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## Introduction

Bernadette Wegenstein  
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A woman is more authentic the more she looks like what she has dreamed for herself.  
The transvestite Agrado in the film  
*Todo sobre mi madre* (1999) by Pedro Almodóvar

### Cosmetic Surgery

According to the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ASAPS), nearly 11.5 million cosmetic surgical and nonsurgical procedures were performed in the United States in 2006. Since 1997, the overall number of procedures had increased 446 percent.<sup>1</sup> The demand for cosmetic surgery products has been growing roughly 11.2 percent yearly, reaching a market size of \$2 billion by the end of 2007—driven mostly by new product approvals, favorable cultural and demographic trends, and improved technology.<sup>2</sup> The sensational character of these statistics could be extended ad infinitum when reading the details published by the ASAPS.

We could highlight the fact that patients have been undergoing cosmetic surgery procedures at increasingly young ages; take, for instance, the fact that in 2006, 16,477 rhinoplasties, 7,915 Botox injections, and 5,423 Hylaform/Restylane injections were performed in the United States on adolescents. Or, if we want to analyze the data in terms of gender dynamics, we might note that while the most popular invasive procedure for women in 2006 was breast augmen-

1. <http://www.surgery.org/press/news-release.php?iid=465> (accessed 10/3/07).

2. Alex Kuczynski, *Beauty Junkies: Inside Our \$15 Billion Obsession with Cosmetic Surgery* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), p. 152.

tation, followed by eyelid surgery and abdominoplasty, men—who had only 8% of the total 11.5 million procedures done—underwent mostly liposuction, eyelid surgery, and rhinoplasty. The most popular noninvasive procedure for men and women in 2006 was Botox injections (3,181,592 procedures), and the most popular invasive procedure was liposuction (403,684 procedures).

But what is really of interest in the context of this special issue on the reality TV makeover phenomenon is the impact that these shows (starting in 2002 with ABC's *Extreme Makeover*, followed in 2003 by FX's *Nip and Tuck*, and in 2004 by FOX's *The Swan*, E! channel's *Dr. 90210*, and MTV's *I Want a Famous Face*) have had on the overall consumption of cosmetic surgeries. The data speak volumes. In 2003, overall cosmetic procedures were at 8.3 million, with an increase of 12% in surgical procedures and 22% in nonsurgical procedures from the previous year. The year 2004, however, which is also the peak of the makeover show genre, featured a 44% increase, totaling 11.9 million procedures, with surgical procedures, increased by 17% and nonsurgical by 51%! ASAPS President Peter Fodor attributes this growth to media coverage, including the dramatic increase in surgery shows:

I believe at least some of this upward trend may be attributable to increased media coverage of plastic surgery in 2004. . . . People have had many more opportunities to see, first hand, what plastic surgery is like and what it can do for others. That can be a strong incentive for them to seek the same benefits by having cosmetic procedures themselves.<sup>3</sup>

In 2005 and 2006, however, surgical and nonsurgical procedures increased by only 1% (in 2005, nonsurgical procedures even declined by 4%, to 9.3 million), and they have remained stabilized at 11.5 million per year since then. To give a practical example of this market movement: rhinoplasty for men increased from 38,989 procedures in 2004 to 45,945 in 2005, but decreased to 33,143 in 2006. In other words, the heyday has been reached. We are now facing the age of a normalized, slowly progressing growth in cosmetic procedures. This collection of papers aims to trace—with the help of authors who are true forerunners in the fields of cultural and literary theory, philosophy, sociology, and clinical psychology—the nature of this upheaval and its connection to our culture.

### Reality Television

Nielsen Media Research indicates that 56% of all of American TV shows today are reality television programs, and that about 69% of

3. <http://www.surgery.org/press/news-release.php?iid=395> (accessed 10/3/07).

TV programming worldwide (cable and broadcast) is devoted to reality television.<sup>4</sup> Within the spectrum of reality TV, there are documentary-style shows, in which ordinary people are followed into their daily lives, as in *Family Plots*; docu-soaps starring celebrities, such as *Britney Cam* with Britney Spears; talent searches, in which ordinary people try to become celebrities, such as *America's Next Top Model*; historical reenactments, such as *Colonial House* (PBS 2004), set in the American frontier of 1628; an increasing number of dating shows, such as *For Love or Money*; law enforcement/courtroom/military shows, such as the British *Commando VIP*; reality game shows, such as *Survivor* and *Project Runway*, which may include a military component as with *Boot Camp*, or a sport component as with *The Ultimate Fighter*; and, finally, lifestyle-change shows such as *The Monastery*, and the booming subgenre of self-improvement or makeover shows, such as *I Want a Famous Face*, *Pimp My Ride*, or *Ten Years Younger*, which can also feature game-show characteristics, as with *The Swan's* pageant. All of these subgenres have one thing in common: they incorporate to a greater or lesser degree the narrative strategy of "wish fulfillment."

