

Makeover Feminism

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Most viewers of commercial television or consumers of popular magazines have seen striking images of women whose appearance has been dramatically altered. Many of these “made-over” women changed their body image through diet and exercise regimes, skillfully applied makeup, or elective cosmetic surgery. Possessed of higher education, prestigious careers, and families, these successful women often report that they felt some aspect of their appearance prevented them from reaching their goals. Responding to criticism from feminists, they defend the choice to enhance their appearance as a tactical effort to win power in normative society. Drawing on popular media interpretations of third wave feminism, women compelled to politicize a personal decision to “improve” their image have wrapped this act in ideological jargon.

Makeover Feminism is a cheeky new slogan meant to express the idea that conformity to cultural norms of physical beauty achieved through artificial and sometimes extreme means asserts female power. These women deny submission to patriarchal fantasies of the feminine ideal, claiming agency in the choice to alter their faces and/or bodies. Significant numbers of females submit to costly and dangerous, deforming, and potentially lethal procedures in an effort to claim power through beauty. This trend is visible in the annals of medical journal statistics that demonstrate an increase in the number of elective surgeries undergone by women in the last ten years (figure 1).

Year	Total Annual Procedures
1992	1,515,222.00
1996	1,937,877.00
2000	13,585,134.00
2001	13,254,795.00
2002	12,824,683.00
Total Number of Procedures	43,117,711.00

Figure 1

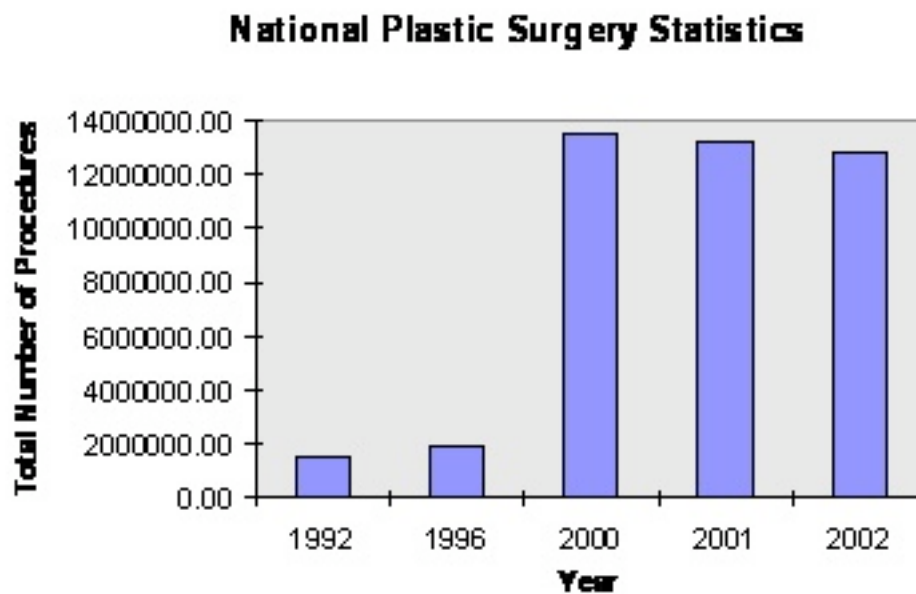


Figure 2

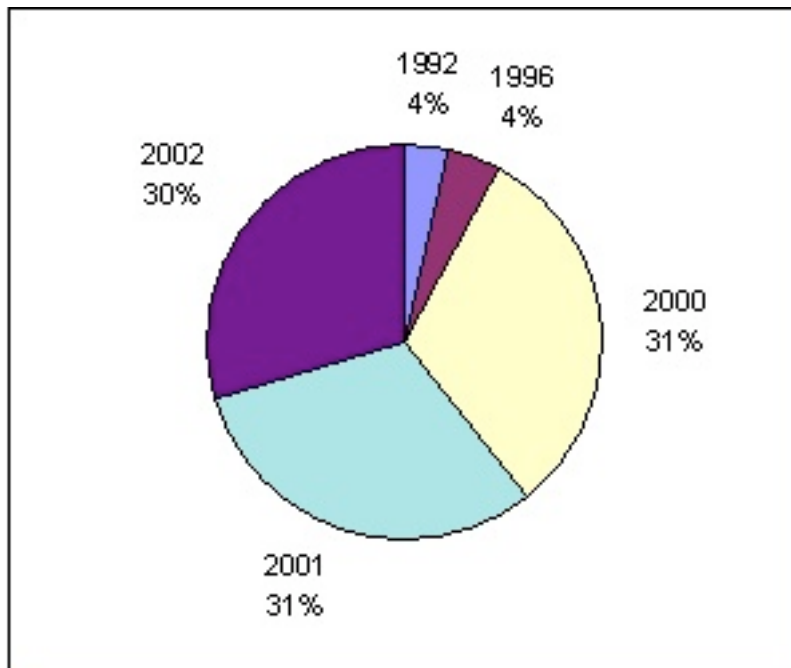


Figure 3

(All Data: American Society of Plastic Surgeons)

