

**Bernadette Wegenstein**

*The Cosmetic Gaze: Body Modification and the Construction of Beauty.*

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The notion that beautiful, diseased, and perfect bodies are discursively and ideologically constructed has been established in the works of Sander Gilman and Kathy Davis in the cultural history of cosmetic surgery as well as in the feminist writings of Susan Bordo and others. Bernadette Wegenstein's book belongs in this tradition of unravelling the politics of bodies.

Opening with the medical gaze in the ancient Greeks, Wegenstein traces how connections were drawn in philosophical and medical texts between inner and outer beauty, or physical and moral beauty. The science of physiognomy, especially the writings of Johann Kaspar Lavater was crucial, Wegenstein notes, in establishing this connection in later-day (18th-century) Europe as well. Wegenstein demonstrates how Lavater's theory made implicit *gendered* links: a man's physiognomy connects an inner self which is by and large devoted to action, whereas the woman's physiognomy is connected with chastity, devotion, and reproduction. These sciences, far from being objective, were driven by ideological, often racist, needs. Drawing upon Foucault, Wegenstein shows how the 19th-century discipline of phrenology and later the science of eugenics enabled physiognomic models of criminality, health, and deviance to be established in law and science. Normalcy, abnormality, and monstrosity were all 'measured' and objectified for punitive, therapeutic, and corrective actions. The climactic moment in this history of physiognomic discrimination and the medicalization of looks, of course, came in the twentieth century with Nazism's obsession with racial purity. In this section, Wegenstein examines how the Third Reich's 'sciences,' fuelled by the state's need to stoke the fires of anti-Semitism, generated normative standards of Aryan beauty. Finally, arriving at the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, Wegenstein speaks of the culture of the quick fix – of transformation – as a constituent of the 'technologies of the self'.

In her second chapter, Wegenstein first looks at what she calls 'beauty's irresistible promise' (64): she points to a link in late capitalist culture between beauty and happiness. Reading folktales and the aesthetics of early-20th-century avant garde movements (embodied for her in figures like Breton's Nadja, the eponymous heroine of the novel), Wegenstein demonstrates how beauty is 'convulsive' and ever-changing, never fixed or universal. Addressing the theme of disfigurement in texts like Hawthorne's famous 'The Birthmark' and Alice Munro's 'Face,' Wegenstein shows how disfigurement becomes the identity of the individual in a culture not only of the face but also of the gaze. (For Wegenstein [109], the ideology of the face is linked to the ideology of the normativising 'cosmetic gaze', which is 'how humans experience their own and others' bodies as incomplete projects that await the intervention of technologies of enhancement, which will help them better approximate their true self or natural potential.') Looking at performance artists like Lee Bul and Chuck Palahniuk's novel *Invisible Monsters*, Wegenstein examines the gendered connection of monstrosity, where to be ugly is to be 'culturally invisible' (Palahniuk's term, cited in Wegenstein, 87). It is in such a context, Wegenstein writes, where beauty *is* identity that makeover culture thrives. Turning to icons of makeover, such as Michael Jackson,

Wegenstein notes that the ‘legitimizing function [of markets for extreme makeovers] never seems to stray far from a desire to thrill at the excesses and failures that these [makeover] technologies enable’ (95). With computer graphics and technologies we see now a ‘data-driven approach to aesthetic enhancement’ (104).

In the twenty-first century, the subject of her next chapter, Wegenstein looks at television makeover shows that contribute to the audience’s desire to have their images ‘approximate’ that of the celebrities they see on screen. Reality television in particular, Wegenstein notes, takes as exemplars for spectacle people ‘obsessively unhappy with a particular body feature’ (129) and who then are transformed into their ideals. Transformation has become, she notes, an imperative where the self (that exists beneath the skin) is seen as capable of ‘relentless transformation’ (131).

In her final chapter Wegenstein turns to gender concerns – although these have never been far from her arguments in the preceding chapters – in the culture of cosmetic surgery. Examining a series of films, performance art and reality television programming, Wegenstein shows how the woman’s beauty and the male cosmetic surgeon’s ability to transform it suggests a certain dominance of the male gaze *within* the cosmetic gaze. Narcissistic bodily violence such as self-mutilation is more common among women and is linked, Wegenstein suggests, to the persistence of particular models of femininity and the individual’s internalization of these models. Wegenstein concludes that while the ‘ethic of self-improvement remains... [even though] the cosmetic gaze [that] once expressed itself in the politics of racial cleansing, it has now been repackaged by technology into a socially acceptable care of the self’ (184).

Commentators like Alison Hearne and others have documented the politics of reality television and makeover shows. Laurie Ouellette and James Hay have described these shows as ‘networks of government’ where, although the state is not directly governing us, private agencies have instituted these measures of governance under the guise of choice. Wegenstein’s work is in this same league although, strangely, none of these above-mentioned commentators figure in her work, although she is interested in the ‘governmentalization’ of looks. The power of the cosmetic gaze, undergirded by consumerism, market forces, patriarchy and medical ‘authority’ (often cast in pop-psychological terms) is transmitted through multiple formats, media and genres. Thus the cross-platform and cross-genre work that Wegenstein adopts in *The Cosmetic Gaze* enables us to see the persistence of the ideology of beauty in numerous domains, whether the documentary film or the novel. This enables us to see, that is, an entire cultural discourse of beauty and concomitant ugliness.

*The Cosmetic Gaze*’s most interesting chapters, I must say, are the early ones. Wegenstein is at her best when she is tracing the historical roots of the ideology of beauty in biomedicine and science: there is more scholarship here than when she analyses contemporary cultural examples of these. But in any case, this is a good read and should be of interest to students in media studies, gender studies, and cultural studies.

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