Sigridur Thorgeirsdottir

Breast Augmentation Surgery: Empowerment in Times of Pornography

For some women the possibility of breast augmentation means a relief from suffering. This is true of reconstructive surgery after mastectomy or after childbirth. In some cases implants may help women who suffer mentally from being “flat-chested”. However, the majority of recent breast augmentation surgery can not be said to fall under these categories for they mostly serve the purpose of boosting breast size, i.e. inserting implants to increase the size of rather small or medium size breasts to big or even oversize breasts. Due to these different reasons for breast augmentation surgery a distinction is sometimes made between surgery that is medical or therapeutic, and surgery that is non-medical or non-therapeutic. Even though many breast augmentation surgeries are clearly medical, it is nevertheless difficult to draw a sharp line between medical and non-medical surgery of this type.

The development of breast implant technologies has in the last four decades created an increased demand for breast augmentation. A breast size that may have been considered acceptable 10 or 20 years ago is nowadays quite often seen as being insufficient, and even a possible major cause of a woman’s low self-esteem and suffering. Therefore, the threshold for the amount of suffering necessary for a breast implant surgery, considered to have therapeutic value, has been lowered. The technological advancements in the sphere of breast augmentation surgery have thus not only narrowed ideas about “normal” breast size, but have also contributed to bringing about a change in common ideas about female bodily beauty. Big breasts have however not always been considered beautiful. We only have to think of the famous model Twiggy to recall that being flat-chested was the body ideal to be striven for by young women 35 years ago.¹ In

¹ A look similar to the Twiggy look is still prevalent among skinny, flat-chested fashion models whose bodies quite often resemble bodies of boys. It is common to assume that this has something to do with the fact that gay men are influential in designing women’s fashion. The boyish looking female body in fashion
the last decade, however, big breasts have acquired, perhaps more than ever before, a
fetish character. One only has to look at the many women singers and dancers on MTV
who show off with enlarged breasts. To be sure, big breasts are “in” and this is reflected
in the rapidly growing breast implant industry. The said industry, cashing in on the trend,
is not simply answering a demand, but rather creating it as well, and feeding the big-
breast trend. It is estimated that over two million women in the US have undergone breast
augmentation in the last two or three decades. The number of girls in their late teens
asking for breast implants is also on the rise.²

To feel better or to feel big

In the following I will discuss some philosophical considerations regarding breast
augmentation surgery for cosmetic reasons. I will not focus on women who would like to
become “ordinary”, “normal” or “well”, because their suffering is due to what they
consider to be abnormally small or even malformed breasts, but rather on women who
want to get bigger and “better” with the help of breast augmentation surgery. My focus is
therefore strictly on non-medical breast implantation surgery, even though this term is
contested as already mentioned. Kathy Davis, in her research on women who have
undergone breast implant surgery, mainly focuses on women who suffer because of small
breast and want to become ordinary.³ She does not, however, discuss at any length
women who may not actually suffer because of small breast, but merely want to feel even
better about themselves by having bigger breasts. Davis’ research resulted in the
publication of her influential book *Reshaping the Female Body: The Dilemma of
Cosmetic Surgery* in 1995, and since then the big breast fashion has become much more

---

² Susan Kreimer, “Teens getting breast implants for graduation”,
http://www.womensnews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/1861/context/covet/
visible and ubiquitous. In beauty pageants it is by now not uncommon that the contestants have had their breasts enlarged to adhere to the prevalent beauty standard. One could not claim that these young beauty queens had undergone suffering in the way in which Davis’ breast-implant interviewees had. These were cases, Davis claims, where the issue was not “about beauty, but about identity.”\textsuperscript{4} In many cases the women felt that the implants were a correction that made their body looks the way they felt it should. The enlarged breasts of contestants in beauty pageants and of icons of popular culture, like the former \textit{Bay Watch} actress Pamela Anderson, are however cases in which the issue is presumably “beauty” or at least to look outstanding in this specific way, and not “identity” in the way Davis understands it in the context of her research. In her analysis the healing effect of breast implants restores identity in the sense that it makes women feel about their looks they way they felt they should feel all along. Davis’ focus is on the question of lack, whereas the big breast trend can rather be said to be a question of enhancement. The big breast fashion of the last decade therefore necessitates addressing the issue of breast augmentation from the perspective of adherence to changing beauty standards. Davis’ approach is appropriate for analyzing a part of the breast augmentation surgery industry, but it is too narrow for analyzing the big breast fashion we are now confronted with.

