Plastic Passion

Tori Spelling’s Breasts and Other Results of Cosmetic Darwinism

Andi Zeisler / FALL 1998

It seems like people have started talking about having cosmetic surgery the way they used to talk about having children—as an abstract inevitable, something that will occur at some unspecified time in the future. As a society, we’ve grown inured to the concept of cosmetic surgery and blasé about its presence in our daily lives. It’s played for laughs in culture both high (a New Yorker cartoon) and low (your average sitcom). It’s standard fodder for daytime talk shows, free weeklies and ads on public transportation hawk it aggressively, and the entertainment glossies make sure we know exactly what Demi Moore’s breasts are up to. Its terms have invaded the vernacular—we’re no more surprised to see a magazine with the cover line “Your Kitchen Needs a Face-Lift!” than we are to hear that Cher had another rib removed.

And we’re not just hearing about other people’s operations; where cosmetic surgery was once mainly the province of wealthy socialites, aging movie stars, and strippers, it’s now an equal-opportunity proposition, complete with TV commercials and low-cost financing plans hawked on the Internet. The American Society of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeons reports that, over the past five years, the rate of breast-augmentation surgeries has more than tripled, liposuctions have doubled, and liposuctions performed on men have tripled. Cosmetic surgeries in general have increased by more than half since 1992. In our society, it’s no longer nature that determines who’ll be the fittest—it’s the surgeons, and the people with the money to pay their astronomical bills.

There’s plenty that’s disturbing about this kind of cosmetic Darwinism. There’s the classism and racism inherent in the body-reshaping industry, for one, and the eugenic implications of a world full of people with bodies and faces that reflect a fashion-model ideal. Surgery and the fashion/beauty industries have informed each other from the start, and this union, along with long-standing Hollywood associations, has plenty to do with why lots of us deride cosmetic surgery as vain, shallow, and devoid of personal meaning, especially when compared to its hipper body-modification counterparts of tattooing and piercing. When a grown woman undergoes twenty-plus operations to transform herself into a giant Barbie doll (as frequent talk-show guest Cindy Jackson did) or compares cosmetic surgery to tuning up the car (as Loni Anderson has), is it any wonder?

The evolution of cosmetic surgery into pop culture touchstone ensures that there’s now less stigma attached, but it also means that we’re seeing a lot more media coverage of it that pushes a downright whimsical agenda. A recent issue of Vogue features “Calf Masters,” a piece that asks, “Are you ready for spring’s capri pants and pleated schoolgirl skirts? Are your legs?” and then swings right into a perky evaluation of surgical options (including calf implants and inner-knee liposuction) for optimum capri-pant effect. Not that this kind of thing is unprecedented; most women’s magazines start running their get-ready-for-summer exercise features around March, but those generally stop short of suggesting going under the knife in order to make the most of one’s bikini. The ease with which Vogue proposes a spendy operation for the sake of a fleeting trend points to the classism implicit in cosmetic Darwinism, but also embodies a shift in the M.O. of the cosmetic surgery shill. Glossy magazines, despite their overstock of wafer-thin models, have generally shouldered the responsibility of urging their readers to think carefully and at length about what a big, expensive, and possibly dangerous undertaking surgery is. An article like “Calf Masters,” by contrast, downplays the dangers of the gee-whiz fashion-forward thrill.

On the other hand, certain corners of culture seem ambivalent about participating in such lipo-for-everyone boosterism. This became apparent on a recent episode of Beverly Hills, 90210, which addressed, within one hour, a whole host of issues with an eye toward dramatically presenting the
Media Enslavement of Women. Pornography, sex toys, cutting, dieting, sizeism, and cosmetic surgery were trotted out one after another in neat five-minute segments. Cosmetic surgery’s moment in the 90210 spotlight went a little something like this:

KELLY’S MOM: I’m going to have a face-lift next week, and I won’t be able to chew for a while. I’ll be drinking lots of smoothies.
KELLY: You’re kidding me!
KELLY’S MOM: Honey, this is Beverly Hills. We never joke about plastic surgery.
KELLY: Mom, you look great! What are you thinking?
KELLY’S MOM: Forty percent off for people in their forties got me started . . . and the thought of losing the bags under my eyes sealed the deal.

On its own, the skimpy exchange might have just been filler, but situated within the rest of the topic-heavy hour, it became a firmly antisurgery message (and a marvel of hypocrisy for a television show that sometimes seems to exist solely to display Tori Spelling’s baseball-in-a-sock breast implants). The show’s hastily assembled cosmetic surgery = oppression moral posturing indicates that someone within its chain of command is concerned that perhaps all these years of televised focus on bodily perfection might somehow poison the minds of impressionable viewers, and it’s high time to start backpedaling.

