
*Plastic "Perfection":
Examining the Role of Autonomy in Cosmetic Surgery*

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Abstract:

The concepts of individual autonomy and freedom of choice are prevailing trademarks of Western postmodernity. Using Michel Foucault's concept of the manifestations of power in conjunction with Susan Bordo's critique of postmodernity, I will argue that the postmodern concept of "choice" is not the product of pure individual autonomy. Rather, societal norms, history, and hegemonic power structures play an insidious part in forming the choices people make. In applying these concepts to cultural standards of beauty and the increasingly normalized practice of cosmetic surgery, I shall provide an examination of how power structures coercively maintain women's subordination and oppression through a veil of absolute self-determination and choice.

Cosmetic surgery is often portrayed as an individual's choice and a result of autonomy; however, I argue that the issue is not so simple. The reasons people (typically women) undergo cosmetic surgery are usually because they feel that their features inadequately fit the standards of beauty in Western society. The degree of autonomy in which one claims to base such decisions is questionable, as those who purport the practice to be purely based on individual volition largely ignore the broader social and historical implications of beauty ideals, norms, and practices. In accordance with Susan Bordo, I argue that the postmodern society and its "anything goes" attitude ignores historicity and its implications. In placing the autonomy of cosmetic surgery in the patient's hands, one overlooks the fact that standards of beauty are not only set by social norms but that these norms are not "objective"; rather they are perpetuated and maintained by various hegemonic structures and institutions. Ignoring the long-standing historicity of the relationship between beauty and female subordination allows for hegemonic structures to be reinforced, reworked, and insidiously dispersed throughout society.

Working with the Foucauldian model of power, Bordo shows how culture influences the ways in which we comport ourselves, enact gender roles, style our hair, and so forth. Although careful not to accredit too much to Foucault's idea that the "definition and shaping of the body is the focal point for struggles over the shape of power," Bordo notes that such a concept was "discovered by feminism, and long before it entered into its marriage with poststructuralist thought."¹ Furthermore, Bordo is careful not to portray bodies as "*tabula rasa*, awaiting inscription by culture," and she recognizes that biology may well play a significant role in shaping our lives. Biology, culture, and historicity are inextricably linked; "We are creatures swaddled in culture from the moment we are designated on sex or the other, one race or another."²

Foucault focuses on the idea of the body and its interaction with culture as he discusses the "direct grip" that society and culture holds on the body. He works with the concept of the "docile" body, which prevailed during the eighteenth century:

To begin with, there was the *scale of control*: it was not of treating the body *en masse* ...but...individually; of exercising upon it a subtle coercion, of obtaining holds upon it at the level of the mechanism itself — movements, gestures, attitudes, rapidity: an infinitesimal power over the active body Then there was the *object of the control*: it was no longer the signifying elements of behaviour or the language of the body, but the economy, the efficiency of movements, their internal organization; constraint bears upon the forces rather than the signs...Lastly, there the *modality*: it implies an interrupted, constant coercion, supervising the processes of the activity rather than its result and it is exercised according to a codification that partitions as closely as possible time, space, movement.³

Foucault shows how power coercively and insidiously manifests within postmodern society. Covertly operating through various institutions, power is scattered and perpetually and coercively

1. Susan Bordo, "Introduction: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body," in *The Body in Feminist Thought Course Kit V.1* (Toronto: York University, 2006) 53.

2. Bordo, "Introduction," 63. (In saying this, I further point out that even the concepts of race and gender are neither purely understood in terms of biology, nor culture, but based on the similar model of biology, culture and historicity.)

3. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage-Random House, 1977), 136–137.

enforced throughout society. The covert and scattered formation of power facilitates the pervasion of normalizing and regulatory practices, as it seems to emanate from nowhere and yet everywhere. Although the way we present ourselves, conceive of beauty, gender, and the like appears to be of our own volition, our behaviour is performed through these coercive and invisible manifestations of power.

In relating this power of appearance to male dominance and female subordination, Bordo notes that through the "voluntary" reproduction of masculinity and femininity, "one can acknowledge women may indeed contribute to the perpetuation of female subordination...without this entailing that they have 'power' in the production and reproduction of sexist culture."⁴ For example, when women "choose" to undergo cosmetic surgery, they are often condemned by others as "voluntarily" enforcing the stereotype that women are irrationally concerned with their looks. For in enforcing stereotypes within sexist culture, women do not have the power to change or undo these structures.

