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# Aesthetic surgery as false beauty



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**Abstract** This article identifies a prevalent strand of feminist writing on beauty and aesthetic surgery and explores some of the contradictions and inconsistencies inscribed within it. In particular, we concentrate on three central feminist claims: that living in a misogynist culture produces aesthetic surgery as an issue predominantly concerning women; that pain – both physical and psychic – is a central conceptual frame through which aesthetic surgery should be viewed; and that aesthetic surgery is inherently a normalizing technology. Engaging with these ‘myths’, we explore the tensions uncovered through a historical analysis of the practices of aesthetic surgery as well as the challenges to feminist claims offered by post-feminism. In particular we seek to destabilize the connection in feminist writing between beauty and passivity. We argue that through aesthetic references to denigrated black and working-class bodies, young women may mobilize aesthetic surgeries to reinscribe active sexuality on the feminine body.

**keywords** *aesthetic surgery, beauty, body, class, race*

In this article we aim to disrupt some of the usual ways in which feminists have come to think about the female (and male) body, in order to find a space between the prevalent discourses for some alternative explanations. Our principal aim is to explore some of the diverse reasons why women (and men) may engage in aesthetic surgery,<sup>1</sup> without relying on the beauty myth as a determining argument. Instead we focus on seekers of aesthetic surgery as either consumers (exercising choice within a given set of constraints) or as reflexively engaged in a project of the self (within a limited range of possible selves). We aim to widen understandings of aesthetic bodily practices to extend beyond gender and/or ‘race’ in any conventional sense. Furthermore, we aim to decouple the link between beauty and passivity, or at least to decentre it, by positing alternative correlations such as the link between glamour and *active* sexuality. In doing this we will also uncover some of the ways in which feminist discourses of beauty are inherently classed and ‘raced’. However, moving away from a singular explanation – beauty, normalization, internalized racism, for instance – inevitably complicates our argument. In the following sections

we consider gender, 'race' and class; work, consumption and emulation; feminism and post-feminism; as well as the interaction and interrelation between these frequently intertwined categories.

## A beautiful history

Theories of beauty have a very long history. What makes something or someone beautiful, whether beauty is a property of the object/person or rather rests in the eye of the beholder, and whether or not a consensus exists on what exactly is beautiful, are questions that have occupied thinkers since the ancient Greeks. Feminists, however, have tended to skip such fundamental questions, drawing rather on the view that beauty is part of the currency of power. Feminists have asked not what beauty is, but who is in charge of the standards and definitions of beauty and what their motives are for maintaining them. They have also drawn on existential philosophy (offered via de Beauvoir) in order to identify the consequences of being defined as a beautiful woman, and on Foucauldian theory to demonstrate the technologies at work in becoming beautiful (Bordo, 1993; Bartky, 1991). We do not intend to propose an alternative definition of beauty; in any case beauty always exceeds the rule that defines it. Rather, we want to re-examine some early theorizations and practices of beauty in order to demonstrate their considerable influence on later thinking, and on feminist thought. We aim to expose some fundamental contradictions that structure contemporary notions of beauty.

The first thinker to consider beauty in any sustained and analytical way, perhaps, was Plato (2003). For Plato our world is a world only of partial representations of another one – the realm of Forms. Our immortal souls lived in the realm of Forms before our life in this world, and we are reminded of it but can never fully recall it whilst in this life. In the *Symposium* Socrates argues that beauty is what attracts us, and that the good is the one thing that can be attractive above all else and that makes beautiful things beautiful. Worldly instances of anything – such as a beautiful thing – should lead us to seek the beautiful itself, the Form of beauty. All experienced examples of a Form thus recall the Form itself; beautiful things lead us toward the beautiful, and the beautiful is beautiful because it is what is loved, and we can only love the good. Plato used the term *callos* both to denote beauty as it is experienced through the five senses and to denote that which is morally noble. Thus, for Platonists, beauty always has a moral quality. When we see a beautiful person, that perception jolts our memory of this former realm and gives rise to feelings of love for that person; Plato uses the metaphor of growing wings and trying to fly back to the heavenly realm of Forms. Beauty, love and moral goodness are thus inextricably linked, and also connected to truth and knowledge. However, we should remember that Plato was, of course, talking about beautiful *men*, not women. Seeing a beautiful boy could inspire a philosopher towards greater pursuit of the Forms of truth and knowledge. Women were seen as less capable of attaining a state of pure contemplation or communion with the soul. Since the beauty of boys is linked to pedagogy,

the boy could be a loved/beautiful object in a relation that would lead to learning and mastery. Women were outside this pedagogic relation. The beauty of a woman is thus fundamentally different from the beauty of a man.