\textsuperscript{4} Same, 163.
Is this a sign of breast augmentation surgery with the purpose of feeling normal?
Enhancement and efficiency culture

The big breast trend goes hand in hand with changing attitudes towards cosmetic surgery and medicine in general. Like Carl Elliott has shown in his book *Better than Well*, modern-day medicine in the industrialized countries is increasingly developing towards an “enhancement” medicine. Lifestyle drugs such as mood enhancing psycho pharmaceuticals and cosmetic surgery are certainly signs of the times in this regard. Breast augmentation surgery is thus a part of an enhancement and efficiency culture within medical and pharmaceutical technologies with the goal of making the most out of our capacities and looks. Breast enlargements surgery has subsequently, along with cosmetic surgery of all kinds, undergone a process of normalization. Cosmetic surgery is one of the fastest growing branches within medicine, and it has become a topic of popular culture as the TV show *Extreme Makeover* in the US demonstrates. In this show people undergo all kinds of cosmetic surgery to have their appearances improved. Insofar as this trend puts pressure on people to look a certain way in order to gain more self-confidence it increases intolerance for looks that deviate from pre-given standards. As such it leads to more uniform standards about the human body and looks at the cost of difference.

Perhaps it is not out of the way to talk about a “Pamela Anderson syndrome” of breast enlargements for she is for many the big breast fashion icon of the last decade. This syndrome is an indicator that the goal no longer is “normal” or “ordinary” but rather the mega-size. In extreme cases the goal is therefore not getting a normal looking cleavage, but rather to be able to show off a real “silicone valley”. The man-made, hyper real, imaginary, constructed female body becomes the ideal to be striven for. This kind of excess is part of a larger trend towards the mega-size, be it mega mansions or mega

---

6 See the website of *Extreme Makeover*: http://abc.go.com/primetime/extrememakeover/
7 On the website it says: “Following nationwide open casting calls and over 10 thousand written applications, the lucky individuals are chosen for a once-in-a-lifetime chance to participate in *Extreme Makeover*. … This magic is conjured through the skills of an "Extreme Team," including the nation's top plastic surgeons, eye surgeons and cosmetic dentists, along with a talented team of hair and makeup artists, stylists and personal trainers.” http://abc.go.com/primetime/extrememakeover/bios/jeff.html
McBurgers. Arundhati Roy sees the “Big” or “the mega” as a symptom of the 20th century that will wear out: “[…] perhaps that’s what the 21st century has in store for us“, she writes. “The dismantling of the Big. Big bombs, big dams, big ideologies, big contradictions, big countries, big wars, big heroes, big mistakes”, and we may add, big boobs. Roy continues: “Perhaps it will be the century of the Small. Perhaps, right now, this very minute, there’s a small god up in heaven readying herself for us.”

But until small will be “in” like Roy so hopefully predicts, many women may feel better about themselves after super-size breast implants and extreme makeovers. The beauty standards that are set heighten women's insecurities about their looks. These insecurities are exploited by the diet, cosmetic, and plastic surgery industries, as Naomi Wolf has argued in a recent book. Every day new products are introduced to “correct” inherent female “flaws” drawing women into an obsessive and hopeless cycle built around the attempt to reach an impossible standard of beauty. Therefore, the phenomenon of big breasts as well as much of cosmetic surgery is a dilemmatic feature of modern culture. And it is, furthermore, obvious that not only women are eager to take advantage of cosmetic surgery. Men are also more and more getting “tummy tucks”, hair implants, face-lifts and nose jobs. Even the Italian president, Silvio Berlusconi is, according to the Italian tabloids, supposed to have vanished from the public scene for a month in the beginning of 2004 to have a face-lift.