These statistics (figures 2 and 3) indicate an overall increase in elective cosmetic procedures over the past decade. Further inquiry into this data source revealed the following: Women compose 85% of cosmetic patients included in this data base. Women 19-34 undergo a greater number of breast augmentation and otoplasty (ear) surgeries, but women 35-50 account for 45% of female surgery patients (based on average numerical data from the American Society of Plastic Surgeons website from 1992-2002). The number one elective nonsurgical procedure is Botox injection, at an average cost of \$400.00-450.00 per treatment, used to paralyze muscle and superficial fascia in order to prevent wrinkling from facial expression. The number one surgical procedure is cosmetic rhinoplasty, more commonly known as a “nose job,” at an average fee of \$3,500.00 (American Society of Plastic Surgeons).

This data supports popular knowledge that cosmetics and cosmetic surgery is a multibillion dollar industry, growing rich off the anxiety of Americans, especially women, who fear and dread aging, weight gain, or nonconformity to normative standards of appearance.

Research has shown that attractive people are hired and promoted more frequently, and earn more income. Attractive women are perceived as friendlier and more competent than their nonattractive peers (Franzoi 374). Women, valued culturally for their sexual and reproductive role in the lives of men, uniquely suffer this association of virtue with beauty. Feminism traditionally attempts to deconstruct these cultural attributions by questioning the enshrinement of idealized feminine imagery in art, literature, theology, and law (for instance, iconic images of the Blessed Virgin Mary, or popular images of perfect mothers such as Donna Read or June Cleaver). Feminists argue that women must be taken seriously as human beings who contribute to the community and the larger culture. Women should not to be valued solely as objects of male sexual gratification, or the surrogate means through which a man may own his progeny. If women conform to the pressure to be beautiful, thin, and glamorous *just so they can have equal opportunities*, they capitulate to an oppressive patriarchal paradigm. Supporters of Makeover Feminism argue that positioning beauty and feminine sex appeal within dominant power structures—coupled with the skills, credentials, and authority to support those positions—undermines stereotypes of sexually attractive women as stupid and/or incapable. Although women obtain cultural power through beauty, and have every right to do so, it is nonetheless a contradiction in terms to call such tactics feminist. Makeover

Feminism fails to construct political meaning or power for women, either psychosocially or semantically.

The core ideologies of feminism are stood on their heads by apologists for the multibillion dollar cosmetic industry, at the expense of a rich and valid feminist intellectual canon. I do not believe that women who choose cosmetic procedures make themselves enemies of feminism. The personal ethics of choosing to alter one's appearance is not at issue, but whether adaptation to an oppressive system in an attempt to gain power can be considered subversive. Beauty serves the individual in negotiating subtle (or not so subtle) dynamics of attraction and preference in the social competition for resources. However, this fails as a collective tool for political and socioeconomic revision of women's status. Women who gain power through cosmetically or surgically enhanced beauty do not create a stable base of power for all women. Further, by referring to their alterations as feminist actions, Makeover Feminists move the discourse of female meaning and power back into the realm of woman-as-object. This clearly violates the intention and agenda of traditional, socially engaged feminism.

The construction of self-as-other has been the locus of feminist critique since at least the late 1700s, when a Frenchwoman named Olympe de Gouges wrote and distributed a pamphlet entitled *Les Droits de la Femme* (*The Rights of Woman*). For her efforts, Olympe de Gouge was assassinated by guillotine (Donovan 1). In 1792 Mary Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, a response to enlightenment era discourse on the inalienable rights of men. Wollstonecraft recognized that women were confined to a position of objectification: "Strength of body and mind are sacrificed to libertine notions of beauty, to the desire of establishing themselves—the

only way women can in the world—by marriage” (qtd. in Donovan 8). Although Wollstonecraft introduces the tension within woman’s experience of herself as subject vs. object, the main thrust of her work centered on garnering civil rights for women. This original emphasis in feminism shaped first-wave feminist theory. Feminism’s second wave penetrates social and political layers to explore psychological, religious, and philosophical understanding of misogyny. In 1949 Simone de Beauvoir wrote, “The situation of woman is that she—a free and autonomous being like all human creatures—nevertheless finds herself in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other” (qtd. in Donovan 117). It is not necessary to situate this argument within existentialism to understand the self-alienation implied by de Beauvoir’s statement. A woman inhabiting an identity of Otherness lives from a displaced center; her actions and choices reflect the desires and preferences of the subject through whom she exists as other. Feminism, simply understood, seeks to redress this disassociation by establishing woman as subject.