Plato was highly influenced by Pythagoras and saw a connection between geometry and beauty. The perfect form is symmetrical and follows strict numerical proportions. Perfect proportion, which could be mathematically proven, was also seen as a door into the realm of Forms, a bridge to the other world. Aristotle shared this respect for numbers and symmetry, but rather than these acting as a reminder of or door to another realm, for Aristotle these were characteristics firmly rooted in this world. For Aristotle, beauty is related to how well an object is designed to be able to meet its function or goal. Beauty is order, symmetry and definiteness. For Aristotle, beauty is rooted in the real world, and has a purpose. (For human beings this might mean that beauty leads to reproduction, for example [Aristotle, 1984].)

Another important step to outline is the ways in which these ideas were taken up in early Christianity. Early ecclesiastical scholars Thomas Aquinas and Augustine worked to reconcile Platonism and Christianity. Like Plato, these scholars saw beauty as a reminder of another world – Heaven. Through gazing on beauty we progress from ‘sensible beauty’ up a ladder of love to the beautiful revelation of God. God is the arch designer and makes *man*, perfectly proportioned, in his own image. Thus a beautiful man reminds us of God, but a beautiful woman is problematic, since she is not made in God’s image, so her beauty is much more ambiguously conceived (Synnott, 1993).

Later thinkers expanded on the already established link between beauty and measurement. Beauty, they thought, was a scientifically measurable phenomenon related to perfect proportion. This position is perhaps best illustrated through the work of Leonardo da Vinci (and many of his contemporaries) and is most evident in his Vitruvian man whose proportions are painstakingly measured out. However well intentioned, it is but a short step from Vitruvius to the head measurements associated with scientific racism (Blumenbach, 1865 (1969); Ripley, 1897; Goldberg, 1993). Thus early theorizations of beauty have been used to exclude many people from white Western standards of beauty.

Alongside this connection between (white) men’s beauty, morality, spirituality, truth and knowledge, there also exists another narrative – of *women’s* beauty, which is most usually suspect. Women’s beauty is more often linked to deception than to truth or goodness. For Plato, for example, true (men’s) beauty is original, close to the Forms from which sensible and bodily experience is derived, closer to the very order and proportion of the world; whereas women’s beauty is connected with adornment and simulation – women also being at one remove from the human Form that is God’s image. In many religious texts women’s beauty causes man’s fall from faith, truth, knowledge and goodness. Beauty corrupts, and beauty itself can be faked. In the Old Testament every reference to the application of make-up relates to a ‘bad’ woman, Jezebel being

the best known. In almost every instance these decorated women are also Egyptian, or 'other' women. Women who paint their faces usually do so for seduction – using sexuality to confuse men, usually with some ulterior motive in mind. Women using make-up are thus bad women, as opposed to unpainted good women. So naturally beautiful women are good, falsely beautiful made-up women are bad – bad because they *have* a sexuality. Naturally beautiful women submit to and carry out the will of others – their father, husband, brothers, gods. Falsely beautiful women use their beauty for their own ends, to manipulate men. Thus, we are left with a startlingly different formulation to that proposed by many feminists: naturalness = passivity, false beauty = agency. For men, then, beauty is good because it is connected to truth, knowledge and spirituality. For women, natural beauty is good because it is passive; false or 'enhanced' beauty is bad because it reflects the active (sinful) intentions of the woman herself.

### Grotesque bodies?

Having briefly outlined the theoretical origins of the classical body we will now explore its 'opposite' – the grotesque body. This is especially important since contemporary Western culture continues to make links between these different bodies, the beautiful and the grotesque. The grotesque body is most strongly associated with Mikhail Bakhtin's (1984) work on the medieval carnival in Europe. Bakhtin argued that carnivals celebrated the unfinished body – a body that was intimately connected with, and open to, the world around it. The grotesque body was celebrated by working people in an irreverent critique of the classical body, itself linked to self-discipline, spirituality and thus the aristocracy. Two bodies came to represent two coexistent cultures – the classical stood for the officially sanctioned (serious) culture, and the grotesque represented the unofficial (playful and largely lost) culture of 'the people'. Classical bodies were characterized by grooming, beauty and grace. The grotesque body emphasized and exaggerated the mouth, anus, buttocks, penis, belly, breasts, nose, eyes and ears, to demonstrate the body's unboundedness.

For Bakhtin, the grotesque body was part of a culture of fun, not revered like the classical body, but sent up in a collective humour that always recognized the reveller as part of the joke: making the grotesque the object of laughter, one implicitly laughed at oneself. The grotesque was never beautiful, but working people felt an affinity with and affection for it. However, the developing cultural authority of the bourgeoisie by the 18th and 19th centuries sought to erase the carnivalesque and all its associations (Stallybrass and White, 1986). The controlled body came to take a pivotal role for the bourgeoisie in defining 'respectable' citizenship with all the benefits that accrued to that category, and oppositions between the classical and the grotesque became integral to concepts of class, gender, 'race' and sex. By the end of the 19th century in Europe and its colonies, the only proper, respectable body was a controlled, slender and 'unmarked' one. Those bodies unable to escape the struggles of everyday survival, a

life so celebrated in carnivalesque imagery, began to be marked *pejoratively* as grotesque and hence denigrated.

