Deborah Caslav Covino: *Amending the Abject Body: Aesthetic Makeovers in Medicine and Culture*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2004

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1 The booming makeover industry, especially its intersections with reality-television programming, has captured much feminist academic interest as of late. Deborah Caslav Covino's Amending the Abject Body: Aesthetic makeovers in medicine and culture, narrowly predates a flurry of publications exploring the American penchant for aesthetic transformation (Heller forthcoming 2006, 2007; McGee 2005; Wegenstein, under review; Weber 2005). Her work identifies the importance of the study of the makeover in popular culture, and sets a high standard with which to compare more recent investigations into makeover culture. Using Julia Kristeva's theoretical conceptualizations of the abject from her Powers of Horror (1982), Covino traces the impetus behind the explosion of aesthetic surgical procedures. The cosmetic surgery industry markets its services almost exclusively to women, relying on Western ideologies of beauty and femininity for self-justification and product-promotion; thus, Covino focuses primarily on female subjects. She situates her work among feminist theory of cosmetic surgery, but determines that a new a mode of analysis is necessary in order to move beyond previously reductive interpretations of female cosmetic-surgery patients (as either victims or agents of makeover culture).

2 Covino argues that the emergence of an "aesthetic surgical imaginary" has shaped our perceptions of physical and psychological health, such that the objectification of abject bodies engages a process of expulsion and amendment, which fosters social affirmation for the individual undergoing surgical change. Moreover, she underscores the ability of the aesthetic surgical imaginary to harness objectification, abjection, and identification for the purposes of bolstering the aesthetic-surgery industry, as it links physical transformation with autonomy (through social conformity, thus reflecting the inherent paradox of its ethos).

3 Covino begins by tracing the foundational psychoanalytic framework of the abject, summarizing briefly Kristeva's development of Lacanian theories of the Symbolic and the Semiotic in relation to language acquisition and the repressed maternal. She suggests that the cultural application of abjection theories is relevant in the climate of makeover culture because the aesthetic surgical imaginary promises successful social integration and happiness for women through its services. The abject is central to the perceived need for aesthetic surgery and feeds into the industry's claims to be able to fulfill the desire of "the fantasized image of oneself as free from the visible signs of temporality, discontinuity, and variance" (2).

Covino twists the traditional understanding of the abject: rather than perceiving it as exclusionary for its repulsiveness, she bases her argument on the notion that the aesthetic surgical imaginary conveys the promise of success through the self-objectification of abject body-parts in order to access community, a process Covino likens to Kenneth Burke's "consubstantiality," or "'shared substance'" (33). Amendment of the abject through surgery is the key to unlocking the desired inclusion in a community of "clean and proper bodies," which we are socialized to find desirable.

4 The irony, Covino reminds us, is that the abject can never permanently be amended, because the body defies all attempts at control, border enforcement, and rigidity, despite aesthetic procedures. Moreover, the abject is inseparable from that which seeks to be rid of it, since the clean and proper body must be defined by what it is not (or by what it will not admit that it is). Covino provides as an example of this inseparability the industry's attempts to differentiate "good" scars from "bad" scars: the fear of the unruly abject body emerges in industry discourse as a desire to control the shape that the body will take post-operatively. While great care is taken by surgeons to ensure that the marks of aesthetic surgery are hidden and minimal, ultimately, even the "good" scar reminds us of the potentially improper, disorderly, uncontainable body (39). So how, then, does the industry succeed in denying its inevitable failure to amend the abject body, and instead convince millions of people that it holds the tools to accomplish beauty, acceptance and self-determination? Covino contends that the sustained industry and media discourse of an essential, natural, ideal beauty, as well a rhetoric of democracy, and a philosophy of individualization, all converge in the aesthetic surgical imaginary, and thus deflect attention from the illusion of permanence achieved by cosmetic surgery. The inevitable upkeep required to temper the signs of aging become routine maintenance, dependent on the determination of the committed patient, if she is to retain access to the community of clean and proper bodies.