The magazine Living Fit, meanwhile, published the results of a survey in which male and female baby boomers were questioned about their attitudes on cosmetic surgery. The piece, titled “The Unkindest Cut,” aimed to counter the media buzz on a “cosmetic surgery boom” with an emphatic statement that people are really much happier with themselves than we’d all like to think. The main evidence of this, however, isn’t that fewer people are choosing surgery, but that more people are having what Living Fit refers to as “lunch-hour surgery: non- or minimally invasive wrinkle-fighting procedures like laser skin resurfacing: Retin-A; chemical peels; and Botox, collagen, and fat injections.” The intent seems to be to draw a line in the sand between what is and isn’t cosmetic surgery, and the piece congratulates itself heartily for doing so, with a neat conclusion that the alleged boom is “really more of a boomlet.”

But the distinction between boom and boomlet isn’t the crucial point, is it? It’s as though Living Fit thinks the fact that some folks are choosing to temporarily paralyze their faces with botulism toxin rather than go full-on with the face-lift is somehow indicative of a propaganda-free, antisurgery attitude. But the only thing it’s indicative of is that vanity is still a huge issue when it comes to how people conceptualize/rationalize their body modification. Increasingly sophisticated technology has made cosmetic surgery less taxing and less embarrassing for the people who choose it, but in the process it’s fueling the development of a bizarre moral hierarchy of cosmetic procedures.

Feminism these days is about defining our own terms, being able to adapt former definitions and shift them around to suit us. This is why we not only no longer have to shun lipstick but can actually turn the act of wearing it into a feminist statement (although, to the casual observer, the righteousness of this statement might go unnoticed and we might simply appear to be women in lipstick). And cheery testimony of how the face-lift or the breast implants were “for me”—and, by extension, for feminist self-realization—permeates many a first-person chronicle of surgery.

Elizabeth Haiken, author of Venus Envy: A History of Cosmetic Surgery, argues that, when it comes to current attitudes about surgery, the practice of dismissing the cultural context and rationalizing it as individual betterment “flattens the terrain of power relations.” In other words, we can talk about doing it for us until our high-end lipstick flakes off, but we should also keep in mind that we probably wouldn’t even be thinking about what life would be like with a new nose or perkier breasts or shapelier inner thighs if it weren’t for a long-standing cultural ideal that rewards those who adhere to it with power that often doesn’t speak its name, but is instantly recognizable to those who don’t have it.

Sure, maybe pop cultural forces can help undo the history of body hatred foisted upon women and girls—but only if they avoid the kind of hypocritical pop peddled by the likes of 90210 and Living Fit. The blanket statement “Cosmetic surgery is bad for women!” ignores important subtleties. It’s hard to condemn someone whose insecurity about having small breasts poisons the rest of her life; for her, that amounts to a feminist issue. The larger theoretical framework—the idea that by submitting to the knife, women capitulate to a pernicious social code that ranks female worth by ad-
herence to the beauty ideal, etc.—is very real, but it isn’t going to help
someone whose day-to-day life has already been damaged by this code and
just wants to get implants and get on with living. It’s as hazardous to ap-
plaud only those who don’t choose surgery as being worthy of feminist ap-
probation as it is to roundly denigrate those who do.

Women are increasingly visible in forming culture and instituting
change, but when we look at the rising cosmetic surgery statistics, the idea
that there might be some sort of connection between the two is impossible
to ignore. With visibility comes scrutiny, and we’ve all seen how the annals
of pop culture treat the visible woman whose livelihood has nothing to do
with her looks. It’s the Hillary’s Hair syndrome—show the world a potent
woman and all they want to do is talk about how big her ass is or whether
she should go blonder. One of the idealistic myths of feminism is that an
increase in female power will somehow effect a momentous change
wherein the multibillion-dollar fashion/beauty cabal will magically loosen
its grip on women everywhere. It’s the result of years of struggle within the
constraints of our image-obsessed culture, but it isn’t necessarily logical.

So even if nobody’s strapping women to gurneys and rolling them
down halls lined with scalpel-wielding men in green, cosmetic Darwinism
is definitely greasing the wheels. The terrain of power relations, to cop
Haiken’s phrase, is only getting flatter with time. Whether we feel like we
need to look a certain way to make up for cultural power that we don’t have,
or whether looks are still a major means by which we achieve power—or
whether we refuse to give credence to either of these ideas—what we’re
born with is still going to be weighed against what surgery can give us. The
occasional earnest media dispatch may suggest a minor, if not exactly em-
phatic, backlash against surgery as we’ve conceived it in the past, but it
can’t compete with the sexy media spectacle of safe and groovy space-age
technology and a wrinkle-free future. So in spite of a queasy feeling and a
temptation to dismiss the whole idea of cosmetic surgery as an antiwoman
plot and anyone who “chooses” it as a sucker, we must admit that in a com-
plicated time, our thinking has to evolve, even if our calves, chests, and
cheekbones don’t.