'Other' 'races', genders, sexualities, classes and ages began to be systematically incorporated into a sophisticated binary system that attributed relative value and differing moral characteristics to different types of bodies, and the grotesque body became increasingly central to the burgeoning 'science of the other' (Stallybrass and White, 1986). The 'science' of 'race' conflated white with rationality, goodness and purity, and black with degeneration, dirt and danger (McClintock, 1995). These systems combined with Social Darwinism to form what has been called the 'racialization' of gender, sexuality and class through the insistence on essential signifiers of biological degeneracy in all these categories (Gilman, 1985).

The belief that there was an intrinsic biological basis for human behaviour and difference underpinned much of Enlightenment thinking. Black bodies were considered closer to nature (negatively in this formulation) and particularly invested with uncontrollable sexuality and a lack of morality. Science was deployed to 'prove' this sexual degeneracy through, for instance, the measurement of hips and buttocks (Krafft-Ebing, 1965). Nowhere was this idea made more explicit than in the exhibition throughout Europe in the 19th century of Sara Baartman, known as the 'Hottentot Venus', whose protruding buttocks (and therefore grotesque body) were taken to signify the truth of her arrested development and voracious sexuality (Gilman, 1985). Middle-class white women, however, were stripped of sexual desire and placed in opposition to the hypersexual black woman, whilst nevertheless being considered incapable of rational thought. It is easy to see, then, why a largely white, middle-class feminism has until recently tended towards favouring a desexualization of the body in favour of claims to rational thought and moral superiority.<sup>2</sup>

The body therefore became a marker of who is valued and who is denigrated, who is included and excluded in civil society, and the particular racialized, gendered, classed and age traits of each body were assumed to express the social position, intellectual ability, or sexual characteristics of the person in question. Bodies were thus carefully managed in order to be read as appropriate for social contact. Dress is one mechanism for achieving this aim (Goffman, 1959), but increasingly aesthetic surgery is being used to enhance people's chances of participation in the public sphere, especially through enacting social mobility.

## The feminist body

Feminist work has frequently engaged with traditional political and social theory, itself concerned with developing the idea of a sovereign subject that can enter into contracts based on equality. Equality, though, is not just a right but something that has to be demonstrated. Equality depends on the ability to engage rationally – in particular by putting aside those more visceral influences that are said to cloud rationality. Simone de Beauvoir's (1997) profoundly influential writing, for example, starts from this assumption. Women, she says, are twinned with nature and their bodies, men with

culture and their minds; women with immanence and men with transcendence. Women can never be accepted as fully rational because they are seen as governed by their hormones – their reproductive potential marking them as animalistic (and implicitly sexual) (see for instance, Grosz, 1994 and Shildrick, 1997 who develop this point). This absence of rationality marks women as objects, never fully self-present, and engaged in constant self-scrutiny. According to de Beauvoir, this results in women's reduction to, and constant and trivial obsession with, their bodies and beauty. To gain equality with men, then, feminists must reject those qualities that mark them as different – as women. Women should seek to transcend their bodies and therefore reject beauty.

Immanence is also, of course, a quality of other 'others' who are neither defined as, nor required to be, beautiful. Working-class and black women have more frequently been denied the 'luxury' of beauty, and instead have been concerned with earning their living in dirty and sometimes dangerous conditions. However, despite being thought of as ugly, they have, at the same time, been invested with 'a hypersexuality' (McClintock, 1995). Thus, 'true' beauty has been desexualized, bringing respectability for white, middle-class women through their distance from 'other' sexualized women. While beauty may have been experienced as a constraint for middle-class women, for 'other' women achieving beauty meant attaining the 'respectability' that signified enhanced status. By the 1970s, the 'Black is Beautiful' movement – one which sought to expand definitions of beauty to include black women (and men) – offered an important political voice, given the benefits associated with beauty in a 'host' or colonizing culture (Tate, 2005). Reproducing the body image of white, middle-class women has also been highly desirable for working-class women (Skeggs, 1997). Thus access to a system that equates beauty with value has been central for both black and working-class women, women whom feminism, in adopting an anti-beauty position, therefore excludes.

