

Traumatic Beauty. Esthetic Body Modifications as a Play of Differences between Standardization and Individualization

Burkhard Brosig · Günther Oesterle · Johannes F. Lehmann
Uwe Gieler

"Psychoanalysis and religion agree in saying: 'One must not attack the body', 'One must accept oneself'. These are primitive, ancestral, anachronistic concepts. We think that the sky will fall on our heads if we touch the body!"

"Are we still convinced that we must bend ourselves to the decisions of Nature, this lottery of genes distributed by chance?"

Orlan (www.digibodies.org/online/orlan.htm)

Abstract

The art of esthetic body formation is evaluated in historical, aesthetic and psychoanalytical contexts. Body modifications are, this is a central thesis of the article, traumatic inscriptions of the individual in the search of personal identity and uniqueness. As a consequence, the body as surface of the individual enters and gets caught and sometimes lost in a play of differences with symbolic connotations: Beautiful and ugly, good vs. evil, attractive vs. unlovely, individual or normative, all these characteristics were, all of a sudden, variables in a complex equation constituting a social self and a unique personal subjectivity. The body enters a process of transformation, gets created again by an individual, who tries to subject the flesh to his own creative will. Body transformations such as seen in Body Integrity Disorder (BIID) are, in this context, an ultimate expression of these transformatory processes.

Introduction

Traumatic Beauty, the title of the following article may cause confusion. Is beauty not simply only pleasant-sensual-esthetic, in the sense of Kant's "disinterestedness" in the esthetic experience? Are traumata, on the contrary, not always decisive-flooding-destructive ugly experiences? How can beauty be traumatic? How can trauma be beautiful? What becomes of the opposites beautiful and ugly in the context of modern body-shaping possibilities? Is BIID as an ultimate expression of body modification still beauty, or necessarily, perverse-exciting?

When we look at these contexts of beauty and ugliness, body reality and medial virtuality more closely, the categories which used to be carefully separated become indistinguishable.

In the following we will report a *historical-anthropological thesis*, an *epochal-diagnostic finding* and finally offer a *psychoanalytical perspective* in response to this phenomenon.

Historical-anthropological Thesis

Beautiful and *ugly* are not bound to any static normed definition and assumption of normality which have remained unchanged over time, but rather have arisen historically; that is, have been historically changeable and newly-negotiable in each society. Beauty/ugliness is a cultural basic dichotomy, which is related in many unfathomable ways to other central, historically deep-rooted occidental dichotomies (like body/soul, good/evil, true/false, male/female, content/form, sign/meaning, substance/accidence etc). Historical shifts in dominance and recordings only become recognizable in light of the cultural code. The question asked by the humanities is thus: What are the current cultural and structural conditions for the specific discourse and practices regarding beauty/ugliness?

Beauty/ugliness form an historically and culturally contingent code for the perception and modeling (norming) of bodies, which cannot, however, itself be reduced to physical ideal norms and thus follows changeable rules. For this reason, there is also a "History of Beauty" (Eco, 2004). To the extent that beauty is encountered in the body, but beauty at the same time transcends the purely physical (the mere formless material) and thus appears as the non-physical, as the form or *gestalt* of the body, the opposites beauty/ugliness are both coded via those of body and soul or nature and culture. But the dichotomies beautiful/ugly and body/soul are rather diametric to one another, where beauty is taken as an intelligible and non-physical principle, as the outward and visible sign of truth and goodness, while only being perceptible on the physical substrate. Beauty is *that something* of the body, which at the same time is not the *body*, but which *forms* the body, while ugliness, "equivalent to the amorphous" (Franke, 1974) and "unformed" (Friedrich Schlegel) is degraded to mere "materialness" (Wagner, 2001). Such an internalized differentiation of emotional-physical beauty and merely physical-material ugliness has had many socially-effective consequences under the historical conditions of the different periods. This can be exemplified by gender attribution, which has changed historically. While Aristoteles assumed an analogy of masculine and beautiful, the equivalence of feminine and beautiful, apparent since early modern times, has relegated these "beautiful men" to the status of "crisis figures" (Trapp, 2003), against which the fascination of beautiful women remains both threatening and unfathomable.

