Review of "The Cosmetic Gaze: Body Modification and the Construction of Beauty"

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Book Review | *The Cosmetic Gaze: Body Modification and the Construction of Beauty*

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In this timely and thought provoking book, Bernadette Wegenstein traces the deployment and transformation of, what she calls, the “cosmetic gaze,” from Greek antiquity to the technologically saturated culture of the West. In her introduction, Wegenstein clearly defines this central concept as follows, “The cosmetic gaze thus perceives all bodies in light of some potentially transformative completion, while at the same time transfixing that potentiality on the phantom remnant of a ‘true’ self that is fixed in time…The gaze carves out (to use one of the sculptural metaphors of the cosmetic surgery industry) what in the body obscures its perfection and leaves behind only what is beautiful and meant to be seen by others.” (Wegenstein 2012, x) The four chapters present an interdisciplinary narrative that combines philosophical, historical, literary, psychoanalytical, feminist, cultural and media studies into a postmodern pastiche with intermittent deconstructionist moments. The chapters are replete with well-chosen images that enhance the quality of the narrative. Overall, the strength of the book lies in its cultural and media studies erudition and supple ability to apply these disciplines to the morphing of the cosmetic gaze from eighteenth century Europe to today.

Throughout the first three chapters Wegenstein tends to adopt a descriptive and rather journalistic approach. In general, she avoids taking a critical stance on the cosmetic gaze, even when such a stance seems to be called for. The last chapter presents a critique of the misogyny of the cosmetic gaze as it is revealed in international films and visual arts.

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The first chapter, “Tracing the Cosmetic Gaze: From Eighteenth Century Physiognomies to Racial Theories of the Third Reich,” introduces the ancient Greek concept of kaloi kagathoi featured in Plato’s dialogues, more commonly known as kalókagatheia. Wegenstein explains that this term, which is a compound of the words “kalós (beautiful), kai (and), agathós (good) – assumes a correspondence between beauty of bodily form and a beautiful disposition in the soul.” (p. 5) The meaning of this term is said to be transmitted relatively unchanged to the use that the eighteenth century German physiognomist Johann Kaspar Lavater makes of it in his practice of drawing and “reading” the moral quality of a person’s character (mostly a woman’s!) in/on her face, based on harmony and symmetry. One wonders how the use of this term could have survived so many centuries without significant alterations in its meaning and use but the author does not address this issue. Certainly the correlation between an outside appearance and an inside constitution implies a very different understanding of these terms for Plato, Descartes and the Cartesian tradition to which Lavater’s work is indebted. Moreover, the mere thought of the physically ugly but morally accomplished Socrates featured in Plato’s dialogues seriously problematizes a unified understanding of kalókagatheia even for the Greeks.

I found the account of the transmission of kalókagatheia from Greek antiquity to the 18th century to be philosophically tenuous as it is legislated through repetition rather than explained. However, the concept’s continuity from modernity to contemporary media and makeover culture is better explained and well supported. The author may be seen to be subtly aware of this when she says, “While one could begin in the Middle Ages or even in antiquity, my study builds on the identification of a medical gaze – directed under the body’s skin – that has been in circulation in the Western world since the anatomical discoveries of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In early modernity, a separation began to be theorized between an individual body and a social body, which led to the concept in high modernity of the body as… ‘a project’ to be worked on…..The eighteenth century thus represents a significant moment for the history of medicine, a moment that Michel Foucault famously identified as the birth of modern medicine.” (p. 3) In fact, Foucault’s concept of “the docile body” as the body that “may be subjected, used, transformed and improved” seems to be the real, but never quite acknowledged, inspiration for Wegenstein’s work.

According to Wegenstein’s informative and fascinating historical account, Lavater’s intuitive technique of “reading” and drawing faces simply by looking at them seems to have been “motivated by his religious desire to find the true essence of human nature, which he felt reveals itself through the outer appearance of man.” (p. 9) She perceptively criticizes

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this romantically inspired approach as “thoroughly eclectic and subjective” one that often “fused empirical observation with unscientific methods...” (12) Partially due to its traditional sexism, Lavater’s approach was hugely popular with the burgeoning (pseudo) sciences that flourished during the 19th century; physiognomy, phrenology, anthropometry and craniometry. These sciences perpetuated (a modernized) kalókagatheia through the use of objective technologies, such as photography. The discussion of nineteenth century eugenicist Francis Galton’s and psychiatrist-anthropologist Cesare Lombroso’s sexist, racist and selective appropriations of Lavater’s work for the purposes of removing “undesirable social elements” in order to create a “deviance free society” (p. 39), as well as their influence on Nazi ideology, constitutes some of the most gripping reading in the book. In what appears to be an implied dialectical progression across the views of Lavater, Galton and Lombroso, culminating in the ideology of the Third Reich, Wegenstein shows how various social groups of “deviants” (prostitutes, criminals, Jews) were constructed and oppressed with the help of nineteenth and early twentieth century science, technology and politics. Thus, the categories of physical and moral normalcy are reinforced through acts of sexist and racist exclusion.

