'I just want to be me again!'

Beauty pageants, reality television and post-feminism

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Abstract This essay examines the connections between the Miss America pageant and reality makeover television shows. We argue that televised performances of gender have shifted focus from the intensely scripted, out-of-touch Miss America to reality makeover shows that normalize cosmetic surgery as a means to become the 'ideal' woman. While both spectacles offer their viewers performances of femininity, these performances need to be understood as emerging from the cultural and political conditions in which they are produced. This difference in presentation of the subjects of beauty pageants and makeover programmes speaks respectively to the changing role of media in the normalization of performances of femininity, as well as to the affiliation of many young women with post-feminist politics in the United States.

keywords *beauty pageant, makeover shows, post-feminism, reality television*

> A Miss America has to have this image of being this wholesome, holier-than-thou, up-on-a-pedestal woman. In this day and age of reality TV, when people want the nitty gritty and the foibles, that's diametrically opposed. You really need to get to real women letting their hair down. (Paula Shugart, president, Miss Universe Organization, cited in Godleski, 2005)

After the 2004 Miss America televised pageant attracted a record-low 9.8 million people, the US television network ABC dropped the event as a ratings loser (Godleski, 2005). The fate of the pageant was unknown for a while, but recently the Miss America Organization has signed a multi-year broadcast deal with cable country music network CMT (de Moraes, 2005). The move to CMT indicates a clear shift in genre for the pageant, and airing the programme on a narrowly defined niche cable channel certainly challenges the pageant's historical claim of 'universal' femininity. Indeed, in this post-network era, where hundreds of cable channels attract smaller and smaller audiences, it is no surprise that Miss America had difficulty finding their audience on a broadcast network such as ABC. Beauty pageants and country music have both been more popular in Southern states of the US, and thus CMT may turn out to be Miss America's niche. As media analyst Larry Gerbrandt (2005) comments, 'Miss America is sort of a heartland kind of event . . . It's Mom, Dad, the flag and apple pie. That's their demographic'.

Before the move to CMT, however, there was talk about remaking the pageant in the style of a reality television show, where viewers would watch the pageant unfold over a number of weeks, investing in individual contestants in a *Survivor*-type manner, until the fateful night when one of them wins. Indeed, in an effort to connect more closely with an audience that tunes in regularly to reality programmes such as *Survivor*, *American Idol*, *The Swan* and *Extreme Makeover*, the Miss America pageant in recent years has adjusted its script to contain more reality-style gimmicks, such as *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*-style questions during the on-stage interview portion of the event (where the host asks 'Is that your final answer?'), or new rules that allow the previous contestants who did not make the top ten to come back for a second chance at the crown (Godleski, 2005; Peterson, 2005).

During this historical moment, however, Miss America didn't just find reality television useful – reality television discovered the theme of Miss America as a driving narrative in the form of a new genre, the cosmetic surgery makeover show. At the same time that Miss America was losing its television audience, the cosmetic surgery makeover show made its debut on network television, and became an immediate hit. These shows offer personal narratives of individuals (both women and men) as they undergo extensive cosmetic surgery as a way to 'make over' their lives; the surgical procedures are positioned as effective means through which one can achieve a more general life transformation. Reality makeover shows clearly and uncritically legitimate the increasing normalization of the cultural practice of cosmetic surgery in US culture, and transparently conflate personal fulfilment and individual achievement with the attainment of a physically ideal body.

Televised performances of gender have shifted focus, then, from the intensely scripted, out-of-touch Miss America to reality makeover shows that normalize cosmetic surgery as a means to become the 'ideal' woman. What does this genre redefinition mean in terms of gender representation and performance? It is clear – at least as measured by television ratings – that the Miss America pageant is widely understood as irrelevant and old-fashioned, and that shows such as *Extreme Makeover* and *The Swan* seem to resonate more with their audience, but does this indicate anything deeper than the popularity of faddish television? In this essay, we are interested in the shift in popular appeal from more traditional performances of beauty such as the beauty pageant to the surgically enhanced performances of beauty that form the logic of contemporary reality makeover shows. While there has been a great deal of scholarship produced over the past decade about the appeal of reality television, what interests us is not so much the change in television genre, but rather the definition of femininity that is produced through this genre. Specifically, how do the cultural conditions of the current media environment provide an opportunity to construct a particular version of femininity that resonates with contemporary ideologies of personal transformation, celebration of the body, and female empowerment? These contemporary ideologies comprise a commercially driven 'post-feminism', and it is within this context that reality makeover shows are both created and legitimated.