This leads to a second cross-over with other western dichotomies. Beauty was (and is) always an attribute of perfection and thus – mediated by the divine – identification of truth and goodness. On the other hand, beauty as being only external and on the surface, that is a form of *physical* appearance, is always coupled as well with lies, pretense and masks. Beauty appears at the same time as something spiritual *and* as something physical and is thus involved in the differing evaluations of both dichotomies. As an intelligible, non-physical attribute, beauty belongs to truth, goodness, perfection and the divine. As *physical* beauty, however, it belongs to the (degraded) sphere of the external, ephemeral, accidental, pretentious and false. The ugliness of the body is the truth concealed behind the beautiful pretense. Beauty and ugliness have switched positions with respect to the dichotomy true/false. Both elements, the intelligibility of beauty and the mere pretentious appearance of the artificially beautified body, touch on the central problem of *identity*. Thus, the artificial forming of the body is also an act of self-empowerment over the simply given physical attributes; however, this element of self-empowerment itself is precarious, when the (self)constructed

beauty has to be made known in a gesture of confession (illustrated clearly, for example in the *Bild* advertisement of the courageous truth "My breasts are done" [i.e. constructed, german: „Meine Brüste sind gemacht“]).

Time diagnosis

At present, there is a radical *new* and in part *risky* balancing of the boundaries between beautiful and ugly, which involves all areas of culture. It has medicine-technical, economic-political, media-technical and psychosocial requisites:

On the one hand, the rapid medical-technical development in plastic surgery since the start of the 20th century has reached the point in the last two decades where nearly all wishes concerning plastic forming of the body appear to be fulfilled. Moreover, the market, acclaimed by Neoliberalism, has consequences for the commercial formability of chances in life (in the profession, partnership, sexuality), so that beauty is playing an ever-greater and more determinant role as a factor in the market and in life and happiness. The body becomes "a biological stock with high profit expectations" (Reusch, 2001) while the State, for its part, is "slimmed down" by means of cuts (Metzen, 1994). In addition, media developments, like omnipresence (Internet, cell phones) and the digitalization of media images enable visual self-presentation on the one hand, and nearly unlimited image processing on the other, which represents in a sense the medial analogue to the physical cuts made by plastic surgeons. Identities can thus – through the internet as well – be simulated and manipulated many times over (keyword: "Second Life").

Research of the shame and disgust threshold come to the conclusion that we can presently identify a new phase of "external pressure to self-pressure" (Elias, 1976) and in this respect an increased mental sensitization for deviances (Menninghaus, 1999: 77).

The prevailing youth cult (anti-aging) and the devaluation of age in light of the real over-aging of society leads to increasing use of plastic-surgical corrections (Brosig, Euler, Gieler & Brähler, 2006). I have termed this rejection of age and maturity by pharmacological and surgical means, which promise very concrete help against the symptoms, but cannot ultimately stop the underlying processes of the life cycle, the "Dorian-Gray-Syndrome" (Brosig, Kupfer, Niemeier & Gieler, 2001; Euler, Brähler & Brosig, 2003).

Both modern art, as a seismograph of contemporary diagnostics, and psychoanalytical theory construction, as the site of interdisciplinary comprehension, have reacted to these time-diagnostic findings of an apparently *traumatic* reformulation of beautiful body norms, traumatic in the sense of flooding with proffered sensuous-media beauty and traumatic in the sense of medicine-technical possibilities of body correction.

An abundance of contemporary artistic works has seismographically marked this growing sensitization and the flexible negotiation process between the boundaries of beauty and trauma. In an impressive scene in Pedro Almodóvar's film "All about my mother" (Almodóvar, 1999), the change in body perception is shown tragically. In a spontaneous revue improvisation on stage, a transsexual begins to present his body like components of his wardrobe by soliloquizing on prices and special offers in plastic surgery, but also about plans for further changes and the development of the market. The only *seemingly natural* states of the body are totally transferred to the paradigm of goods esthetics and money. At the end of the 70s, the artist Valie Export (2006) designed articles of clothing on which artificial limbs were

printed. The symbolic character of the body was exposed by this visual analoging of body and clothing.

The performing artist Orlan (2006) goes beyond visual representations, by herself undergoing plastic surgery, with the operations transmitted in the internet. The brutality of this procedure consists less of the publication of this presumably intimate shaping than in the fact that the operations do not aim for a normatively set goal but are performed as an end in themselves. This means, strictly speaking, that beautifying and uglifying, overlaid with normative *esthetification* vs. esthetically risky *individualization*, are woven together. In itself already a gesture of cultural-scientific reflection, Michel Houellebecq, in his novel *Elementarteilchen* [Atoms] – as in all of his other novels – unsparingly confronts the body and its beauty, as the sole remaining source of happiness of post-metaphysical and radically individualized marketing subjects, with its unavoidable decay (Houellebecq, 1999).