While in recent historical epochs the cosmetic gaze aimed at identifying and coercively enhancing or suppressing the moral potential evidenced in a person’s features, thereby normalizing that person in accordance with the dominant cultural or scientific telos, today’s techniques of normalizations have become invisible, appearing non-coercive and liberating (p. 53). The docile body unwittingly reinforces its own docility. Any reference to a culturally fixed and substantive telos has dropped out and the telos becomes vacuous and formal, a mere drive toward more enhancement. Thus according to today’s cosmetic gaze revealed on makeover TV shows, “the truth of beauty no longer depends on a real human referent (as in Lavater’s times) or on an idealized set of traits (as in Galton’s composites). Instead, authenticity is established in the lonely desert of the television experience, between an adorning camera eye and the entertained viewer’s deliberate self-deceit…. These [surgically enhanced composite] bodies have become ‘science fictional referent-less fetish images’ and are looking back at us from an unreal place. But their imperative is nonetheless real: you must change.” (p. 55) The paradoxical result of living in a makeover culture is not a brand of enhanced individualism but rather its opposite, a compulsive “massive conformism.” (54) This point illuminates and gathers the broader meaning of Wegenstein’s narrative and it could have been more strenuously underscored.

Chapter two, “The Dark Side of Beauty: From Convulsive Beauty to Makeover Disfiguration,” excavates the violent and destructive aspects of beauty. It offers a more specifically gendered analysis of the transmission of a “new beauty” as exemplified in the
literary works of Hawthorne, Breton and Munro, but Wegenstein does not develop a specifically feminist stance.

She credits the twentieth century Surrealist movement, especially Breton’s novel *Nadja*, with aestheticizing and ultimately normalizing violence and shock, including ugliness, in the creation of a “new beauty” that is “convulsive.” Informed by the normalizing gaze of Lavater, Galton and Lombroso, the new beauty includes what these men worked hard to exclude, but Breton’s work reveals. Today’s makeover culture “has inherited both an avant-garde revolution in aesthetics and a traditional notion of beauty as expressing a natural order and a good soul, the technological possibilities of manipulating the body have rewritten Plato’s *kalókagatheia* into a license to cut, deform, dismantle and reconstruct. Whereas the traditional notion of beauty posited a signifying relationship between internal essence and external appearance, *the ethics of makeover beauty involve a wholesale collapse of this distinction.*” (88, my emphasis) This philosophical claim seems correct and central to the rest of the book so it should have been better explained.

The meaning of this “collapse” seems to hinge on the reader (somehow) understanding that the new beauty no longer posits an internal essence or potential that is fixed and directed toward a determinate actualization, as it was for Greek philosophy. Rather, influenced by modernity’s critique of teleology, our culture of enhancement drives forward by appealing to a fuzzy and fluid sense of inner essence or authenticity that is actually informed by the ever-shifting norms of makeover culture. Since this inner state (or anoriginal origin) was never actually given or experienced, or so Wegenstein’s deconstructive reading asserts, it is nothing but an internalized and regulative social ideal that drives the individual forward toward more enhancement, especially through surgical cutting.

Pop icon Michael Jackson, socialite Joceyln Wildenstein and porn star Lolo Ferrari, are presented as individuals who more or less deliberately resist the culture of normalization by radically “cutting” themselves. Because their body modifications are far from normative, bordering on an alien and abject aesthetic (88-97), these individuals are dismissed as pathological or “awful” by the public. This is exemplified in “Tara’s” normative “catalogue of awfulness” at awfulplasticsurgery.com. (93) Wegenstein’s invocation of these deliberately non-normative interventions as examples of resistance, however painful, to today’s aesthetic straitjacket should be made more explicit. While she briefly glosses the point that for Michael Jackson “masculinity …became a performance piece that was reserved for the stage,” (89) and that for Lolo Ferrari, her “largest human breasts” constituted a “completely artificial femininity” that “went into a realm that may shock some and that some may read as having empowered her” (95), these remarks do not carry
substantial explanatory power and leave readers rather stranded. Is Lolo a feminist performer, a victim of patriarchy or a 20th century vaudevillian figure?