5 Once Covino situates a discussion of the abject within the current American makeover phenomenon, she takes up a more direct reading of makeover reality television by exploring The Learning Channel's A Personal Story. She focuses on the "I-centered narratives" of the patients and the formulaic unfolding of each episode, where erasing physical markers of abjection is celebrated and normalized through successful cosmetic-surgery procedures and social affirmation. The goal of the series, according to Covino, is not to educate the female viewer about aesthetic-surgery procedures (and their potential dangers and costs), but instead "to normalize, routinize and legitimize the industry as a response to the personal desires of individuals" (69). The heavy emphasis on the individual (as indicated by the title, as well as

voice-over patient narration) sidesteps the industry's responsibility to account for its part in the social and cultural construction of the abject body, while the actual removal of the abject remains peripheral and controlled on A Personal Story (71). The denial of the abject on a program that requires the abject for its formula seems paradoxical, but there are several paradoxes within this genre, as Covino points out. She suggests that, as a product of capitalism, A Personal Story "conceals the processes of production" so that the viewer does not focus on the financial or physical cost of surgery (74). This process deemphasizes the producer/consumer market relationship and instead celebrates self-determination as the required currency for aesthetic surgery. Her analysis of several episodes in detail is helpful in illustrating these and other points.

6 Covino's final chapter builds upon her analysis of *A Personal Story* and links the philosophical engine of the aesthetic surgical imaginary with *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, as well as the widely distributed American retiree magazine *Modern Maturity*. These cultural texts reflect the tenets espoused by the aesthetic surgical imaginary, particularly the emphasis on individual responsibility for one's well-being (88). Here, Covino continues to highlight that, whatever the medium, the presence of choice is illusory for women and men who are faced with options that really only spell out conformity, revealing the extent to which abjection becomes "a kind of lapse in determination, or the consequence of sloppy self-will" (93). Whether Oprah doles out free makeovers to women who fail to "pass" in a youth-dominated beauty culture, or *Modern Maturity* encourages dying-management (including preparation for one's funeral) in its "Death" issue, attempts to control the abject or the outdated "promote the view that the aged body is an unnecessary deviation from the good body" (101). The result, Covino reaffirms, is the complicity of makeover culture with the aesthetic surgical imaginary in their construction and objectification of abject bodies, and the resultant amendment and identification for the purposes of perceived entry into a community of clean and proper bodies (105). Covino identifies a growing body of critical analysis in response to the rise in aesthetic procedures and clients, but rather than aligning herself with conclusions that lament the dangers and immoralities of aesthetic surgery, she offers an alternate solution.

7 She suggests "we need a new lexicon to talk about the distorted body" (107), one that acknowledges the abject as correlative to the beautiful. She calls this epistemological refiguring "inspired abjection," and describes it as a response to social abjection that is "most fully capable of a complex vision of variant bodies and involved in the creative desire to both escape and describe the temporal and corporeal" (108). Covino's vision encourages

acceptance of the abject, for the purpose of limiting beauty fetishism and "present[ing] conjunctions of the extraordinary and the ordinary" (109). This prospect might appear to be unrealistically egalitarian and reliant upon naturalized binaries of beauty/abject, but Covino is careful to relinquish fantasies of reclamation or celebration: "There is no gain in wrenching beauty so that it includes wrinkles and spider veins" (108). Rather, she points to some present examples of inspired abjection in works of art and literature, and contends that inspired abjection does not require a devaluation of ideal beauty or its supporters. *Amending the Abject Body: Aesthetic makeovers in medicine and culture* provides an important perspective for thinking about the relationship between the subject and the aesthetic-surgery industry, one that moves outside of the well worn dialectic of the cosmetic surgery patient as either victim or agent. Covino also offers a productive endpoint from which to build upon, through her call for a consciousness of inspired abjection, which is sure to foster continued debate about the role of makeover culture and the reception of makeover television.

Works Cited

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