in the United Kingdom recently put forth yet another theory: Women mate with less-than-classically beautiful men as a way to strengthen and diversify the gene pool—ugly men being somehow healthier and hardier, like roaches. And so the science of hot sweet love marches on, in several directions at once, and in the end, we're left baffled. Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie? Got it. Jennifer Lopez and Marc Anthony? Not a clue.

Not that I'm complaining. It is an empirical fact that my wife is gorgeous, many paygrades above me in physical beauty. How the hell does that happen? I'm not rich, powerful, a jock or a Hollywood star. It reminds me of that great line by Nancy Astor, when she admitted that she married beneath her, but then, "all women do."

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