**Technological mastering of the body and “technopower”**

In a much wider context we can say that breast augmentation surgery is part of an increasing technological mastering of the body. We can say that we have become much more body in the 20th century since we have more advanced and refined means to alter and structure the body with the help of dietary and physiotherapeutic measures,

---

pharmaceuticals and medication, medicine, genetics and biotechnologies. Our attitude towards our body has in effect become more positivistic. We do not only treat it like a thing that can be cultivated and refined, but also modified and altered. As a result of this, the body has become more of a commodity. It is part of what we have to offer, and contributes to our market value be it in symbolic or in financial terms.

This approach towards the body is reflective of the technological attitude towards life and nature that has become predominant in our parts of the world. Technological development is part of a larger social, global and economic development. The Finnish philosopher Georg Henrik von Wright coined the idea of “technopower” meaning the combined workings of techno science, market economy and globalization. Technopower is a major force in determining the way the world is going. Western science was for a long time thought to be totally objective, free of “values”, entailing pure intellectual research only. In the last decades the notion of value free science has been extensively criticized, largely due to the industrialization and commercialization of many branches of applied science, as well as the blurring of the border between applied and theoretical science. We are however, like von Wright argues, becoming progressively more aware of the latent or explicit values underlying technopower. As in the case of cosmetic surgery these values are often highly ambiguous. There is for example so far little known about the possible long-term implications of much of cosmetic surgery for values (and value systems). Von Wright therefore says that one of the most useful tasks of philosophical analysis nowadays consist in the disclosing of the illusionary tendencies of technopower. Underlying his claim is an attempt to refute the idea that technological advancement necessarily leads to progress. Technological innovations are often ambivalent and dilemmatic. The idea that breast augmentation surgery is problematic is nevertheless debated, as becomes apparent in opposing attitudes towards it in ethical analysis of the phenomena.

**Liberation or oppression?**

TV shows like *Extreme Makeover* are not only a factor in normalizing phenomena like breast augmentation. They also make them look desirable and even indispensable. The candidates that undergo cosmetic surgery in the show are chosen from thousands of applicants. On the homepage of the show, the following caption says it all: “These men and women are given a truly Cinderella-like experience: A real life fairy tale in which their wishes come true, not just to change their looks, but their lives and destinies.” Nancy Etcoff’s book about cosmetic surgery, or at least the title, *Survival of the Prettiest*, gives the idea of this kind of makeover a social biologist dimension.\(^\text{11}\) The right looks are seen as a survival factor, a means not only to become more desirable in the eyes of oneself and others, but more importantly of standing a better chance in competitive matters and become more valuable on the job market. Even though many of the participants in *Extreme Makeover* would agree to this view, it would not in any way diminish their desire for advancing their looks with cosmetic surgery. The question therefore arises: Are these people realistic about the way of the world and free in their choice to adapt to it? Or would we claim that the bodies of these people are being colonized by the cosmetic surgery industry without any resistance? These have in fact been the prevailing two attitudes within ethical literature on the subject of breast augmentation surgery.

If we take a look at what has been written on the subject in the last 10 or 20 years we can roughly see these two opposing tendencies. There are those who condemn it, and claim that the women who undergo such surgery are victims of the cosmetic surgery complex. Women with surgically enlarged breasts are seen as culture dopes that follow blindly the dictates of the cosmetic surgical industry. On the opposite side are those who

---

claim that women are free agents who make free choices about cosmetic surgery. The rationale is that since the breast implant technology exists we might as well make use of it, particularly if it makes women feel better about them selves. Women have throughout the ages made use of the techniques at hand in order to become more “beautiful”. Breast implant surgery is merely considered to be one more instrument that women use to enhance their appearances.

Let us take a closer look at these two opposing views. According to the critical view, women who undergo breast augmentation surgery (for cosmetic reasons) are basically viewed as passive victims. Their attitude is seen as being one of false consciousness that implies that they are considered to be unaware of the oppressive features of profit driven cosmetic surgery and gender stereotypes of popular culture. Women are considered to succumb to oppressive beauty norms because the emphasis on big breasts and young looks serves to keep women in an inferior position compared to men.