Bordo points out that these women are not "cultural dupes" who are "passively taken in by media norms of the ["beautiful"]"; in fact, in most cases these women have "correctly discerned that these norms shape the perceptions and desires of potential lovers and employers."⁵ Looking at the testimony of Dianne Powell, a forty-seven-year-old woman who has undergone a facelift, it is noteworthy how acutely aware she is of cultural pressures to conform to beauty norms in the workplace:

I am an investment banker and *my appearance is of utmost importance especially when dealing with clients*. In this world, *first impressions can make or break a deal* — and for the last few years, I didn't feel that attractive. I felt I was aging too fast, which my stress-filled work environment didn't help. My skin was losing its elasticity no matter how many different special creams I would apply on my face. I looked much older than what I actually was and after I said, "Enough is

4. Susan Bordo, "Material Girl: The Effacements of Postmodern Culture," in *The Body* (see note 3), 68.

5. Bordo, "Introduction," 55.

enough, I'm going to do something about it!" That is when I seriously started thinking about a facelift.⁶

In another example, Esta Santiago, a twenty-one-year-old woman, is aware of how "stupid" her insecurities are and yet she cannot help feeling ashamed of her own body for not "fitting in" to society's normalization of the "jiggle-free" body:

I felt that my stomach was the only thing that was not right about my body. I am a fairly slim gal but my stomach would protrude out noticeably. *It was embarrassing and it made me feel self-conscious and sad all the time. I know it's stupid but it did.* I would always make sure I was wearing baggy clothes so nobody could notice. I was thinking about getting liposuction for a long time and decided to make the move on your website. I was lucky enough to have the support of my parents to go through with it.⁷

In "choosing" to undergo cosmetic surgery, both these women carefully and rationally executed their plans. Moreover, these statements highlight the intense pressure felt by most women to conform to Western beauty ideals. These women are aware and accept that their insecurities are produced by their culture. For example, in the second testimonial, the woman admits that her intense self-consciousness and feelings of depression are "stupid", but the pressure to conform overpowers this so-called stupidity.

Esta Santiago's feelings of stupidity towards her "trivial" insecurities are instilled by the very culture that produces the homogenization and normalization of beauty. Such a paradoxical double standard further maintains the structures of female subordination and male domination. As Naomi Wolf maintains: "The beauty myth is not about women at all. It is about men's institutions and institutional power."⁸ By keeping women subservient to beauty, women "remain vulnerable to outside approval, carrying the vital sensitive organ self-esteem exposed to the air."⁹ I am, however, weary of Wolf's characterization of women's vulnerability, as such portrayal

6. Dianne Powell, "Testimonials," *My Body Part* 30 Nov. 2006, <http://www.mybodypart.com/testimonials.html>.

7. Esta Santiago, "Testimonials," *Body Part* (see note 6).

8. Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (New York: Anchor-Doubleday, 1992), 13.

9. Wolf, *Beauty Myth*, 14.

emphasizes victimization and posits women as cultural dupes. On the other hand, her argument adequately reemphasizes the paradoxical argument put forward earlier by Bordo. Those women may perpetuate female subordination through their conformity to beauty and cosmetic surgery, however, such a perpetuation does not entail that they are in positions of power to enforce/redirect sexist ideology.¹⁰

Women's subordination is duplicitously maintained through the portrayal of cosmetic surgery as an objective practice in which the individual "chooses" to undergo the surgery. If a woman does not conform to standardized ideals of beauty, she is ostracized and is at a disadvantage to women who do conform to beauty ideals (and white men who need not conform to these ideals). For example, in the first testimonial, Dianne Powell acknowledges that her appearance "is of utmost importance" not only to her clients but to her employers as well. If she cannot keep or acquire clients based on her appearance, her employers will likely replace her with a younger, more "beautiful" woman (or a man of any age) whom clients will prefer. On the other front, if a woman does "choose" to undergo cosmetic surgery, she is criticized for being narcissistic and culpable of willingly perpetuating female subordination. In Foucault's model of power, the institutions that create and maintain these paradoxes become even more covert and insidious, since through these paradoxes they are able to escape blame. Thus, women are further subordinated through their "self-determination" because it allows blame to be projected onto them, which further allows culture and its coercive institutes of power to remain free of any locatable culpability.

Prior to postmodern society, the constraints of beauty over women were more visible; for example, one can see these literal constraints over the female body in the beauty practices of foot bondage or the coveted slender waistline obtained through the constrictions of the corset. Through fashion, women were literally caged and imprisoned by constraints of their own bodies. Bordo notes that one of the first mass feminist rallies "poignantly listed, among the various social and political rights demanded, 'The right to ignore fashion.'"¹¹ However, once this right was "given", the power constraints placed on women's bodies to maintain subordination became covert as women are now

10. Bordo, "Material Girl," 68.

11. Bordo, "Introduction," 54.

able to “choose” whether or not to conform to beauty norms and ideals.

As women can now express their individuality and determine what they chose to wear, fashion is seen in postmodernity as a trivialized and arbitrary concept of “anything goes”; thus, we can reinvent ourselves, our looks, and our bodies at will, without politicization. However, such a notion masks the pervasive power of normalizing practices of beauty in a given culture. Through “uninterrupted and [constantly] coercive” modalities of power,¹² “popular culture does not apply any breaks to these fantasies of rearrangement and self-transformation. Rather, we are constantly told that we can ‘choose’ our own bodies.”¹³ The homogenization and normalization of beauty practices and imagery are powerfully “suffused with the dominance of gendered, racial, class and other cultural iconography.”¹⁴ So much are these images ingrained that even on the “level of [cultural] discourse and interpretation” they reiterate “the same conditions which postmodern bodies enact on the level of cultural practice: a construction of life as plastic possibility and weightless choice, undetermined by history, or even individual biography.”¹⁵