Looking at the economics behind reality television itself, cheap production costs are behind the format's original boom. Reality TV was a response to the economic restructuring of U.S. and British television in the 1980s. The growth of cable, VCRs, the market dominance of powerful networks like FOX, as well as the emergence of local independent stations led to a fragmentation of TV audiences; as a result, advertising revenues had to be spread among a larger pool of distributors and created pressure on broadcasters to cut per-program production costs. As Chad Raphael points out in his analysis of the political-economic forces behind the emergence of a genre that he calls "Reali-TV," there is an "inseparability of the television industry's economic needs and how this genre represents reality."<sup>5</sup> What Raphael emphasizes with the term "Reali-TV" is that the economic crisis of television could have been solved by merely expand-

4. Another statistic to keep in mind: the average individual American watches television for roughly four hours a day, and the average American household watches more than seven hours of television a day. According to one study, television accounts for nearly 40 percent of the average American's free time: Carl Elliott, *Better Than Well: American Medicine Meets the American Dream* (New York: Norton, 2003), p. 84.

5. Chad Raphael, "The Political Economic Origins of Reali-TV," in *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, ed. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette (New York/London: New York University Press, 2004), p. 119. For coining the term "Reali-TV" Chad refers to an article by Ed Siegel, "It's Not Fiction. Or, It's Not Reality. It's Reali-TV," *Boston Globe*, May 26, 1991, p. A1.

ing infotainment or other programming trends—but instead, crime-time television, tabloid TV, and on-scene shows, as well as documentaries, were adapted into a new format that claimed access to “reality,” to the “truth.”

### Cosmetic Surgery and Reality Television

FOX Network is the most prolific purveyor of reality television programs. One of its recent reality dramas, analyzed at length in this special issue, is *The Swan* (2004–2005). The show features three of the above-discussed characteristics: it is a self-improvement/makeover show, a game show, and at the same time a wish-fulfillment show. *The Swan* was created and produced by Nely Galán, a Latina woman (originally Cuban) who lives—as she puts it—“a self-confident businesswoman’s life in Hollywood.”<sup>6</sup> In her invention of a reality television version of Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tale “The Ugly Duckling,” the beauty pageant contestants undergo major surgery in addition to noninvasive makeover procedures such as styling, dieting, working out, and therapy, in order to be transformed into female beauty ideals. The producer herself watches over them as a “life-coach” over a three-month period, during which the women are away from their families and habitual lives in order to undergo the transformations—“internal” and “external,” as the show explains—and to “pass” into a new life. In her role as life-coach Galán can be aggressively straightforward: “no more candy, ice-cream. Say good-bye to your old life and habits. Look into the future and into feeling good.”<sup>7</sup> For a total of seven weeks in each episode a pair of contestants compete against each other; the winner of the final competition—a telespectacle that was watched by more than 10 million Americans in the first season (May 24, 2004)—is crowned “the Swan” and walks away with \$50,000 in addition to a new self: “On our show, you don’t walk away with nothing, you walk away with \$250,000 worth of services from day one.”<sup>8</sup> There is only one ultimate winner at the end of each season, whose wish for a better life and look has been fulfilled in addition to her being awarded the first prize. But what is this prize really for?

In my interview with Galán, I inquired about her motivations to participate in the extremely successful show (300,000 applications

6. Interview for the documentary *Made Over in America* by Bernadette Wegenstein and Geoffrey Alan Rhodes: <http://www.frif.com/new2007/over.htm> (accessed 10/3/07).

7. *The Swan*, The Complete Series, First Season (2004), DVD edition, gaLAnEntertainment 2006.

