

**MEREDITH JONES (2008) *SKINTIGHT: AN ANATOMY OF COSMETIC SURGERY*. OXFORD AND NEW YORK: BERG. ISBN 184520669X.**

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Meredith Jones' *Skintight: An Anatomy of Cosmetic Surgery* has profoundly changed my perspective on cosmetic surgery and its cultural scope. The study carefully navigates between feminist discourse, art, and the latest trends in the celebrity world. To begin with, the title is telling: already the subtitle conveys Jones' approach of both analyzing and critiquing cosmetic surgery from *within* its own (ideo)logical framework. 'I am not objective but rather part of what I study', she says (2). However, the anatomical metaphorical scope activated by the title *Skintight* does not do full justice to Jones' major theoretical contribution: a sound conceptualization of what she calls 'makeover culture.' Jones concedes that the term 'makeover culture' has been used before. She sees the major yet certainly not single merit of her book in providing an overarching concept for the sometimes diverse and arbitrary usages of the term:

Makeover culture is a state where becoming is more desirable than being. It valorises the process of development rather than the point of completion. It is closely related to renovation and restoration, and includes elements of both, but where renovation and restoration imply achieving a final goal or a finished product, makeover – used either as noun or verb – is in the present tense. Despite appearances then, makeover culture is not about the creation of finished products – whether they're houses, psyches, bodies or gardens – rather it is about showing subjects, objects and environments being worked upon and improved. (12)

Makeover culture differs from the earlier 'before/after model' of cosmetic surgery, in which the labor and sacrifice required by

cosmetic surgery were hidden. The term serves to mark a pivotal shift in the discourses and practices surrounding cosmetic surgery, from a logic of 'transformation' to 'makeover.' Whereas transformation proclaims some magical change in 'patients' initiated by the 'expert' cosmetic surgeon, makeover depends on rather active 'clients' willing to embody the radically extended work ethics of late capitalist society. It is all about 'the display of ongoing change and labour, and how cosmetic surgery is its quintessential example' (12).

Throughout *Skintight*, Jones activates a broad number of theoretical and methodical tools from feminist theory, semiotics, cultural studies, actor network theory, and many others, in order to analyse the shift from transformation to makeover. Each chapter draws on different theoretical notions. This may especially appeal to readers interested in shifting back and forth between the chapters rather than moving through the whole book in a linear fashion. Mostly, the theoretical background sheds an apt light on the materials discussed, and vice versa. At times, however, theoretical variety happens at the cost of profundity. The notion of ideological complexes (Hodge & Kress, 1988) employed in the first chapter, for example, loses some of its critical depth in Jones' reading. Jones exemplifies the contradictory logic of makeover culture and the functioning of its ideological complexes by the website *Awful Plastic Surgery*. She also refers to makeover culture as a social organization. I am not quite convinced that the critical impact of Hodge and Kress' social semiotics is fully realized with such an example, though. In particular, I doubt that Jones' equation of makeover culture with what Hodge and Kress have in mind in their rather Marxist account of 'social organization' is entirely justified. Also, I would be more hesitant in labelling Michael Jackson's cosmetic surgery a 'mask of whiteness,' in analogy to Joan Riviere's (1929) concept of 'womanliness as masquerade' (chapter 7). Womanliness as masquerade implies that women wear a mask of femininity in order to conceal parts of their identity that have societal connotations of masculinity, such as success or intellectuality. The paradox that women indeed stage what they supposedly essentially are makes for the subversive potential of the concept. Jones is right in claiming that, like the mask of womanliness, Jackson's mask 'provides only conditional protection' (162). I am not sure, however, if labelling Jackson's cosmetic surgery a 'mask of whiteness' really serves to deconstruct supposedly essential ethnic or 'racial' identities the way 'womanliness as masquerade' deconstructs gender identity.