Using Foucault’s concept of “docile bodies,” Kathryn Morgan emphasizes that although Foucault applies his model to military and carceral institutions, such a model is salient to the homogenization and coercive manifestations of cosmetic surgery over women’s bodies. “What is most important about this relation to cosmetic surgery”, says Morgan, “is the extent to which it makes it possible to speak of the diffusion of power throughout Western industrialized cultures that are increasingly committed to a technological beauty imperative.”¹⁶ Moreover, “it also makes it possible to refer to a set of experts – cosmetic surgeons – whose explicit power mandate is to

12. Foucault, *Discipline*, 137.

13. Bordo, “Material Girl,” 63.

14. Bordo, “Material Girl,” 63.

15. Bordo, “Material Girl,” 63.

16. Kathryn Pauly Morgan, “Women and the Knife Cosmetic Surgery and the Colonization of Women’s Bodies,” in *Sex/Machine: Readings in Culture, Gender, and Technology*, ed. Patrick D. Hopkins (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1998), 269.

explore, break down, and rearrange women's bodies."¹⁷ By allowing women to "choose" their appearances, the power structures that continue to constrain women's bodies have shifted and rearranged themselves in order to become more insidious and covert. Thus, "what looks like an optimal situation of self-reflection, deliberation, and self-creating choice often signals conformity at a deeper level."¹⁸

In light of the testimonials above, we can see that while these women are explicitly aware of the societal pressure of conformity to beauty ideals, they nevertheless stress the careful consideration and choice involved in their actions. Yet, their insecurities are created through the internalization of external sources, "for the eye, the hand, and the approval of the Other — the lover, the taunting students, the customers, the employers, and the social peers."¹⁹ And more importantly, "*the Other is almost always affected by the dominant culture, which is male-supremacists, racist, ageist, heterosexist, anti-Semitic, ableist, and class-biased.*"²⁰ For example, Bordo notes that "a black woman's 'choice' to straighten her hair" represents a "cultural history of racist body-discriminations such as the nineteenth century comb test."²¹ The comb test, she explains, was a practice which allowed only blacks who could pass a fine-tooth comb through their hair to be admitted into certain clubs and churches.²² Without a proper examination of cultural history in relation to beauty practices, the underlying biases embodied by the Other escape notice.

Internalizations of the dominant culture and its biases are often embodied within the "objective" expert; for example, the plastic surgeon. In her aptly titled essay, "Conformity Through Cosmetic Surgery", Sara Goering attends to Western society's racial biases by referring to its long-standing historicity; "individuals who partake in cosmetic surgery to erase phenotypic signs of race [such as Asian eyelid surgery to remove the creases] often claim simply to be attempting

17. Morgan, "Women," 269.

18. Morgan, "Women," 270.

19. Morgan, "Women," 271.

20. Morgan, "Women," 271. (Emphasis mine.)

21. Bordo, "Material Girl," 64.

22. Bordo, "Material Girl," 64.

to become normal or beautiful.”²³ However, such a claim of triviality and arbitrariness of beauty ignores the fact that “our societal images of beauty are deeply ingrained in our discriminatory history” that has valorized whiteness in both science and religion.²⁴ By claiming expertise and objectivity, cosmetic surgeons (explicitly and implicitly) “use the authority of their positions within the medical establishment to encourage such racialized transformations.”²⁵ Even though women who undergo these surgeries claim that their decisions were the result of individual autonomy and deliberation, “the field of cosmetic surgery’s promise to help individuals achieve good mental health through such transformations ignores the background racist conditions, and indeed reinforces those conditions through its practice.”²⁶

The notion that individuals who undergo cosmetic surgery do so based on purely autonomous choice and self-determination is thus problematic. Such a notion presents beauty as arbitrary and trivial, and subsequently ignores the fact that culture and history influence beauty ideals and practices. Through insidious and scattered distributions of power, dominating structures maintain their race- and sex-based subordination. In attributing full autonomy to the individual “choosing” to undergo cosmetic surgery, these powerfully coercive structures become more covert. As such, these power structures cast an even more powerful grip over society, since through covertness they are able to maintain their power by infinitely reworking/shifting themselves in order to accommodate cultural historical changes and demands (for example, women’s rights). Furthermore, in becoming more covert, the power structures are able to escape culpability, since it is allegedly through individual “choice” and not through the coercive forces of power that stereotypes and subordinations are perpetuated and maintained. Thus, in order to begin to escape the pernicious grip of these dominating power structures, it is important that an individual’s exercise of “choice” is not one of pure autonomy, but includes cultural and historical influences shaped by hegemony.

23. Sara Goering, “Conformity Through Cosmetic Surgery: The Medical Erasure of Race and Disability,” in *Science and Other Cultures*, ed. Sandra Harding and Robert Figueroa (New York: Routledge, 2003), 175.

24. Goering, “Conformity,” 175.

25. Goering, “Conformity,” 177.

26. Goering, “Conformity,” 177.

By ceasing to ignore these implications we recognize that anything *does not* go.