The term Makeover Feminism may serve heuristically to summon concepts of individuality, choice, and embodiment. A woman undergoing surgeries, diets, hair coloring, and wardrobe transformations may be acting autonomously to recreate her image. However, the normative beauty standards against which she measures her image are probably not her own. It is always the patriarchal eye she is seeking to please, and through which she hopes to establish power. One doesn’t hear, for instance, of a woman going under the knife to acquire a second chin in order to appear older, wiser, matriarchal, and therefore powerful. Claiming agency in her self-presentation, a woman conforming to normative standards of thinness and youthful appearance reinforces

gendered subjugation to such standards. The truth behind the bravura of choice and agency in these women's arguments may be a bit more constrained. In fact, women who have been valued for their appearance and submissiveness all their lives may find it difficult to establish power through other means. One experiences great anxiety when moving from a familiar territory of power into new terrain. For women accustomed to the male gaze of approval, letting go of favored status as a pretty woman summons childhood fears of abandonment, and adult dread of the emptiness of death. For if a self exists only as other, that self ceases to be if no longer "beheld."

Although feminist discourse on embodiment has become increasingly bizarre,¹ its original meaning centered on the immanent spiritual value of particularly female flesh. Feminists rewrote the female body as source of origin, nurturance, comfort, and the rooted center from which one lives a life of conscious negotiation with the world. Makeover Feminists position the self as object, and locate a woman's power in the act of being chosen. This brings us full circle in the argument for women's status as fully human beings that exist in, of, and for themselves primarily—as do men—not merely as relational creatures.

I would like to discuss briefly some theories and misunderstandings of third wave feminism. In the 1980s authors such as Camille Paglia and Naomi Wolf emerged into the mainstream with new critiques of feminism that were accepted popularly as third wave theory. In fact, these writers offered poor interpretations of second wave feminist theory, reducing a complex evolution of feminist query to a single point—what they referred to as "victim feminism." Popular media, historically hostile to feminism, embraced these dissident voices, granting their arguments an authority not recognized in feminist

academia. More respectably, the late 1970s and 1980s did bring some important criticism of feminism as a movement overly concerned with the issues facing white, educated, middle and upper class women. To quote feminist scholar Amanda Lotz, “During the 1970s and 1980s many women recognized that existing feminist theory was not sufficiently complex to understand or explain how oppression can be experienced differently within the broad category described as ‘women’” (Lotz 4). The theories of women of color feminists and third-world feminists predate and better define academic third wave feminism (Lotz 4) than do antagonists such as Paglia.

Regardless, popular theories of third wave feminism persist, and include such new culture “power imagery” as Madonna, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Kim Possible, the Spice Girls, Power Rangers, Britney Spears, Lara Croft, and Courtney Love.² Although these “power images” construct positive role models for girls and women, they reinforce normative feminine aesthetic standards. A woman’s attainment of peak artistic, athletic, or intellectual mastery is seldom celebrated or rewarded in popular media unless paired with a pleasing face and body. Although each of these female icons performs skillfully and exhibits physical prowess rivaling that of any man, her intimidation factor is held in check by acquiescence to social norms of feminine hygiene and appearance. A beautiful, slender woman who “kicks ass” may find media approval, but an unshaven woman lawyer who makes partner before her male colleagues is a “granola dyke.” The real message to women, I believe, is that powerful women are embraced only if they are thin, sexy, young, and beautiful.

Certainly, media figures exist who embody female agency and cultural power without conforming to ideals of feminine beauty. Former Secretary of State Madeline

Albright, former Attorney General Janet Reno, and primatologist Jane Goodall inhabit public space as autonomous women seated in their own authority. Although these women have won cultural power, they are frequently criticized or humorously belittled for their appearance. In spite of this, I am not convinced that these women would have carved a deeper niche into the patriarchal belt by appearing younger, thinner or more buxom, or more obviously concerned with their sexual image. In fact, many beautiful, intelligent, capable women suggest that female attractiveness can be a hindrance as well as an asset. Some attractive women experience prejudice from teachers, colleagues, and employers who believe that a pretty woman cannot be bright. Other beautiful, successful women have endured accusations of having “slept their way” to positions of power. This no-win situation for women is what Anthropologist Gregory Bateson termed a double bind (qtd. in Laing, 113). The problem then shifts from media manipulation of imagery to the psychosexual arena of gender politics, and this is where feminists must situate their struggle.

Makeover Feminists will argue that they situate the problem appropriately by asserting their right to be beautiful, sexual, and self-determining in their aesthetic choices, *and* use these tools to wrest power from the brokers. I agree that women must reclaim their sexual nature, and even see the possible realm of embodied power as “other” if played with consciously. However, a social movement for liberation must include all expressions of a true self: instincts, drives, needs, and desires for things basic to survival, for relationship, and for transcendence. One cannot live a fully authentic life as object/other without recourse to varied states of empowered being. It is impossible to build a free society if the psyche is split and enslaved to shadow projections.

As I previously asserted, feminism is basically a shift from woman as eternal Other—always defined from outside—to woman as Self. Makeover Feminism, despite its sincere discourse within the tradition, cannot accomplish the goal of female liberation.

Notes

1. Feminist discourse on embodiment now includes arguments for and against cyborgs as representations of feminine consciousness, arguments for self-mutilation as gender performatives, Bordo's defense of eating disorders as statement, and the ongoing discourse of appearance treated in this paper.
2. Interestingly, I stumbled across the phrase "makeover feminism" in an online article analyzing Courtney Love's physical transformation.

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