The above reservations aside, I was intrigued by two recurring themes of the book: Jones' various ways of linking cosmetic surgery to the realm of the artistic, and her creative and thorough development of feminist analyses of cosmetic surgery, normality, and deviance. Furthermore, the notion of monstrosity reverberates through both themes. Already in the first chapter, Jones touches upon the links of cosmetic surgery and art. The chapter not only traces the history of plastic surgery, but it also shows that while plastic surgery is a medical discipline it has always had strong ties to the artistic: early surgeons like Gaspare Tagliacozzi worked closely with artists who were supposed to depict their surgical work; reconstructive surgeons during the First and Second World Wars collaborated with artists who produced facial masks to conceal severe facial injuries (Haiken, 1997); and surgeons are often seen and presented as artists. In the third chapter, Jones notes that some surgeons tend to stress their artistic skills more than their medical ones nowadays. They advertise their artistic work together with their medical skills on their professional websites. Jones also argues that patients have become clients. They are well-informed and demanding, and often diagnose themselves before approaching a cosmetic surgeon. Thus, they provide some of the medical skills once monopolized by surgeons, who in turn claim a somewhat intuitive artistic grasp that cannot be acquired or researched just so easily. Another link between cosmetic surgery and art concerns artists who react to or even use cosmetic surgery. In the first chapter, Jones introduces 'Project Façade,' artist Paddy Hartley's sculptural responses to the Gillies Archives at Queen Mary's Hospital in Sidcup (a unique collection of medical files on plastic surgery between 1917 and 1925). Hartley artistically responds to and interprets personal accounts of soldiers who underwent surgical reconstruction under Harold Gillies during the First World War. By producing sculptures using uniforms similar to those worn by the soldiers, he seeks a greater acknowledgment of these early patients' experiences.

Artists explore not just the personal scope of cosmetic surgery in certain historical periods, but also its cultural and political scope. Importantly, they question the boundaries of normality. In chapter 7, Jones engages with cosmetic surgery that is deliberately not used for looking 'normal,' and regards the artists Orlan and Michael Jackson as the 'monstrous mother and child of cosmetic surgery' (151). Jackson, for example, appears as monstrous because his gender and ethnic identity have become blurred by his multiple surgeries. He is 'portrayed as a shoplifter of images and identities

that don't rightfully belong to him: whiteness, femininity, beauty, and childishness' (160). Monstrosity as understood in this chapter serves not only to delineate the borders of normality, but also to open up a place of becoming a 'prosthetic ethics of welcome' (Zylinska, 2002: 217). Monstrous artists such as Orlan and Jackson cannot be domesticated and thus embody and explore future body possibilities. The crucial difference between the two artists lies of course in the fact that Orlan's cosmetic surgery is project-based and an integral part of her art while Jackson usually denies ever having had cosmetic surgery. And '[i]ronically, Orlan writes and speaks abundantly about her work but is often ignored. In contrast Jackson is secretive about his cosmetic surgery but speculation about it is overwhelming' (160). Orlan shows the abject process between before and after, and it is exactly the visualization of this stage of *becoming* that is difficult to witness for many critics. Jones argues, however, that Orlan might have been 'mainstreamed' in makeover culture: there is an abundant tendency to show these stages in popular culture.

Chapter 5, 'Makeover Misdemeanours: Magazines and Monstrous Celebrities,' for me constitutes the very heart of the book. Beginning with this chapter, Jones engages in in-depth analyses of the various figures – the 'celebrities of the cosmetic surgery world' (130) – that mark the boundaries of normality in makeover culture. Using feminist conceptions of 'monstrosity,' she discusses how these boundaries are shifted in the course of the normalization of cosmetic surgery itself. She understands the appearances of so-called 'monstrous' or 'grotesque' celebrities like Cher or Farah Fawcett as the "unnatural" measuring sticks against which the "new natural" can be measured, accepted, and condoned" (107). In turn, the measuring sticks themselves are domesticated and to a certain degree normalized. The so-called monstrous celebrities overdo cosmetic surgery in three ways called 'indiscretions' by Jones: 'Ageing disgracefully,' 'The lopsided mask,' and 'Beautiful aliens.' In 'The lopsided mask' indiscretion Jones unfolds the mechanism behind attributions of monstrosity. The standards of the 'new natural' comply with an aesthetics of reception rather than with essentialist standards of 'the natural,' while at the same time clinging to a concept of authenticity. In this sense, authenticity is what is *displayed* as being authentic. The display of authenticity needs to be consistent, though. When Pamela Anderson started to change the size of her breast implants, she exposed breasts as being not much more than a 'masquerade' staging femininity. Anderson is indiscrete because she reveals the supposedly 'natural' category of 'femininity'