Thus, a related concern in this essay is the on-going relationship between dominant norms of femininity and particular versions of mainstream feminism. Certainly, the Miss America pageant has been engaged in a relationship with feminism since its inception in 1921, and feminist critiques of pageants have questioned (among other things) the relationship between pageant-defined femininity and claims of national representation, exposing the implicit premise that the 'ideal' American female citizen is defined in terms of white, heterosexual or subordinate femininity. The 1968 feminist protest of the Miss America pageant perhaps best exemplified the ways that the meanings of this particular spectacle have been understood, challenged, and struggled over in terms of its relationship to feminism (Echols, 1989; Dow, 2003). Yet, along with beauty pageants and other dominant rituals of hegemonic femininity, feminism itself has undergone a 'makeover' in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.[1] Post-feminism has become a dominant form of mainstream feminism in the United States, where a media creation and legitimation of post-feminist 'power', combined with the increasing cultural recognition of adolescent girls and women as both powerful citizens and consumers, offers what at times looks like a radical gesture in terms of disrupting dominant gender relations (Findlen, 1995; Baumgardner and Richards, 1999). However, this consumer post-feminism is often individualized and constructed as personal choice or individual equality, and thus is figured quite differently from a historical feminist emphasis on social change and liberation. This is the feminism of reality makeover shows such as *The Swan* and *Extreme Makeover*, where a 'celebration' of the body, the pleasure of transformation, and individual empowerment function as a justification for a renewed objectification of female bodies. In the following sections, we examine how the Miss America pageant and reality makeover shows each work to construct a particular version of the liberal feminine self in connection with discourses of feminism.

Miss America and national representation

In 1960, the televised broadcast of the Miss America pageant attracted 85 million viewers – an almost unheard-of number in today's competitive television context (Huus, 2005). In 2003, the ratings for the pageant, which is one of television's longest running franchises, fell to only 10.3 million viewers (Huus, 2005), prompting the network ABC to consider how to change the pageant to suit a more contemporary television audience. The Miss America pageant clearly had a kind of identity crisis, in which the spectacle not only failed to attract a television audience, but also seemed to fail in its construction of ideal femininity itself. Since its beginning in 1921, the Miss America pageant was largely understood as an important civic ritual in the United States, a vital source of knowledge for many young women about the disciplinary practices of femininity (Banet-Weiser, 1999). Perhaps most importantly, the pageant resonated with its audience and with American women – the Miss America crown has been held up to be attainable by 'ordinary' women; this crown, like commercial success, like the American dream, is there for those who try. The Miss America pageant was expert at navigating between the individual and the ideal – it claimed to be all-inclusive and to depict a national community. The Miss America contestant's body, through her disciplined physique, her commitment to virtue, and her testimony to stability, represented a well-managed collective American body. In this way, the beauty pageant helps to transform American culture's anxiety about its stability as a coherent nation into a spectacular re-enactment and overcoming of that very anxiety. In other words, the Miss America pageant contestants perform the abstract character of liberal personhood – white and middle class – within a particular national imaginary. As Susan Bordo (2003), Sandra Lee Bartky (1988), and many others have pointed out, theories of power and agency that understand gendered and raced bodies as effects and enactments *of* power rather than passive sites *for* power are required to generate a more complex understanding of productions of femininity – as both represented by media events and also through self-representation. A theory of power – such as one provided by feminist readings of Foucault – calls for a reconfiguring of gendered bodies on a political, social, and cultural landscape that assists in analysing the complicated and contradictory ways these bodies are disciplined and regulated (Bartky, 1988). Beauty pageants such as the Miss America pageant are not simply sites for the objectified feminine body, but are rather places in which this feminine body is articulated within the terms of liberal ideology – as an individual with choices and freedoms. Importantly, the television context of the Miss America pageant allows for this kind of liberal production, encouraging audiences to focus relentlessly on the visual character of women's bodies, as testimony for the collapse of identity with representation.

As Sarah Banet-Weiser (1999), Maxine Craig (2002), and others have argued, the Miss America pageant has historically prided itself on its commitment to liberal ideology, especially the theme of equal opportunity. Through a visual focus on female bodies and particular visions of individualism, pageants attempt to resolve contradictions within liberal ideology – contradictions about the exclusivity of who can access wealth, employment, housing, and so forth – by relying on classic liberal stories about individual achievement and pluralist tolerance. By making invisible the social technologies that produce difference, these liberal stories result in the retrenchment of a national identity defined by white middle-class norms. It is the active commitment to making these technologies *invisible* that connects media events such as the Miss America pageant to a conventional notion of liberal politics; the pageant is committed to maintaining the illusion of the liberal subject in the US, one defined by personal freedoms and public protections. Beauty pageants can be thus situated as a particular cultural form that accommodates a liberal feminist rhetoric, which relies on particular fantasies of agency, voice and citizenship as crucial components of identity construction for most American women.

The pageant, in other words, offers a sensationalized venue for constructing liberal identity that both draws from and resists a mainstream feminist agenda. Beauty pageant contestants are particular kinds of theorizing agents: contestants perform liberal narratives about women's rights, individual achievement, pluralism, self-determination, and voluntarism in a similar way and on similar grounds as liberal feminists who have articulated these very same narratives.

Liberal ideology clearly remains a political force in contemporary US society, but the Miss America pageant, and its own version of liberal femininity, does not seem to be able to connect with an audience any longer. What has happened? Have the contours of liberal ideology shifted so that the version performed by Miss America contestants is no longer relevant? Certainly, the association between Miss America and the nation has been characterized by pitfalls, contradictions, and unevenness in every given historical moment. The relationship between gender and nation has, in the US, always been a crucial one to maintain, and that maintenance requires a glossing over of contradiction and conflict. What occurs on the stage of a national beauty pageant is the enactment of a particular kind of national dilemma, one that must continuously attempt to resolve tensions that characterize dominant practices of femininity within an increasingly diversified society – even as the pageant simultaneously celebrates and reinvents precisely these categories of experience.