Unlike the individuals mentioned above, most people, especially women, actively or passively measure themselves against an internalized ideal of the new beauty whose fundamental criteria is to look “refreshed”, like a “four or five years younger” version of oneself (107). Helping one to look beautiful, that is young(er) and sexually potent and/or fertile, is a matter of aesthetic mathematics. Stephen Marquardt’s “golden mask”, digitally mastered according to the golden ratio (101), concretizes this new aesthetic. The mask calculates ideal facial proportions by technologically transposing the Lavaterian beauty ideal of symmetry and harmony. The mask determines where to introduce the cut, but the cut must be hidden. As Wegenstein nicely put it, “An ideal of a subtly refreshed version of the real me requires the erasing of every trace of the technology that was used to create it, thus ‘falsely’ mediating health and the possibility for healthy reproduction.” (107) The trouble is that Wegenstein does not explain the moral component of the correspondence between this inner me and the external me. Reference to physical potency and health are obviously physical and not moral attributes. Thus, without reference to a clearly articulated and shared moral norm, this version of kalôkagatheia founders. The eidos no longer corresponds to an ethos. So, while Foucauldian docility consummates itself, the Platonic cornerstone of the book no longer works. Wegenstein says that the cosmetic gaze is now “fully normalized, invisible, a part of the way we inhabit our bodies today, and it shows itself through its supplemental extrusion, the dark side of beauty that revels in its own convulsions.” (p. 108) Yet, any appeal to a contemporary inclusion of beauty’s dark side seems to be overly optimistic because, as Wegenstein points out, this dark side must be concealed and is ultimately no more than a means to the end of achieving a traditionally normative beauty.

Chapter three, “Machinic Sutures: Twenty-First- Century Technologies of Beauty” introduces and deploys Wegenstein concept of “machinic suture.” This chapter features the most original, clear and well-supported parts of the book. The concept of “machinic suture” names the operation through which the supposedly prior or pure aspects of selfhood – my true self, how I desire to be, my body – have become so via the performative influence of augmented realities.” (p. 109) Thus, the true self is not given, never present, but a constantly deferred and socially hyped up project whose mirage organizes the physical and psychological enhancements of so called conscientious individuals, mostly women. The “machinic suture” relies on technique and technology. Wegenstein’s discussion emphasizes (mostly) the technological aspect in the contexts of plastic surgery (pp. 111-119), reality TV (pp. 119-126), make-over shows such as The Swan (pp. 126- 137), new criminal imaging technologies, E-Fit (pp. 137-1420), video installations (p. 123), virtual games such as The
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Sims (pp. 142-147) and web participation on pornographic sites such as Ishotmyself' (147-150). These contexts reveal the production of the “machinic suture.” Following Wegenstein’s claim that plastic surgery offers the “most widespread and important application of the cosmetic gaze” (111), I will briefly comment on the surgically “refreshed” look of the “new beauty.”

Wegenstein’s narrative exposes the contradiction inherent in the desires of Susan and Pat, two upper middle class women from Southern California, who want to look “healthy” and “refreshed” via surgical intervention. According to their perspectives, supposedly shared by millions of women, “cosmetic surgery, which is an invasive surgical procedure that is conducted under anesthesia, is categorized as healthy. The surgery has lost any risk factor. This belief is maintained even though Pat lost her own daughter –Susan’s best friend growing up – to complications after a cosmetic surgery procedure.” (p.117) The use of technology must remain invisible. According to the author, “The new version of the New Face is that it shouldn’t look new. It should look like you. It should look like the old you.” (p.118) This new self is popularized on makeover TV shows, such as The Swan, where the audience, again mostly female, identify with the success stories of other women who have painfully transformed themselves through a psychological realignment of their self-regard (with the help of the show’s specialists) and the cut of the surgeons. Reveling in the “reveal” moment of contestants on The Swan, who now look “healthy” and “refreshed” and win prizes for doing so, their “media bodies” are presented as “real bodies.” The trouble, as Wegenstein states, is that the body images of women viewers “become interchangeable with the media bodies that cosmetic surgery reality tv presents.” (p.125) The desire for the “new beauty” lacks a referent and so the (mostly) female audience is unknowingly stuck in “hyperreality,” desiring a simulacrum. The possibility of critically questioning this desire, socially and politically, is not presented as an option.