8. Interview for the documentary *Made Over in America* (above, n. 6).

to the second, and 500,000 applications to the third season) and her views on the need for a makeover. I learned that the key for a “successful transformation”—that is, the key for the successful casting of a contestant—is the extent to which the woman is willing to “surrender” to beauty culture: Rachel Love-Fraser and Elisa Stiles won the first and second seasons, respectively, because, apparently, they “gave in” the best. But who are these successfully-to-be-made-over women? What nearly all the contestants who ever appeared on *The Swan* share is the fact that, despite being obsessively unhappy with a particular body feature, there is no “big problem” evident in their looks. The first season’s sixteen contestants, all white,<sup>9</sup> certainly did not look “ugly” by any means: in a more-than-careful casting, they were tested for body dysmorphic disorder<sup>10</sup>—which they were perhaps predisposed toward, but did not clinically suffer—and were ultimately chosen for being “normal” while at the same time being willing to “surrender” to something that would come “upon” them. While for the television spectators, as for the readers of the various beauty magazines and tabloid press where these women were featured, their need for a makeover was strengthened by the fact that their “before” photographs were taken in bad clothes and from bad angles, showing them with sad and at times desperate faces, nothing dramatic was actually wrong with them. What was not apparent, however, was how they felt about themselves, and what kind of fragile relationship they revealed toward their own body image. Rachel Love-Fraser, for instance, winner of the first season, wanted to leave everything behind and focus on “who she really was,” as she stated in a *People Magazine* interview.<sup>11</sup> The articles to follow not only give us insight into the psyche of people on the make-over market, but will provide us with a cultural-theoretical, sociological, clinical, and overall critical framework to read and understand them.

9. The second season included two episodes in which one contestant was handicapped, as well as some ethnic diversity.

10. Body dysmorphic disorder is a psychiatric disorder characterized by excessive pre-occupation with some imagined defect in physical appearance, causing the subject significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning. See DSM-IV, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, 4th ed., quoted in Katharine R. Phillips, *The Broken Mirror: Understanding and Treating Body Dysmorphic Disorder* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 33.

11. Michelle Green and Michael A. Lipton, “The Swan Controversy: Has TV Plastic Surgery Gone Too Far?” cover story, *People Magazine*, June 7, 2004, p. 61.

### Reality Made Over

This special issue of *Configurations* starts—perhaps uncharacteristically for a journal of literature, science, and technology—with “*The Swan: The Fantasy of Transformation versus the Reality of Growth*” by Pamela Orosan-Weine, a clinical psychologist who in her practice specializes on body-dysmorphic disorder and other body image disorders. Orosan-Weine’s approach to Rachel Love-Fraser would be that only by working through and accepting the losses and impossibilities of life would Rachel find her “true self”; from a clinical viewpoint, by altering her body all that she does is to delay or repress the body’s natural change and decay. Orosan-Weine’s insightful and sensitive voice is one rarely heard among cultural and literary theorists, for whom the individuals under analysis are cultural agents rather than human beings. It is even more refreshing, then, to read her reinterpretation of “The Ugly Duckling” fairy tale, which she bases on a reading by Bruno Bettelheim, relating the contestants’ desires for a new self to a childhood “family romance” in which the child imagines herself to be misrecognized by her real parents, to be “in truth” of royal descent.

A piece in dialogue with Orosan-Weine’s is Virginia Blum’s “*Objects of Love: I Want a Famous Face and the Illusions of Star Culture.*” Even though Blum’s voice is not a clinical one, she uses psychoanalytic tools to get to the heart of the makeover show contestants’ narcissistic desire-structure, such as in the case of the transsexual porn star Gia, who wishes to look more like Pamela Anderson. Blum engages in a sharp discussion about the problem of the identification with the star ideal, and of inscribing the ego-ideal into the subject’s own body. Similar to Orosan-Weine, who concludes that the contestants regress to a childhood “family romance,” Blum describes this move from a psychoanalytical position as one that brings the individual back to a “ground zero” of ego formation.

In her feminist deconstruction, “*Editing as Plastic Surgery: The Swan and the Violence of Image-Creation,*” Kimberly Jackson adds a historical discussion on “the West’s newest relation to a feminine compulsion toward imitation,” tracing back the act of mimicking the “other” (star or beauty ideal) to the proliferation of copies of the same divine statues in ancient Greek culture. In a Baudrillardian move, Jackson reveals the signifier of otherness as the ultimate “empty” function of the mediated self, pointing to the fact that the process of editing (television format, surgery, . . .) has left literally nothing of contemporary femininity.