One of the problems, then, that the Miss America pageant has been facing in the last five years concerns this process of reinvention – the pageant cannot seem to create and sustain an ideal definition of femininity for the contemporary US. This is not because in 1960 there was a more coherent ideal definition of femininity for the nation, but instead simply because the relationship between contemporary Miss America contestants and feminine national identity is situated within a different media environment. These factors include the obvious, such as a racially diverse population that is plainly not reflected in the make-up of Miss America contestants, but also the more subtle, such as a post-network television environment, where hundreds of niche cable channels belie the illusion of a universal television audience (and thus the illusion of a universal liberal citizen such as Miss America), and a postmodern media audience that is savvy about both its own self-identity and its media choices. These factors – a diverse and savvy media audience and a multitude of channel choices on cable television – have forced the Miss America Organization to consider particular kinds of changes to the pageant, so that the event would seem more 'relevant' to a contemporary audience.

Not surprisingly, these changes came in the form of reality television, where tropes and themes that had proven successful (read: attracted audiences and thus ratings) for shows such as *Survivor* and *American Idol* were incorporated into the pageant to liven up the show and make it more contemporary and in touch with its audience (Huus, 2005). As Art McMaster, the CEO of the Miss America Organization, claimed about the past year's show, 'It dragged too much . . . We decided to cut it down to get a faster-paced, hipper type of show this year' (Huus, 2005). The pageant attempted to be more spontaneous, in an era that celebrated and rewarded the unscripted television show. And, while the objectification of women's bodies as entertainment never seems to go out of style, the particular ways that the Miss America pageant objectified contestants came across as *too* sincere, not enough tongue-in-cheek, not cynical or hip enough. Even those loyal to the pageant seemed to agree; past CEO Leonard Horn has stated that the pageant needed a 'radical update', claiming that 'By the time [the contestants] reach the national level they no longer look like fresh girls or 21-year-olds . . . They look like 40-year-old Stepford Wives . . . If they are going to relate to the women in [the] audience, they have to look and act like their peers' (Huus, 2005). In the current post-feminist context, when media audiences are routinely tuning in to reality television that offers edgier, more personal, and more spontaneous gender performances, Miss America could not find an audience niche.

Cosmetic surgery and post-feminism

The politics of feminism are quite obviously different for different generations, and post-feminists are produced in a very different cultural and political context than, say, second wave feminists. This generational divide situates the specific politics of post-feminism as a politics of contradiction and tension: the dynamics between the ideological claims of this cultural phenomenon – girls are strong and independent – and the commercial merchandising of these claims – where identity characteristics such as strength and independence function as effective marketing strategies – demonstrate a profound ambivalence about these feminist politics in general. Reality television contributes to this ideology through its relentless focus on individual pleasure and choice, and through the explicit suggestion that accessing choices and individual pleasures is enabled by consumerism (through cosmetic surgery, new clothes, new houses, cars, etc.). In other words, post-feminism boldly claims that women possess active political agency and subjectivity, yet the primary place in which this agency is recognized and legitimated is within individual consumption habits as well as within general consumer culture. The contradiction lies within this dynamic, where it is in fact true that media representations of women are more 'positive' in the contemporary climate, but it is equally true that these positive representations are part of aggressive new market strategies rather than indications of social and political changes within dominant gender relations in the US.

Angela McRobbie (2004), writing about post-feminism, argues that contemporary commercial popular culture uses sexist imagery in an ironic way to deflect feminist critiques of this kind of imagery, so that the exploitation of one's body and sexuality is positioned as a matter of personal and individual choice and disconnected from feminist theories of power. As she points out,

> If we turn attention to some of the participatory dynamics in leisure and everyday life which see young women endorse (or refuse to condemn) the ironic

> normalization of pornography, where they indicate their approval of and desire to be pinup girls for the centerfolds of the soft porn lad mags, where it is not at all unusual to pass young women in the street who are wearing T-shirts bearing phrases such as Porn Queen or Pay to Touch across the breasts, and where (in the United Kingdom, at least) young women quite happily attend lap dancing clubs (perhaps as a test of their sophistication and cool), we are witness to a hyperculture of commercial sexuality, one aspect of which is the repudiation of a feminism invoked only to be summarily dismissed. (McRobbie, 2004: 8)

The Miss America pageant, despite its lukewarm attempts to appeal to a media-savvy post-feminist audience, remains irrevocably connected to a particular Puritan ideal of sex and sexuality; one simply cannot imagine a Miss Oklahoma answering interview questions wearing a t-shirt emblazoned with 'Porn Star' across the breasts. This, perhaps, is why the pageant has seen its final days on network television, and why reality television programmes such as *The Swan* and *Extreme Makeover* gain more popularity with contemporary audiences. Both pageants and makeover shows purport to endorse individual choice and personal freedoms; it is what one is encouraged to *do* with those choices and freedoms that differentiates the two genres – and ultimately it is this difference that comes to define contemporary notions of femininity and citizenship.