The basic insight, illustrated through the use of various media in this chapter, is that the traditional idea of a core self is empty. A core self is given, whereas Wegenstein’s exposition shows that today this core self is produced through a continuous, “violent” exposure to various media images where “we are forced into perception.” (p. 124) Furthermore, a core self is something that suggests unity and stability, while the technological core self is a product of the “machinic suture.” (p.124) The following quote captures the meaning or meaninglessness of the “machinic suture” as instantiated through surgical intervention and in the context of makeover TV. Wegenstein writes, “Cosmetic makeovers claim that the goal is not to look like anyone else but to find oneself and how one was really meant to be and look. This self has moved beyond its limited reality as a flesh body into the mixed realities of the various ways it can be envisioned, with or without technologies of enhancement, and improved according to the laws of the cosmetic gaze…
Transformation is the imperative as well as the true nature of the makeover self... The authentic self is not a given but lies out there to be discovered. It has to be achieved, which is a by-product of the actual moral virtue of the made-over self-hard work. The body is... a platform to invest in, and the act of resisting a bettering of the body (and soul) is taken as an expression of bad morals.” (p.131, my emphasis) Interestingly, the “machinic suture” as the constitutive process of the cosmetic gaze, together with the cosmetic gaze itself, signal the ontological (en)framing of meaning as constant production at the expense of political action or a receptivity to the given (being). The absence of social and political resistance to the cosmetic gaze implies the ontological hegemony of this gaze.

In the last chapter, “Editing Women: The Cosmetic Gaze and Cinema,” the author develops a psychoanalytical and feminist interpretation of the cosmetic gaze. She emphasizes that, in the twentieth century, “the dissemination of this beauty concept... paved the way for a culture of makeover beauty, which ... accepts a certain aestheticization of the makeover process, such that abnormalities, deformities, and creative interventions can attain positive value as modes of self-expression. The cosmetic gaze... opens up a space of acceptability for beauty’s dark side.” (p.151) Through an analysis of films, old and new, she critiques the male gaze and argues for the liberating power of “beauty’s dark side,” which remains concealed to the male gaze but gives itself over to the “more expansive” cosmetic gaze. Despite the repetition, I find the affirmation of beauty’s darkness unconvincing because this darkness is only accepted if it remains concealed. Furthermore, the difference between the male gaze and the cosmetic gaze remains somewhat unclear. The male gaze seems to be an aspect of the cosmetic gaze directed specifically at ordering the female body and identity, while the cosmetic gaze organizes all aspects of the social order. Nonetheless, according to Wegenstein, it is only through the cosmetic gaze that we can properly critique the “romantic myth of female wholeness” (p.152) that continues to be (self) imposed by/on women.

Wegenstein’s feminist interpretation of A Woman’s Face (1941), The Horror Chamber of Dr. Faustus (1962), The Holy Mountain (1973), The Mirror has Two Faces (1958, 1996) and Time (2006), critically exposes male sexism and gently interrogates women’s internalized sexism. (pp. 153-163). The trajectory of her analysis moves across films that increasingly allow for more female agency and ultimately propose a subversion of the male gaze and the “romantic myth of female wholeness,” such as in Marina de Van’s In My Skin (2002) and Jane Campion’s In the Cut (2003). These films are shot and narrated from the protagonists’- Esther and Frannie respectively -own points of view. Both women are obsessed with cutting. While Esther self-mutilates, Frannie is obsessed with the cutting of other women and with cutting language. (pp. 169 -170) Her “vision of the female body always combines danger and sexuality.” (p. 177) Frannie’s desire seems to linger on the memory of her parents’ tragic romance while it also pursues a relationship with a
misogynist man whose darkness arouses her. This torn desire prohibits the formation of a unified and whole identity and so partially subverts the male gaze. Wegenstein writes, “The female subjects of these films are no longer just made to simply desire femininity … Instead, femininity is addressed … as … caught within the cosmetic gaze itself. There is no outside to this position but only an ‘in’ the skin or the cut. We are presented with the status quo of a femininity that consists of fragmentation. There is no whole female body; there never has been… [so] femininity has to be narrated and visualized in bloody bits and pieces to stress the impossibility of an outside gaze into femininity.” (pp. 176-177)

While this visualization may provide a critical distance from patriarchal oppression, it does not promise feminist liberation, because it does not provide any positive content. First, by positing fragmentation against wholeness it sets up a reactionary dynamic whereby the former shows up over and against the latter, thereby reinforcing rather than displacing the binary relationship between traditional metaphysical and logical categories of unity-plurality. Second, although Frannie resists seeing herself (entirely) through the social order of the superego or through the symbolic order of the other (p.179), her fissured self does not convincingly problematize misogyny. Third, both Frannie and Esther lead suffering lives that end, as Wegenstein perceptively puts it, in bloody bits. Fourth, the line between reinforcing aestheticizations of violence against women and critically exposing them is much too blurry, at least for this reader.

Overall, I found much to like in this book. It is interesting, timely, well written and ambitious. Perhaps it’s overly ambitious and this may be its main flaw. It simply condenses too many concepts across too many disciplines and often does not offer adequate support or explanation. Although the book’s primary strength is not philosophical it is enjoyable, bold, informative and likely to appeal to anyone with a background or interest in interdisciplinary studies and in the growing influence of the makeover industry on today’s culture.