Much second-wave feminist attention turned to the problem of the objectification of women (although there was more than one way of articulating this argument within the second wave [cf. Hemmings, 2005]). In particular, women's bodies were often constructed as being objectified and passively consumed by the active male gaze. This argument has found its greatest intensity in anti-pornography arguments (MacKinnon, 1997) but also in film studies; as Mulvey (1975) puts it, men look (where looking is active) and women display 'to-be-looked-at-ness' (where being looked at is always passive). Other feminist criticisms of beauty concern the narrowness and exclusiveness of its definition; the commodification of beauty (both in terms of the products required to achieve it and its commercial value in industries such as pornography, glamour, fashion and sales); and the labour required to maintain a beautiful body and the time/money costs of this to women themselves (Dworkin, 1981; Bartky, 1991; Wolf, 1991; Bordo, 1993; Adkins, 1994; MacKinnon, 1997; Black, 2004; Jeffreys, 2005).

The feminist intellectual ethic, then, has tended to reject the value associated with the beautiful body. Feminist politics concentrated on erasing the markers of beauty-as-labour from the body, because concern

with beauty has come to signify women's social oppression. Instead, in striving for transcendence, feminists have come to celebrate the 'natural' body: beauty is associated with decoration and adornment, and the natural body strips these accoutrements away. But this aesthetic too frequently conceals its operations – looking natural is not the same as being natural, and similar bodily regimes are often viewed in different ways. Going to the gym becomes about health, fitness and energy levels, for example, rather than slenderness and beauty; dieting is reframed as 'eating sensibly' or making sure clothes still fit. However, this rejection by feminism of the enhanced body may be overly dependent on the norms of naturalness and origin that were once used to condemn women's beauty as a simulation. The feminist acceptance of only a naturally beautiful body in fact endorses certain modes of cultivation – such as the gym – while arbitrarily dismissing others, such as the beauty industry, interpreting the former as active and chosen and the latter as passive and consumed.

## Gender and the knife

Feminists working on aesthetic surgery have identified a variety of different motives for women undertaking procedures. The 'voices' and subjective experiences of patients can support a wide range of different theoretical positions. Thus, whilst feminist writers tend to disagree on issues such as whether women strive to achieve beautiful bodies (Bordo) or 'normal' bodies (Davis), there seems to be agreement on several basic themes. The first is that, since aesthetic surgery exists within a misogynistic culture, it will only ever really be an issue that affects women, sometimes incorporating a small proportion of deviant (feminized) men. Kathy Davis (2003), for instance, argues that men will never be aesthetic surgery patients in significant numbers since the whole construction of being a patient or surgeon is intrinsically gendered. She underpins this argument with current statistics on men's surgery, but in order to justify her claim fully she first excludes hair transplant operations and then states that in the US just 10 per cent of all aesthetic surgery operations are carried out on men (Davis, 1995: 21). Morgan (1991: 30) produces a higher figure of male clients, estimating that 30–40 per cent of procedures are carried out on men, yet she still omits men from her discussion. In fact aesthetic surgery has been practised for millennia, in various 'misogynistic cultures', and at times the majority of its patients have been men (probably because only men could afford it) (Taschen, 2005).

The 'nose job', for instance, has its origins in disguising the syphilitic body. Gaspare Tagliacozzi (1545–99) introduced flap graft procedures, using skin from the arm to reconstruct the nose, into early modern European surgery. His procedure was revised a century and a half later using a connected skin graft from the forehead and cheeks. In 1818 Carl Ferdinand von Graefe published a book on the reconstruction of the nose and established rhinoplasty as the name for the procedure, giving it a classical name like other surgeries (Gilman, 2000). However, the greatest surgeon of antiquity, Claudius Galen (AD *c.*130–*c.*200), was perhaps the founder of



aesthetic surgery. He was well known for the surgical reconstruction of gladiatorial wounds, and his expertise also extended to the correction of drooping eyelids as well as the removal of fatty deposits from men's breasts. Such operations were performed on wealthy and powerful men in an era when men embodied true beauty, and perfection of the body was considered an art form. It is also rumoured that the Roman emperor, Elagabalus (AD 204–22), a young successor to Marcus Aurelius and a transvestite, became the first man in history to undergo a sex change operation. But there is a form of aesthetic surgery that is older still, one so routine that it passes even without note – circumcision.

An average of 65 per cent of American infant boys are currently circumcised with the figure rising to over 80 per cent in the Midwest (Gollaher, 2000). Circumcision was first practised on aristocratic young men among the ancient Egyptians and recorded on some of the earliest known stone carvings. Within Judaism and Islam, circumcision is practised for symbolic rather than medical reasons – as a sign of the Covenant and in order to attract God's divine light. Circumcision, it is believed, enhances the body and thereby cleanses the mind, ostensibly by reducing sexual pleasure such that a man might turn his attention away from sex (and women in particular) and towards God. Moreover, during the Greek ascendancy men performed sports in the nude. However, since sport was about personal and spiritual development it was imperative that men did not display an erection. The circumcised penis displays a greater likeness to an erect one than the uncircumcised penis, and thus many Jewish men who wished to compete in sporting events sought surgical (and other) methods to reverse their circumcisions.<sup>3</sup> Circumcision is in fact key to the development of aesthetic surgery, and therefore so is the male patient and so is 'race'. What distinguishes these masculine practices from contemporary feminine ones is not the extent of the surgeries but rather the value attributed to them. Making the body beautiful was an 'art', an act of aesthetic creation for men amongst the Ancients; it is now something feminized, superficial and trivial – *cosmetic*.