The increasing normalization of cosmetic surgery in the US is one expression of post-feminism. Cosmetic surgery, through its legitimation of a particular idealized feminine beauty, is perhaps the ultimate expression of an individual transformation and a kind of empowerment. Indeed, it is precisely because of this celebration of a 'beautiful' body that many feminists have taken issue with the practice of cosmetic surgery. The increasing normalization of cosmetic surgery and the resulting idealized feminine body have forced feminist attention to this issue, in much the same way as feminists have examined and critiqued the cultural practices and performances of femininity exhibited on the beauty pageant stage. Feminist philosophers such as Susan Bordo (2003) and Kathryn Pauly Morgan (1991) have written persuasively about how decisions by women to undergo cosmetic surgery are often masked as expressions of female agency. On the contrary, Bordo and Morgan argue, the practice of cosmetic surgery *should* enable feminist questions about whether and how women are agents of their own oppression, how this kind of surgery is a clear demonstration of masculinist power, or the ways in which cosmetic surgery functions as a significant example of what Sandra Lee Bartky (1988: 65) called a 'disciplinary practice of femininity'. Bartky uses Foucault's notion of the 'docile body' as a way to explain disciplinary practices of femininity such as wearing make up, weight loss, and bodily comportment. The docile body – a body willing to be disciplined as a process of normalization – is clearly present in the individuals featured on reality makeover shows, as they willingly and emotionally surrender their bodies to cosmetic surgeons ready to coax the 'authentic' beautiful self out of the 'old' body. These shows are premised on the notion that in order to lead a rewarding, fulfilling psychological and personal life, the cost is nothing less than a perfect, medically enhanced body: firm breasts and buttocks, no cellulite, white sparkling teeth, beautiful healthy hair. Indeed, it is difficult for feminists *not* to theorize the cultural practice of cosmetic surgery – and especially its televisual expression – as anything short of objectifying and alienating.

However, as with the beauty pageant, there have also been significant challenges to a feminist theorizing of cosmetic surgery as simply a 'paradox of choice', where women who choose to undergo radical surgeries are understood as victims of false consciousness who are duped into conforming to cultural norms (Morgan, 1991: 35). For example, in her discussion of the surgical alteration of racialized features among Asian-American women, Eugenia Kaw (2002) insists that cosmetic surgery involves a complex process of negotiating between cultural identity and hegemonic norms of whiteness in US society. Kaw asks us to consider cosmetic surgery as less about beauty than about attaining some minimum level of social acceptability that can then serve as a base from which to practise the more 'normal' regimen of feminine beauty within contemporary US society. Kathy Davis (1995) similarly discusses cosmetic surgery as a practice that is not simply about female oppression, complicating the notion that women are striving for perfect beauty by her assertion that women more often elect cosmetic surgery in order to attain a feeling of *normalcy*, not perfection.

We also see a need for complicating the feminist theorizing of cosmetic surgery, but from a slightly different perspective. The cosmetic surgery makeover television genre is enabled in the present context in part because of the normalization of post-feminism. The earlier feminist critique of beauty pageants such as the Miss America pageant positioned itself in stark opposition to the spectacle. While there are certainly feminists who challenge the normalization of cosmetic surgery, it is precisely *a kind of feminism* – post-feminism – that also legitimates the practice, especially in the form of the television makeover show. In other words, while several scholars have argued that a traditional feminist approach to beauty pageants that understands pageant contestants as victims of false consciousness is both over-determined and over-simplified, in order to theorize the ways in which dominant norms of femininity are produced in a spectacle such as Miss America it is necessary to recognize power as a constitutive force in the cultural production of feminine bodies. However, a post-feminist critique often neglects a careful consideration of power relations in contemporary performances of gender. Indeed, as McRobbie (forthcoming) argues, when mainstream feminism became a kind of commodity in the early 1990s (one of the 'flashpoints' of post-feminism), young feminists rightly embraced this move as important and significant. Yet, a superficial focus on the post-feminist slogan 'girl power' allowed for a deflection away from some of the ways in which mainstream feminism became connected with dominant forms of power and subjugation. Calling specifically for a re-engagement with theories of power, McRobbie points out that

> [w]ithout serious engagement with Freud, or with the work of Foucault, or indeed Deleuze, the dynamics of pain within pleasure, the uncertainty and

> ambivalence of pleasure, the whole pink and frilly world of affect and emotion within which the girl herself is permitted to 'become,' the intensity of focus on body and its surfaces, and of course the heteronormative assumptions underpinning these endless rituals of sexual differentiation, which are conditions of youthful female subjecthood, have been quite absent from much of this recent dialogue. (McRobbie, forthcoming)

One of the things that troubles McRobbie about contemporary post-feminist theories of gender is this refusal to engage theories of power with gender construction. Even the most over-simplified feminist account of pageants as an alienating, oppressive site for false consciousness engages theories of power – a Marxist theory of power, an Althusserian rendering of ideology, or a Foucauldian application of the disciplined feminine body. However, within post-feminism, theories of power are absent, replaced by a celebratory notion that women 'own' their power. Thus, there is an erasure of earlier efforts of feminism to engage in collective struggle about issues of female subjection practised on women's bodies; rather, the cosmetic surgeries practised on female bodies become a kind of evidence for a post-feminist transformed self.