Cultural-scientific theory construction responded to the current findings by emphasizing the construct character of the body in a radical way. Since the 1980s, *body* and *physicality* have advanced to indispensable categories of cultural-scientific research. The works of Michel Foucault can be cited as the initial sparks, which opened surprising insights into the historicity of our conception of body and sexuality in the late 1970s.

Single studies of other aspects of the body, like Claudia Benthien's „Haut' – Literaturgeschichte, Körperbilder, Grenzdiskurse“ [Skin – Literary history, body images, boundary discourse] (1999), showed that the skin is not what it appears to medicine to be these days, namely an organ to be researched step by step, but that its importance, its evaluation and its place in the ideal of beauty are continuously renegotiated, whereby these positionings stamp the corresponding medical research and sometimes even elicit it and not vice-versa.

Psychoanalytical Perspectives

The psychoanalytical theory construction, starting with Freud's contribution (1923) to the body-self, has emphasized the ideal of the appropriation of the body by a Self which differentiates itself neurophysiologically. Classically, the Self is always something physical, but the essence of the physical, its being itself does not need further analysis. The body appears to be vitalized by the instincts which are in conflict with other instances of the emotional, but body and *Leib*, to use the terminology of Thomas Ettl (2006) are not substantially separate. In the earlier descriptions by Anzieu (1985) of the *skin-self*, the *Moi-peau*, the alienation of the modern from the body is already established by the fact that the skin is differentiated into various sheaths and functions, the gesture of description and the therapeutic utopia it contains, however, correspond to a harmonizing stabilization of the self.

While Lacan (1966, 1986) took the captivation of the individual with the reflection of his own person perceptible in the mirror in the *mirror stage* as a topic, the boundaries of individuality and becoming-subject by misappropriation of the body are the increasingly disconcerting life topics in Castelnovo-Tedesco's (1973, 1978) occupation with the emotional reactions of transplant recipients to the incorporation of foreign materials in their own bodies. He, too, describes in his theoretical framework the childhood development which, classically viewed, should lead from the amorphous fragmenting and deficient acquisition of body in the infant to a harmonious holistic-experienced body-soul continuum in the adult. He now conceptualizes the surgically newly-created body reality as an abrupt falling back into

psychotic body-soul discontinuities, which in coping with disease, for example in cardiac transplantations, lead to usually transient psychotic decompensations.

In cosmetic surgery, these exogenous-surgical modifications of the body image begun in the transplantation are strictly turned to the extreme. In this connection, there are only a few studies on the process components of body modification. Who gets a tattoo (as a frequent body modification), when and why? How might this event be understood subconsciously? Martine Vautherin-Estrade (2003) has provided a first detailed article on this topic in "Des grenouilles tropicales dans un paysage" [Landscape with Bullfrog], which focuses on a session in which the recently-tattooed patient attempts to understand the symbolic background of body staging:

"The counter transference-horror, which took place of me, being confronted with his tattoo-practices parallel to the psychotherapeutic sessions, the fear, which I experienced, being marginalized by a perverse father-figure and being pressured towards an acting out between Aldous and myself, the traumatic confusion caused by that session, in which he changed addressing himself going from the third to the first person, and the openly displayed overstimulation, with which he confessed these practices, all that let me doubt that I could survive being in the role of the analyst.

And my writing: Pressure to symbolization versus skin-inscription, as a mirror or echo."

We have reached the end of this article with this retrospect of the analysis of a patient with body modification. As shown recently in this text, the discourses of beautiful and ugly, healthy and sick, normed and individual, natural and artificial overlap on the body. The modern appears to have successfully effaced the once naïve creature-nature of the person in his body. The uncertainties coupled to this are the subject of cultural-scientific, artistic and not least of all psychoanalytical constructs, experience and performance, whose comprehension is gaining in depth.

In recent years Body Integrity Disorder (BIID) was described (Patrone 2009; Kasten, 2009) as a new form of body modification. This hard-to-grasp disorder seems to be present a complex web of influences (psychological, biographical, gender-oriented and neurological approaches were used) that may explain some aspects of the clinical picture. Most authors (survey in Kasten, 2009) used clinical concepts, that see the disorder in an intermediate space of delusion, Body Dysmorphic Disorder, Sexual Identity Disorder and traumatic neuroses. Similar "transdisciplinary" contexts between psychodynamics, body-modification-theory and medical and legal aspects of lifestyle-medicine were used in the authors' formulation of the so-called *Dorian-Gray-Syndrome* (Brosig et al., 2001).

For the future it would be important to conduct sophisticated in-depth interviews, to bring more light into the intrapsychic dynamic this disease might have.

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