The term *cosmetic* has a number of connotations. First, to say that something is *cosmetic* means that it is superficial, trivial (it is *only* cosmetic). Second, *cosmetic* means surface, not depth (*only* skin deep). In a culture that views the body as a medium of expression, as the outward representation of the inner self (see Dollimore, 1991), the *cosmetic* is problematic. Divorced from its potential as outward signifier of inner signified, the *cosmetic* is also duplicitous: it *mis*-represents. So *cosmetic* (fake) beauty is problematic. It is no coincidence, then, that masculine art, in its attempt to capture true beauty, chooses the unadorned female nude as its muse (Davis, 1995).

A second central point in the feminist aesthetic surgery literature is the issue of pain – both physical and psychic. Take the following quotation by Kathryn Pauly Morgan:

We need a feminist analysis to understand why actual, live women . . . choose to participate in anatomising and fetishizing their bodies as they buy 'contoured

bodies', 'restored youth', and 'permanent beauty'. In the face of a growing market and demand for surgical interventions in women's bodies that can and do result in infection, bleeding, embolisms, pulmonary edema, facial nerve injury, unfavourable scar formation, skin loss, blindness, crippling, and death, our silence becomes a culpable one. (1991: 26)

However, we should be wary of an approach that foregrounds pain and risk as an argument per se against a surgical practice informed by choice rather than medical necessity. By the same logic we would take a stand against abortion, for example. In the same article Morgan compares her work on aesthetic surgery with Bordo's work on anorexia, but she leaves it to a footnote to add one significant difference:

. . . although submitting to the procedures of cosmetic surgery involves [short-term] pain, risks, undesirable side effects, and living with a heightened form of patriarchal anxiety, it is also fairly clear that . . . the outcome often appears to be one that greatly enhances the women's confidence, confers a sense of wellbeing, contributes to a greater comfortableness in the public domain, and affirms the individual woman as a self-determining and risk-taking individual. (p. 53)

Morgan also criticizes intervention in childbirth as a masculinist appropriation of women's bodies and fertility. Feminists in this camp (see Wajcman, 1991 for a full discussion) have a tendency to present 'natural' childbirth as something that women ought to be striving for, and worth the small risk of being away from a hospital environment. Pain, according to this argument, is good, since women can be fully present during their births as well as experiencing a 'rite of passage' into full womanhood. Similarly, feminists writing on body modification tend to view pain and risk as an essential part of reclamation rituals (such as tattooing, piercing, scarification or branding). Pain here is a cure for psychic distress brought about by earlier violations of the body (Pitts, 2003). Such studies tend to point to the transgressive potential of both pain and body modifications in 'anti-beauty' movements.

Kathy Davis (1995) has also focused on the issue of pain, but her interest centres on the psychic pain experienced by those who feel deep psychological anxiety about their size or shape or what they perceive to be 'defects' in their bodies. Davis argues that whilst feminists have focused on aesthetic surgery as part of the pursuit of beauty, the women in her study simply wanted to be 'normal'. In the Netherlands and the UK, surgery for women experiencing psychological pain is often free and fully sanctioned by the medical establishment, especially when it is seen as repair of 'defective' bodies. This is referred to as 'plastic surgery', whereas surgery for the purposes of 'enhancement' is labelled 'cosmetic surgery' and tends to be conducted through private practice. The latter also tends to be trivialized by the medical establishment as pandering to the whims of rich, vain women.

Because Davis focuses on free surgery, she refutes the idea that women are in pursuit of beauty, and instead maintains that women simply want to be 'normal'. In the process she fails to address two important issues.

First, her refusal of beauty simply seems to reaffirm it as trivial and vain, thus denying its importance to women in enhancing status, economic reward and thus citizenship. Second, since the women she interviewed are seeking free aesthetic surgery from the state, it seems likely that they will express their desires in terms of pain, since it is pain that qualifies them for free surgery. This same practice is identified by Sandy Stone (1991) in her critique of the medicalized definition of transsexualism: only those purporting to be in the 'wrong body' and experiencing considerable psychic discomfort are rewarded with medical diagnosis and free surgery. However, Judith Butler (2004) cautions against a 'strategic' approach to surgery, since one exercises the right to (free) surgery only by submitting to a pathologizing discourse, by relinquishing the right to define one's self truthfully in one's own words. Choice, she says, 'is clearly bought at a price, sometimes at the price of truth itself' (p. 92).