The reality makeover show in the post-feminist context

In post-feminist fashion, then, the reality makeover show is precisely about making *visible* the technologies used to construct self. In this way, the makeover show is committed to a kind of newly entrenched liberal politics, dedicated more to 'lifestyle politics' than to traditional assertions of citizen rights and liberties. McRobbie (forthcoming) points this out in her discussion of the ways in which current theories of the liberal self 'take feminism into account, perhaps politely referencing some key texts of feminist scholarship; but otherwise they have moved on'. This 'moving on' is signalled by 'the emergence of a different kind of popular political formation, a shift away from emancipatory politics (of which feminism is one example) toward life politics . . .' (McRobbie, 2004: 10). In this scenario, the makeover show functions as a kind of 'life politics' and is positioned as much more contemporary – and more 'connected' with contemporary women – than the traditional beauty pageant. In other words, the liberal subjects that are produced through the beauty pageant and the makeover show connect with different theories of who and what the liberal subject should be. In makeover shows, using a reframed rhetoric of individual choice, technological transformation, and celebration of the body, the individual women featured claim to be freeing themselves of their earlier lives. In fact, what is happening is a more intense policing of the body, a body that is ever more docile as it is literally reshaped according to a set of dominant norms.

A dominant feminist critique of beauty pageants is that events such as Miss America claim to present the ideal representatives of the citizenry, marginalizing the types of bodies that are not displayed (Banet-Weiser, 1999). Reality show subjects are also chosen for their 'representativeness', but in their case, they represent the perceived flaws and shortcomings experienced by audience members. Although they may begin with more diverse bodies than the pageant ever did, makeover shows continue to reinforce a certain dominant beauty ideal when they literally cut away physical features that deviate from this ideal. The racism, sexism, and classism of beauty ideals that have been the traditional target of critiques of ‘representative’ femininity exist unproblematically in the current cultural context, because the post-feminist assumption is that these issues no longer have to be challenged – they’ve already been addressed through historical struggles. There are no narratives in these programmes to explain the pressures to conform to a particular (white, middle-class, heterosexual) norm of femininity, so individuals merely see their non-attainment of beauty norms as personal obstacles to be overcome. Within the context of post-feminism and its consequent emphasis on individual transformation and consumer citizenship, then, this process of ‘overcoming’ is more important – and more indicative of a dominant norm of femininity – than the final product.

The ideologies of post-feminism, then, found a niche in reality television, when in 2002 cosmetic surgery and makeovers became a novel theme for new reality television programmes. Although women have been receiving surface-level makeovers on television since the inception of the medium (e.g. *Queen for a Day*), the popularity of these cosmetic surgery shows is a phenomenon unique to this particular historical moment, as is their particular vision of feminine identity. ABC’s *Extreme Makeover* features women and men undergoing cosmetic surgery procedures as part of an ‘extreme makeover’ of all areas of their lives – job satisfaction, personal fulfilment, higher self-esteem. Despite the rhetoric of ‘overall’ transformation, however, the programme is clearly about the medically explicit cosmetic surgeries. After the success of *Extreme Makeover*, cosmetic surgery makeover shows were clearly established as a successful sub-genre of reality television. In March of 2004, the reality programme *I Want a Famous Face* premiered on MTV. This programme featured individuals who wished to alter their faces to resemble movie stars such as Brad Pitt and Jennifer Lopez. As Leigh Turner (2005) succinctly puts it: ‘*I Want a Famous Face* takes fantasies about beauty and stardom and inscribes them on flesh. Call it cosmetic surgery karaoke’. Later in 2004, Fox network debuted *The Swan*, a combination of reality makeover show and beauty pageant. In this programme, there are sixteen contestants who undergo cosmetic surgery in hopes of winning a beauty pageant held at the end of the series. The contestants are apparently chosen because of their ‘ugly duckling’ status, and a variety of cosmetic surgeries, ranging from liposuction to laser eye surgery to breast augmentation, are offered as a means for contestants to emerge as victorious, beautiful ‘swans’. As Turner (2005) describes, all of these shows attempt to call attention to the ways in which they function as vehicles, not simply for physical beauty, but also for psychological growth and personal transformation. As Turner (2005) puts it,

> The new bodies do not just have bigger breasts, more pronounced cheekbones, and whiter teeth. Rather, the programs suggest that individuals undergoing multiple cosmetic surgery procedures become livelier, more outgoing, and psychologically content individuals. Personal growth or spiritual development used to be connected to taking a pilgrimage to Thailand, watching Oprah, or training for marathon runs. Now, apparently, you need buttock implants or breast augmentation to let your authentic self emerge.

