

Ideology, body shame and plastic surgery

By Alison Jasper
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There is little if anything that is straightforward or indeed ‘natural’ about the body, says Alison Jasper. It is a cultural canvas constructed through metaphors and a physical one preyed on by the idea that ‘more surgery will make me better somehow’.

There is little if anything that is straightforward or indeed ‘natural’ about the body. It is a cultural canvas constructed through metaphors: from Socrates’ and Plato’s view of it as a prison for the soul, to the Apostle Paul’s invocation of Christian communities as the body of Christ on earth; from Baz Luhrmann’s description of the body as ‘the greatest instrument you’ll ever own’ (provided you wear sunscreen) to the feeling when struggling with a bad cold that the body is a battleground – a microcosmic staging of the forces of good pitched against the forces of evil; from the ambiguities of cyborgs to the ambiguities of posthumanist bodies.

The body is a discursive territory occupied or landscaped by narratives about gender, family honour, duty, devotion to God or state, individual identity, communal belonging, worthiness and desirability, power and pollution.

Situated in the ‘first world’ we have certainly inherited some very traditional Christian and colonial narratives that have acted to privilege disembodied masculine intellect and spirit over material immanence leading to ambivalence (Jasper, in Hass, Jay & Jasper, 2007) guilt and shame (Clough, 2011) about our embodiment.

It is not, perhaps, very surprising then that ‘first world’ bodies have been so successfully shamed, that multi-billion pound industries (Berliet, Vanity Fair, February 2009 – ‘Plastic surgery confidential’; Orbach, 2009) have been able to take advantage of this sense of bodily inadequacy. Neither is it such a surprise that the majority of people who look for help or improvement through cosmetic surgery continue to be women.

In the *Guardian* newspaper (Friday, 4 February 2011), the people’s panel feature quotes ‘Miss Wright’ who admits that after one successful procedure, costing over £1k she is ‘hooked’ by the ‘carrot of a promise that I might look my best’ or that ‘more surgery will make me better somehow’.

Of course, techniques for producing the ‘better’ body from eye liners to clitoridectomies are hardly new. What is thought-provoking here however, is that we seem to be able to reproduce intense feelings of bodily shame – such that people risk their health and their lives in an often unsuccessful attempt to escape it – even within cultures that no longer see themselves as dominated by so-called ‘religious’ ideologies such as Christianity (are they any more ideological than ‘secular’ ideologies such as freemarket capitalism?).

Susie Orbach illustrates one neat technique for reinventing shame through the rhetorics of empowerment (*Bodies*, 2009, 83). The flip side to the idea that ‘we’re worth it’, is the pressure to exercise our power to take what we apparently deserve. The failure to alter ourselves becomes a new sign of self-neglect: ‘people will soon ask why you haven’t remodelled your body, as though it were a shameful old kitchen’!

Christianity has undoubtedly played a role in making us uncomfortable in our skins but it cannot be held responsible for the whole of this more recent change. A growing sense of entitlement and/or pressure to achieve a beautiful body is also surely implicated in the recent massive increase in procedures performed by cosmetic surgeons and the willingness of people to demand and buy them.

Of course it must be said that the development of surgical techniques and the greater availability of cosmetic treatments aren’t all bad. And for people dealing every day with the burden of disfigurement, whether as a result of something like bodily dysmorphic disorder, or of accident, disease and war this kind of treatment could be, in a very real way, a ‘God-send’.

Nevertheless while cosmetic surgery has achieved some dramatic, life changing effects, it seems very unlikely that the overall market growth in the area will be balanced by an equally widespread reduction in feelings of shame or emotional pain.

References:

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Susie Orbach, *Bodies* (Profile Books, London, 2009).

Miryam Clough, ‘Shame and Sexual Ambivalence’, *Unpublished thesis*, 2011.

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