A third position advanced by feminists is that aesthetic surgery inherently produces normalized bodies. Morgan argues that aesthetic surgery is itself becoming routine, and that this shift is:

leading to a predictable inversion of the domains of the deviant and the pathological, so that women who contemplate *not using* cosmetic surgery will increasingly be stigmatised and seen as deviant. (1991: 26, emphasis in original)

Davis argues that given the desire to normalize (as in the case of her respondents), the private health care sector generates a potentially unlimited market for surgery, each of its clients seeking the same body. Davis's main concern is that 'one ideal – a white, Western model – becomes the norm to which everyone, explicitly or implicitly, aspires' (2003: 7). Consumption is thus equated with sameness. She is also worried that 'anyone' might become a candidate for surgery, since no one *is* 'normal', and that surgery might become a matter of 'choice' rather than 'need'. In highlighting pain in her own research, she effectively argues that women are not 'selfish' consumers of beauty but 'victims' of its ubiquitous discourses. Here we see a repetition of the structure–agency dichotomy, where those who consider themselves 'agents' are characterized as misguided, apolitical and selfish, whilst those that admit to being victims are considered deserving of surgery. However, for Bordo, even those characterizing their actions as choices are ultimately only ever victims of the beauty industry:

... the rhetoric of choice and self-determination and the breezy analogies comparing cosmetic surgery to fashion accessorizing are deeply mystifying. They efface not only the inequalities of privilege, money, and time that prohibit most people from indulging in these practices, but also the desperation that characterizes the lives of those who do. (1997: 337)

On the contrary, contemporary consumption is frequently as much about differentiation and distinction as it is about normalization (Corrigan, 1997). Aesthetic surgery through private practice circumvents medical diagnosis so the range of possible surgeries available (to those who can afford it) is considerably expanded. We might argue, then, that aesthetic surgery to reduce psychological pain is likely to produce a normalized body, whilst

surgery as consumption might instead produce a proliferation of difference.

This idea is supported by recent 'ideal bodies' represented in popular magazines that foreground racial 'mixing' – JLo's bottom, Halle Berry's breasts, Cindy Crawford's legs and so on (*Heat*, November 2004). But as well as 'normative' aesthetic surgeries like facelifts (young person trapped in an old person's body), we can also consider the number of 'non-normative' surgeries that are increasingly taking place – transsexual surgery (woman trapped in a man's body), operations to make the patient look more like a tiger (tiger trapped in a man's body), amputations (disabled person trapped in an able-bodied person's body), as well as breast implants in men or shaped collarbone implants adding interest to any body.

Feminists are therefore failing to give proper critical attention to the prevalent discourse of cosmetic surgeons and patients themselves, which is one of 'enhancement'. Enhancement does not suggest the transformation of the body, rather it suggests a working 'with' the body that a patient already has. A fairly typical example of the sales rationale of these clinics is provided by BeauCare:

Nowadays appearance matters more and more. If you also want to experience that beautiful feeling, Clinic BeauCare will be something for you. We consider quality of paramount importance. Cosmetic surgery is an art. To strive for perfection and to make beautiful is the plastic surgeon's most important goal. We make you feel on top of the world, by meeting your wishes in a medically justified way and by giving you just that little bit more. (Clinic BeauCare, 2005)

The discourse of this clinic is framed in terms of self-improvement rather than psychic distress – the quest for perfection which can 'make you feel on top of the world'. The aim of 'giving you just that little bit more' suggests the (self) improvement of the existing body – its *enhancement* – rather than the promise of a different body. In opposing the surgically modified body to the natural body feminists are in danger of essentializing gender, 'race' and ability (see Jeffreys, 2005), as well as reproducing ancient masculinist discourses of feminine beauty. And, by pointing to the physical pain and side effects that surgery entails, feminists simply rehearse a familiar discourse, readily available in the media in shows such as *Cosmetic Surgery from Hell*, and do little to advance its understandings. These arguments become equally problematic when we examine how discourses around 'race', class and work intersect with aesthetic surgery.

## Reclaiming (fake) beauty?

Recently, post-feminists have claimed that feminists have lost their credibility with younger women by presenting them as perpetual victims of patriarchal control (Roiphe, 1993; Denfield, 1995). Although this critique has tended to oversimplify feminist debates, post-feminism has problematized victimhood and foregrounded women's autonomy, responsibility and agency. How women dress has become a key area of

conflict. Sarah Gamble (2001: 28) describes post-feminism as 'women dressing like bimbos, yet claiming male privileges and attitudes'. Implicit in this position is an assumed correlation between 'dressing like a bimbo' and 'dressing for men'. But as far back as 1985 Elizabeth Wilson was disputing the idea that sexually suggestive attire and adornment was aimed at attracting men:

The belief that [women dress for men] has confirmed many fashion writers in their view of women as essentially silly, since they have seldom questioned the idea that it is every woman's chief preoccupation to arouse male desire . . . [fashion] is interpreted as sexual rivalry – for a woman to dress 'for other women' means simply in order to compete. (Wilson, 1985: 92)

In Europe, and to a lesser extent in the US (where Abercrombie and Fitch clothing catalogues are given out in brown paper bags in some states), high-street fashions have tended towards cropped and low-cut tops and low-waisted trousers that reveal the female body in highly suggestive ways. Items of clothing that were taken by feminists to symbolize women's oppression such as high-heeled shoes and corsets have been reclaimed and imbued with 'new' meaning.<sup>4</sup> These trends have reinscribed female sexuality as potentially powerful. As Angela McRobbie explains:

In the climate of 'popular feminism' when women are more likely to recognise the unfairness of traditional male attitudes to girls who are 'easy' the chances are that young women will feel more free to have sex. (2000: 208)

But post-feminism, even in its most popular forms, should not be taken as a reaction *against* feminism. In fact post-feminism is aware of, and draws on, some of feminism's most significant struggles. The major difference between feminism and post-feminism is one of *attitude* rather than substantive political issues. Post-feminism foregrounds agency: it recognizes the unfairness of gender relations and seeks actively to redress them. Since feminism is identified with women's lack of autonomy as well as a de-emphasizing of women's sexuality, post-feminism conflates these issues into an alternative formulation – sexual assertiveness *signifies* power and autonomy. Thus, in the new millennium, active, even 'aggressive' sexuality, performed through the wearing of revealing clothing, connotes power, autonomy, individuality and success for (especially young) women. What, though, are we to make of the more recent trend towards women who actively 'enhance' their breasts, buttocks and lips through surgery? And importantly, how have feminists conceptualized these tendencies?

Traditionally the hypersexed body – most usually classed and 'raced' – has been unfavourably contrasted with middle-class ideals of respectability. That many young women are surgically cultivating such a body makes them 'ostentatious' and 'vulgar' for some feminists, and 'grotesque' for others. In this language we can see the classed operations of feminism most acutely and can begin to understand the sense of alienation from feminism that many young women feel. To define these women as 'victims' of the beauty industry and motivated by the pain of being outside normative (classed and raced) ideals of beauty effectively erases their subjectivity. Yet

these are exactly the women that feminists claim to represent. Young women who admire celebrities such as the UK 'glamour model' Jordan<sup>5</sup> for her self-determination, business skill and success, as well as her glamorous and hedonistic lifestyle, are bound to be disaffected by feminists who deny Jordan agency simply because her choices contrast with their own sense of agency (frequently rooted in self-improvement and respectability). It is therefore vitally important to recognize that contemporary women who routinely adopt the markers of hypersexualization associated with classed and racialized bodies (such as buttock implants or collagen lips) are not passive but active and desiring (not just desirable).

Aesthetic surgery is most frequently read as a technology through which each woman's aspirations are discursively directed towards the same (white, Western) ideal of beauty or normality. Because of this, writers like Kathy Davis have become lodged within the same discursive frame as medical policy-makers advocating that those experiencing psychological distress through failing to achieve an ideal should be allowed access to free 'corrective' surgery on humanitarian grounds. In this model, however, the patient's subjectivity (her ability to choose as an active consumer-citizen) is erased. Thus the aesthetic surgery patient is effectively placed at the centre of a double bind. In asserting her subjectivity, by articulating surgery as a *choice*, she automatically excludes herself from free (and therefore legitimate) surgery. To qualify legitimately for surgery she has to relinquish her will, presenting herself as a victim of the patriarchal ideologies of idealized femininity that feminists identified and which are now ubiquitously accepted. However, for many consumers of aesthetic surgery, 'enhancements' may be about standing out rather than blending in.

This position makes more sense when we relate aesthetic interventions to the increasing importance of the body in the workplace. Of course, bodies have always been commodified, for their strength, dexterity or speed, for instance, but in the new climate of the interactive service encounter, bodies (both women's and men's) have become increasingly commodified for the way that they *look*. There is a vast literature detailing the *controls* on women's bodies and sexualities at work, but this literature sometimes forgets that appearance also conveys status, authority, control, success. Thus, the well-managed body can accrue significant benefits. What is interesting in this respect is that unlike the 1980s career woman whose body was masculinized through the power suit – her femaleness erased (Entwistle, 1997) – the career woman today actively flaunts her sexually marked body. It would be a mistake for feminists to interpret this phenomenon as merely another example of women being reduced to objects for the delectation of their male clients or colleagues. Instead this may be exactly the body that pioneering women in the 1980s were still too fragile to expose. This body, we argue, rejects notions of respectable, passive sexuality (and its inherent class and race divisiveness) as well as masculinist codes of dressing. Instead it celebrates the feminine and is assertive enough to override the lingering anxieties of men who would erase it.