The theme of authenticity is, of course, key to reality television.[2] The reality television genre of makeover shows demystifies the ideal female body by showing *how* it is produced, in excruciating detail (details which were, although perhaps assumed, nonetheless hidden behind the scenes with beauty pageants). Savvy viewers do recognize that editing and casting ensure that the subjects of reality television perform very clearly defined roles. However, there is no question that form and content of reality television work to hide the constructed nature of the programme and thus present the subjects of the programme as eminently authentic and genuine. Indeed, part of what makes reality television so effective is its presentation of the depicted events as *actually taking place*. A scripted drama can teach viewers how to fall in line with social norms, but there is no guarantee that the strategies advocated will result in success. Even beauty pageants are ambiguous on this score, because viewers are not privy to the processes by which contestants achieved their perfect bodies. But televised depictions of plastic surgery seem to leave nothing out. These presentations perform their realism by doing work on actual bodies. The physical evidence of transformation, along with what appear to be the unadulterated expressions of pain by the subjects, provide unequivocal proof that change has taken place, and leave no room for doubt that the procedures depicted have resulted in a beautiful body. This mode of presentation not only naturalizes a faith in the positive effects of plastic surgery, but also affirms a contemporary post-feminist ideology about individual transformation and the pleasure that eventually comes from constructing the perfect feminine body.

Of course, witnessing this kind of feminine production has been supported by television for years, where an at-home audience could vicariously identify with Miss America, and admire her accomplishments and overcoming of adversity (which may be vaguely alluded to), while remaining oblivious to her actual process of becoming ideal. Witnessing the process itself has historically not been important for television – it was the visual presentation of the *result* that provided 'evidence' of a female liberal subjectivity. In an era of unscripted television, however, the process has become the product. Reality television promises to give viewers a glimpse at 'real' life, complete with flaws and everyday problems.[3] Of course, the 'reality' aspect of reality television is a particular kind of reality: unscripted television programmes are not 'realist' in the documentary sense, but rather are a mixture of realism and spectacular entertainment. The subjects of reality programmes are 'real'; that is, they are presumably representative of the television audience, particularly insofar as they are not actors portraying a scripted role. And the action of the show – the transformation – is seen as 'real' because it is at least partially confirmed by physical changes that occur before the viewers' eyes. Indeed, at the most basic level, the 'reality' genre is different from other types of programming that may technically fit the generic conventions of reality television (e.g. the live, unscripted beauty pageant) because it carries 'the open and explicit sale of television programming as a representation of reality' (Friedman, 2002: 7). This claim to realism has significance in the normalization of gender identity, especially in those programmes dedicated to the transformation of gender identity. Because makeover programmes depict 'real' people undergoing cosmetic surgery, the narrative of these shows normalizes undergoing cosmetic surgery and other extremes to change and 'improve' one's appearance.

The Swan and *Extreme Makeover*

The Swan's self-stated goal is to 'take ordinary women and radically transform them into beauty queens'.[4] The opening to each episode introduces the 'team of experts', including plastic surgeons, a dentist, therapist, physical fitness expert, and a 'life coach'. The beginning words of the show feature each 'expert' offering a pithy sentence about what *The Swan* intends: 'We help women transform their lives . . . We rebuild and enhance their bodies . . . Help them overcome life-long obstacles . . . and drive them to reach beyond themselves'. In both *The Swan* and *Extreme Makeover*, there is a focus on the corporeal, where flabby stomachs are grabbed and measured, large bodies are exaggerated and intentionally made to look unattractive (e.g. *The Swan* features a 'before' picture of each subject wearing grey, dingy underwear that resembles a kind of prison garb), and a general visual privileging of excessive flesh. This initial focus makes the finished product more spectacular, as the subject views herself in an enormous mirror as part of a ritual that is called the 'reveal'.

The Swan and *Extreme Makeover* construct their transformation narratives using very specific strategies and themes that resonate within a postfeminist context of neo-liberalism, individual agency and celebration of technology. For instance, both programmes are structured by an implicit (and sometimes explicit) class discourse. Plastic surgery shows often select as their subjects a 'certain class' of woman, which translates frequently into working-class women. The selection of working-class subjects contributes to the seemingly inexhaustible ideology of the American dream, where those of a lower socio-economic class can succeed at becoming middle-class subjects, and the media audience participates in this transformation by tuning in to watch (Palmer, 2004). *The Swan* normalizes the use of services such as cosmetic surgery, 'life coaches', and therapists (services which are presumably only available to those with disposable income). At the end of the show, the subjects are taken to 'The Swan Mansion', which is the realm of the experts and the site for the reveal of the finished product (the pre-surgery subject apparently never sullies the environment with her pre-surgery 'ugliness'). Although the subjects of reality television may actually represent a more diverse range of identities than previously seen in the medium, the outcome of these subjects' transformations is usually a mainstreaming, a construction of a new, improved self who conforms even more readily to dominant norms. Moreover, as Laurie Ouellette (2004: 232) has argued, reality television programmes

> do not subvert elusive democratic ideals, then, as much as they *construct* templates for citizenship that complement the privatization of public life, the collapse of the welfare state, and most important, the discourse of individual choice and personal responsibility.