Equally fierce in her feminist reading of the cultural parameters constituting the need for “sameness,” Brenda R. Weber contributes the adroit gender-theoretical essay “Makeover as Takeover: Scenes of Affective Domination on Makeover TV.” One of her foci is the definition of friendship in such shows as *What Not to Wear*, in which friends are defined as a “mirror reflecting mismatched ontologies.” The friend, in other words, corrects the other’s appearance, slipping into the role of a controlling “mother-Big-Other.” To put it in Weber’s own words, the friend takes over her subject by “affective domination,” and, as with Jackson’s vanished subjectivity via editing, all that is left in Weber’s account of femininity is a subject that is fed celebrity content through a process of public humiliation, in which we all are involved: the producers and the consumers of this format.

Julie M. Albright extends this focus on the audience of makeover shows, delivering an applied sociological insight into media consumption with her piece “Impossible Bodies: TV Viewing Habits, Body Image, and Plastic Surgery Attitudes among College Students in Los Angeles and Buffalo, New York.” In her comparative study of makeover show audiences—specifically, eighteen-to-twenty-four-year-old college girls—she reveals that class is one of the decisive factors in the relationship between exposure to makeover shows and body-image disorder. Albright compared a significant sample of makeover-show viewers at Los Angeles’s private University of Southern California to viewers at The State University of New York at Buffalo. Her results show that

achieving the beauty ideals seen in the media may be viewed by the Buffalo sample as a “way up,” a viable means of social mobility; for the Los Angeles sample, on the other hand, maintaining their body projects may be the imperative, to maintain and reflect to others their class standing in society. . . . Either way, the class factor, or the “Cinderella story” inherent in plastic surgery makeover shows, is a prominent subtext not lost on these audiences.

In “Of Swans and Ugly Ducklings: Bioethics between Humans, Animals, and Machines” Joanna Zylinska proposes to read the makeover-show contestants as “twenty-first-century neocyborgs bearing the marks of technology on their bodies”—broadening our critical terrain to the crucial domains of biopolitics and bioethics. She delivers a counternarrative to the discussion of makeover—namely, a nonfoundational bioethics that is not based on an individualistic, problem-based moral paradigm, but on “a broader political context in which individual decisions are always involved in complex relations of power.” In her bioethical counterexploration, Zylinska in-

cludes the most provocative comparisons, from such political formations as the military/prison/concentration camp to contemporary U.S. politics of domination and political makeover.

Mark Poster continues the biopolitical discussion introduced by Zylinska, extending it into the indispensable discussion of media history and philosophy. In his piece “Swan’s Way: Care of Self in the Hyperreal” he defines the format of reality television makeover shows as an example of a contemporary “care of self,” in which the subject explores his “possibilities of personhood in the age of information machines.” Poster interprets this body notion emerging from makeover culture historically as a body that merges into external images (of celebrities or of other idealized images of beauty); for him this is a necessary and not surprising event in a modern media culture in which television and video recording devices have affected the self in a direct way.

In the concluding piece, “The Best or the Worst of Our Nature: Reality TV and the Desire for Limitless Change,” William Egginton asks the question of the ethical value of reality makeover TV. Only when we see the contestants’ desire for change in the context of a long history of “selves that change over time, and that are hence never truly self-identical,” he argues, can we begin to substantiate our wish to judge the social effects of makeover TV. With this move, Egginton reconciles many of the positions taken by the authors in this collection, because the ethical question—the question of whether the desires on display in our makeover culture represent the “best or the worst of our nature”—is equally urgent in psychoanalytic, clinical, feminist, bioethicist, and biopolitical perspectives.

In conclusion, I want to thank the authors in this issue for their engaging work, for carefully listening to each other’s voices and often referencing each other, which enriches the issue immensely. I also want to thank Alan Rauch, the editor of *Configurations*, and Ashley Patriarca, the assistant editor, whose editorial supervision made it possible to choose the very best essays I received, as well as to make the very best of them with their careful reading and editorial advice. I consider it an honor to have been able to edit this issue, which sheds light on one of the most drastic cultural phenomena that the twenty-first century has so far seen: makeover reality TV.

Since many of the authors in this issue refer to an interpretation of Hans Christian Andersen’s original story “The Ugly Duckling,” we will print the 1844 fable as a preface, so that the readers may freshen up their childhood memories.