as a construction. Whereas Jones unfolds this argument for ‘The lopsided mask’ indiscretion only, I am convinced that it captures the central mechanism behind all three indiscretions. All three of them concern categories loaded with notions of supposedly biological difference: gender, age, and appearance. Apparently, cosmetic surgery is considered monstrous whenever it reveals the social construction of so-called biological categories, and of so-called biological difference. It is also considered monstrous when it exposes its own aesthetics of reception. The ‘monster’ metaphor has a strong heuristic value here. Rosi Braidotti (1996) considers the monster to *be* embodied difference, and Michel Foucault (2003) even sees in it the model underlying all abnormalities in modernity. In this sense, the monster becomes a powerful instrument of analysis: it allows us to understand how abnormality is constructed when the very boundaries of normality are shifting. In emphasizing the metaphorical scope offered by monsters we should be careful not to neglect the powerful impact that attributions of monstrosity may have on people who were or are actually called monsters. As Rosemarie Garland-Thompson puts it, such a ‘metaphorical invocation seldom acknowledges that these figures often refer to the actual bodies of people with disabilities. Erasing real disabled bodies from the history of these terms compromises the very critique they intend to launch and misses an opportunity to use disability as a feminist critical category.’ (Garland Thomson, 2002: 9)

In the concluding chapter 8, Jones speculates about alternative uses of cosmetic surgery. She returns to the Bakhtinian notions of the *grotesque* and the *freak* rather than to the previously employed notion of monstrosity. This turn is telling as it emphasizes the potentially subversive usage of cosmetic surgery Jones has in mind. Rather than focusing on the borders demarcated by grotesque and freak bodies, Bakhtin (1984) directs his attention to the grotesque body because it also exists on a second plane of reality that turns all existing hierarchies and doctrines upside down. It unfolds its subversive power because it captures *all* members of society during certain times of the year: carnival. Mary Russo stresses the active and subversive power of Bakhtin’s view of carnival as ‘in some ways, nostalgic for a socially diffuse oppositional context which has been lost, but which is perhaps more importantly suggestive of a future social horizon that may release new possibilities of speech and social performance’ (Russo, 1994: 61-62). Jones has a similar idea in mind: she sees the extreme practitioners of cosmetic surgery discussed from chapter 5 onwards as embodiments of the possibility that

cosmetic surgery might 'move from its current meager aesthetic to being a celebration of the grotesque becoming-body' (188).

Certainly, Jones herself provides a possible future horizon with her book. The shift from transformation, or the before/after approach, to makeover also resonates with an increasing 'normalization' (Brooks, 2004) of cosmetic surgery itself. Normalization has been central in feminist discussions of cosmetic surgery. Kathy Davis, for example, emphasized in her seminal study, *Reshaping the Female Body* (1995), that women opting for cosmetic surgery wanted to become normal rather than beautiful. It seems, however, that with an increasing normalization of cosmetic surgery, being beautiful becomes the new normal. Understanding just how these aesthetic normalization processes work, what they mean for social agents (especially women), how they intersect with other sites of normalization (e.g. age, femininity, etc.), and how we might critically react to them is of crucial importance for any feminist engagement with these practices and discourses. Bringing all these questions and possible answers together, while at the same time carefully locating them within existing critical discourse, is in my view the outstanding achievement of *Skintight*. Also, witnessing Jones employ so-called 'monstrous measuring-sticks' to analyse these processes has been a truly revealing, exciting, and enjoyable reading experience.

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