Another factor in this template for citizenship involves overcoming of personal and psychological obstacles. The personal history of each subject chosen to participate in *The Swan* is part of the narrative theme. In one episode of the show, a woman, 'Jennifer', needs a surgical and physical makeover to cover the scars she received during a house fire when she was a child. However, of great significance (apparently) is the fact that her mother left her in the house to burn in the fire, thus her physical scars are compounded by the emotional ones of abandonment. Within this psychological context, her scars are surgically removed (or altered), she loses weight, has multiple cosmetic and dental surgeries, and then is 'revealed' to both herself and the audience at the end of the episode, so that the audience can take part in her individual, physical, and moral transformation.

The process of becoming a 'swan' is dramatized and technologized using simple and culturally recognizable pseudo-scientific visual techniques. Before the makeover begins, the woman's body is graphically displayed in a boxed-in grid, complete with cross-hairs, digital sound effects, and an inexplicable running set of numbers in the bottom left-hand corner (one can't help but be reminded of the Arnold Schwarzenegger film, *Total Recall*). Off to one side, there is a listing of the various procedures that will be conducted during the makeover, including liposuction, dental veneers, tummy tucks, and breast augmentation. The visual trope of the technologized body as displayed in *The Swan* is emblematic of post-feminist culture, where surgical 'choices' about idealized femininity are cast in the same wide commercial net as watching MTV, wearing t-shirts that say 'Girls Rule!', and watching the quintessential teenage US television network, the WB (Bordo, 2003).

The visual display of the plastic, technologized body that is created in *The Swan* privileges a more general cultural narrative about the plasticity of the self (Bordo, 2003). Indeed, after the technology involved in the makeover is displayed, the programme focuses in on whatever emotional trauma the subject has endured, blatantly 'resolving' the psychological obstacles along with the technological solutions. So, to help Jennifer confront the emotional scars from her traumatic house fire, *The Swan* insists that she undergo weekly therapy and life coaching – but more importantly, her scars will be healed through multiple surgeries, a 1200 calorie-a-day diet and 2 hours daily in the gym.

In another *Swan* example, a woman ('Kimberly') is yearning for a self-transformation because, again, she endured a traumatic childhood as an orphan without a stable home environment. *The Swan* – and more obliquely, the practices involved in becoming the ideal feminine figure – can help Kimberly with this trauma, again through an alteration of the physical body. As Kimberly says in this episode, 'It is painful to wake up and know you have a beautiful figure underneath a bunch of flab. I just want to be me again!' While the connection between her tragic childhood and being slightly overweight by contemporary standards is left unclear, it is a connection that is unproblematically – indeed, necessarily – made throughout the programme. The logic of a programme such as *The Swan* unequivocally revolves around transformation – and like so many other themes within post-feminism, the transformation is one of becoming more like 'yourself'.

The transformations depicted on *Extreme Makeover* are similarly articulated as a process of 'becoming' oneself. In one episode, 'Elisa' is seeking a transformation in order to overcome her poor self-image that dates back to her childhood. The narrative clearly positions her as the classic liberal subject who has overcome many obstacles (though these are never specified) in order to become the successful woman she is today. However, as Elisa states, 'The one thing I haven't overcome is my image'. Time after time in this episode, Elisa's 'image' is privileged as the site of the most important transformation, the one that will 'seal the deal' of her self-actualization. In one particularly explicit expression of this, the narrator says 'Elisa's nose [has been] reshaped, along with her poor self-image'. Here, self-image is unproblematically bound to the corporeal, with no acknowledgement that self-image might be much more dependent upon cultural pressures and psychological issues than actual physical appearance.

Becoming a better 'you'

Although both the beauty pageant and the surgical makeover show are about subjects' endeavours to attain a cultural ideal of feminine attractiveness, the makeover show is much more overt in acknowledging the importance of *physical* transformation. Within beauty pageants such as the Miss America pageant, there is an implicit articulation of physical perfection with 'inner beauty'. In surgical makeover programming, there is nothing implicit or subtle about this articulation. Over and over again, the women undergoing surgery to improve their appearance state that they want to be beautiful as a *means* to the various ends of being more successful in their relationships, effective in their careers, respected in their communities, or prized for their femininity. As one subject's husband commented on *The Swan*, 'I'm anxious to see how *The Swan* empowers her'. The underlying assumption made by these women, and thus by these programmes, is that appearance *is* one's character and capacity for achievement in all aspects of life. Indeed, according to Gareth Palmer (2004: 184), '[makeover] television is possible because it is now widely agreed and understood that "appearance is everything"'. Within the contemporary media environment, the meanings inscribed on the bodily surface come to be increasingly central to individual identity. This focus on individual subjectivity is characteristic of post-feminism's celebration of media visibility and the pleasure of consumption practices, as well as indicative of post-feminism's shift away from questions of power and domination (McRobbie, forthcoming). Gender performance is, within this context, one more pleasurable commodity, one more way to celebrate the individual body. Reality makeover shows exploit this feature of post-feminism by offering the pleasure of transforming the self. Within these shows, the submission of one's body to a group of cosmetic surgeons to be reworked and redefined is never positioned as an issue about gender inequity or unattainable femininity – indeed, shows such as *The Swan* and *Extreme Makeover* provide 'evidence' that *any* body is possible, if one simply has the desire.