Outside of work, glamour has arguably replaced beauty as an ideal. For

respondents in Bev Skeggs' (1997) research, glamour was a risky strategy because it easily slid into tartiness. However, young women today are no longer expected to 'save themselves' for the right man and having a sexual past now goes without saying. Thus, glamour no longer carries the same risks it once did. Instead glamour is something that women (and men) can participate in often or rarely; it can be taken up or thrown off at leisure. Glamour can be expensive, but it can also be cheaply emulated. Glamour scorns the natural body and natural beauty so celebrated in bourgeois culture. Glamour is not classed, or 'raced', or gendered – boyz can be glamorous and then there's lesbian chic – glamour is democratic. If ever we need proof that aesthetic surgery is about more than psychological pain, we only have to look at last year's newspaper reports of Brazil running out of silicone a month before the Rio carnival (Fagg, 2005).

Before we are seen to be unequivocally celebrating aesthetic surgery, however, we must point out its limitations. One thing that cannot be open to dispute is the profoundly misogynistic culture of many cosmetic surgeons (although see Davis, 2003 for an account of a pioneering female surgeon in the early 20th century who developed facelifts for women in order to prolong their careers). The negotiation between women and their surgeons is a profoundly asymmetrical one and, in the tricky area of what might 'suit' a patient, the doctor's (normative) judgement and expertise are frequently the deciding factors. Furthermore, the discourse of self-improvement expounded by clinics and young women alike is a highly individualistic one. In Western culture bodies are assumed to exteriorize an inward depth. Western bodies are not so much a collective project of inscription as personal projections of the self. Thus, aesthetic surgery is a profoundly individualized endeavour. It is this very individualism that can prevent us from collectively overturning hierarchies of beauty – whatever those currently might be. Furthermore, bodies are never fully authored by individual subjects, but are shaped by historical and social conditions. Even if beauty becomes a more pluralistic conception, the impetus to work on the body in order to demonstrate an enterprising self may become ever more intense for all of us (men included).

In the end, then, the surgeons are likely to be the real winners, but in the meantime we must not ignore the very real sense of agency, albeit within highly stratified social locations, that aesthetic surgery can provide. One thing is clear: it is time that we begin to question the usefulness to feminism of binary models of gender in terms of transcendence and immanence, mind and body, subject and object, active and passive, as it seems these oppositions are just as likely to limit our enquiries as to enhance them. As we showed in our introductory discussion of beauty and the grotesque, such binaries can be used just as easily to reinforce class and race hierarchies *within* feminism as to undermine masculinist concepts of women. Equally importantly, feminist discourses of victimization or internalized oppression are likely to alienate a generation of young women for whom sexual self-determination, expressed through the glamorous body, is a central component of identity, associated with pleasure and success.

## Notes

1. The term aesthetic surgery is used in place of the term cosmetic surgery to avoid the pejoratively gendered connotations of the latter.
2. This position also explains why many white middle-class women in general are renowned for asking the question 'Does my bum look big in this?', an affirmative answer stripping any woman of the respectability she gained by accepting her opposition to 'other women'.
3. As Gollaher (2000) describes it, 'visible glans in an uncircumcised man was taken as evidence of sexual arousal and was thus considered indecent within the [Greek sporting] arena. To prevent mishaps, many athletes wore the *kynodesme*, a strand of colored string that looped around the foreskin, closing it tightly over the glans' (p. 14). This code placed Jewish men at a disadvantage in competitive games and led to circumcision reversals. The first method of reversal was what the Greeks called *epispasmos* and involved stretching the foreskin over the glans and then binding it at the end. The second more permanent option involved cutting away the connecting tissue between the glans and remaining foreskin, turning the prepuce inside out and pulling the exposed tissue towards the tip of the glans. This operation is well documented by Aurelius Cornelius Celsus in his celebrated first-century work *De Medicina* (Gollaher, 2000: 16).
4. For instance, in 1997 Lee Jeans ran an advertisement campaign in the UK with a poster of a woman resting her stiletto on a man's bare behind with the strapline 'Put the boot in', remodelling this emblem extraordinaire of women's oppression by offering women the power of *having* the phallus (through penetration). Madonna's reclamation of the corset has also been well documented (Fiske, 1989). An advertisement by the cosmetics brand No7 also featured a woman with cropped hair and army uniform advising, 'it's not make-up, it's ammunition'.
5. Jordan aka Katie Price is a highly successful UK glamour model famous for her large prosthetically enhanced breasts and drunken escapades. Her popularity was further enhanced when she starred in the widely viewed UK television show *I'm a Celebrity, Get Me Out of Here!*, where she met her current husband, the singer Peter Andre (Price, 2005).

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