This normalization of flawless femininity is obviously problematic for feminists, and the problem is compounded by a liberal logic that celebrates disciplinary practices of femininity as 'free' choice and individual pleasure. This kind of rhetoric, celebrated and maintained within a post-feminist cultural context, makes it difficult to generate a discourse that is about struggle or structural inequality. Indeed, the feminist critiques of unreal standards of appearance come to seem, as McRobbie (2004) points out, cranky and reactionary (and certainly old-fashioned) within this contemporary context. Rather, the historical feminist insistence that disciplinary femininity is a symptom and effect of gender oppression is re-shifted in this context as a denial of women's agency and the pleasures that can be won through physical attractiveness.

Given both the economic and cultural normalization of cosmetic surgery in the United States over the past decade, it is no real surprise that the reality makeover genre would prove so successful a venture. However, personal transformation through surgery is especially consistent with the context of post-feminism and contemporary commodity culture, because these programmes sensationalize individual improvement through consumption. All makeover programmes are about becoming a better 'you' by making better purchases and adopting better lifestyle habits (remember the plea of one *Swan* contestant: 'I just want to be me again!'). Cosmetic surgery shows not only capitalize on this ideology, but are products of this ideological climate where the consumption of medical procedures rather than (or in addition to) a new haircut or a new pair of jeans is normalized.

While both the Miss America pageant and reality makeover shows offer their viewers performances of femininity, these performances need to be understood as emerging from the cultural and political conditions in which they are produced. This difference in presentation of the subjects of beauty pageants and makeover programmes respectively speaks to the changing role of media in the normalization of performances of femininity, as well as to the affiliation many young women have with post-feminist politics. Before its downturn, the Miss America pageant presented female citizens who embodied a liberal discourse of opportunity and empowerment. Pageant contestants symbolized personal achievement, which for American women is supposed to be defined by the moral discipline that results in feminine beauty and wholesome values. In contrast, the femininity that is normalized by reality makeover programmes has less to do with the ideals of traditional American citizenship and more to do with an individual celebration of the self within the sphere of consumer culture – a consumer citizenship. This celebration is the post-feminist version of 'empowerment'; it is a logic that implies that loving one's own (surgically enhanced) female body is as much a promotion of (post-) feminist values as staging a political protest with one's revolutionary sisters was in 1968. Within this media context, a woman's right to citizenship is passé and hardly worth talking about; post-feminism now seems to be about a woman's right to sculpt her body to approximate more closely a constructed ideal.

And so it is that reality makeover shows present us with a newly defined liberal feminine subject. The women of these programmes are as invested in cultural norms of femininity as any Miss America contestant ever was. But the untempered enthusiasm with which makeover subjects embark upon a project of self-actualization almost wholly within the consumer market differentiates and marks the new genre as part of a post-feminist media culture. Building upon the traditional liberal trope of the disciplined self in search of fulfilment against all odds, the new feminine subject transcends even the limitations of her own body to participate in a discourse that encourages her to '"imagine the possibilities" and close [her] eyes to limits and consequences' (McRobbie, forthcoming). The message of reality makeover programming is that nothing, and certainly not your own body, should stand between you and what you want to become.

Notes

1. Clearly, this does not assume that all feminism could be considered 'post-feminism'. Rather, the version of liberal feminism that became part of mainstream television in the 1980s and 1990s – from, as Bonnie Dow (1996) points out, *Designing Women* to *Murphy Brown* – has actually shifted and become more 'post-feminist'. The television heroines of the post-feminist era range from *Ally McBeal* to *Buffy (the Vampire Slayer)* to the women on *Sex and the City*.
2. Television theorist Mark Andrejevic (2003) refers to Walter Benjamin's prediction that the apparatus of mechanical production would demystify the product, because the presence of the apparatus challenges the magic of production, and makes it clear that objects are produced. The technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition, substituting copies for a unique existence. Benjamin's subject was, of course, art, and his primary argument was that the means of production – mechanical reproducibility – disrupts the aura or the authenticity of a product. Applying this concept to reality television, Andrejevic argues that aura has now been displaced onto the apparatus itself.
3. Economically, this shift in programming has certainly favoured the industry. Reality television is partially the result of the dual trends of corporate media consolidation since the Telecommunications Act of 1996 and increasing globalization of media markets. With these trends there is a

consequent reluctance on the part of networks and media conglomerates to make large investments in media content. Reality television's reduced need for acting, writing, directing, and producing talent fits the bill. As Mark Andrejevic (2003) has pointed out, everyday people are willing to do 'the work of being watched' and developers of television content have been only too happy to exploit this willingness. With a compelling concept, ratings hits can be cobbled together requiring a minimum of overhead costs, resulting in a maximization of profits for media corporations.

4. All examples and text from *The Swan* and *Extreme Makeover* are from episodes airing on Fox and ABC, respectively, in the fall of 2004.

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