The problem with this approach is that it is too simplified. Women are not seen as free agents, but mainly as victims of oppressive forces. Therefore attempts have been made to modify this view. Anna Kirkland and Rosemarie Tong have proposed a more differentiated analysis of the interplay of overpowering forces and women’s decisions about having cosmetic surgery. They claim that as women’s economic, political and social status improves, and as they feel more emancipated “there is less reason to insist that socially constructed norms of beauty are always and necessarily used against women.” Accordingly, Kirkland and Tong situate women’s choices about cosmetic surgery in between free decisions and coercive forces. They see these forces as the “Beauty Trap” that even the most feminist of women can fall into. While lamenting such external pressures, they come to the conclusion that women make their own decisions

13 Same, 154.
under prevailing constraints about beauty and looks.

As opposed to this view, Henri Wijsbek sees breast augmentation surgery on par with any other cosmetic or instrument women have traditionally used to look their best.\textsuperscript{14} It is a freely adopted lifestyle to look and dress a certain way according to the given standards of each time and culture. In his view it is not in itself “wrong” to strive to be “ordinary” or “beautiful” in line with cultural ideals for women and men. Wijsbek does however not acknowledge that there has been an ambivalent feature about female beauty. In a society where men have for the most time had the power in the public sphere, women’s success has also been based on being accepted by men. Women have had their own sphere, like Barbara Schichtermann writes, and that is the sphere of their gender. In this sphere good looks can be a form of power. Beauty is a sign of power, “the only power women can have.”\textsuperscript{15} As such female beauty has throughout the ages in the public sphere been a form of power of the powerless.

Wijsbek also overlooks the fact that breast augmentation requires surgery that entails risk.\textsuperscript{16} In that sense it cannot be compared with non-invasive objects like corselets, high heels or pointed shoes like Wijsbek does in comparing cosmetic surgery to such measures women have used in different times to look their best. Further, Wijsbek does not take into account the fact that our society generally requires women to look young and beautiful more so than it demands men to look youthful. Moreover, it is still a fact that women over fifty are in general considered of lesser worth in the public sphere than younger women, and that men are in general less victims of youthism. Wijsbek does therefore not acknowledge that specific demands on how people are supposed to look

\textsuperscript{16} The risk factors include: Leakage of silicone, rupture of implant, tightening of scar tissue, and immune disorders. The relation between silicone implants and immune disorders have not been proven, according to NIH research, although silicone implants are still banned by the FDA in the US, and saline implants used instead. According to findings of NIH researchers there are higher suicide rates among women who have had breast implants. See NIH’s website on breast implant surgery.
“are sometimes culturally defined for the empowerment of some and the
disempowerment of others.”17 Wijsbek could counter this assertion, and claim that
cosmetic or breast augmentation surgery does in fact empower women because many
women say that they undergo the painful and possibly risky procedure for themselves,
and nobody else. They say that it will boost their self-confidence and make them feel
better about themselves emotionally, physically and even sexually. That in turn may
make them more successful. This may in fact be true, for example if one listens to the
participants in Extreme Makeover, who feel like they get a boost of self-confidence and
become more successful professionally with the help of their makeover. There is no
denying that the enhancement of breast size can and does increase the inner well being of
many individuals.

The main problem with Wijsbek’s approach is that it puts the bulk of the
“responsibility” on individual women. The profit driven cosmetic surgery and
controversial beauty standards are not questioned. The focus is on the individual as a free
agent and not the circumstances that put pressure on people to act in a certain way. His
approach does not contain any scrutiny of beauty myths and images of popular culture,
and how technology shapes values that are highly ambiguous. His approach does
therefore not offer any critical standards to evaluate what kind of beauty norms empower
or disempower people, not as individuals, but more importantly as a group. In order to
assess this difference it is necessary to examine how cosmetic surgery affects men and
women as a group, possibly in different ways.

Does cosmetic surgery affect men and women differently?

President Berlusconi may feel better and even more self-assured after a face lift, but a
wrinkled face, showing a man’s age, is not likely to disempower a man, even though the

17 Anna Kirkland and Rosemarie Tong, “Working within Contradiction: The Possibility of Feminist
Cosmetic Surgery”, 158.
emphasis on youthful looks certainly puts pressure on men in general. Is there then a qualitative difference between a breast implant for women and a face lift or a hair implant for men in terms of how it affects men and women as a group? Do we consider men who get a facelift oppressed? Men as well as women seem to be under social constraints to look their best (even a person with enormous financial and political power like Berlusconi), no matter what it costs. But it seems that the external, social pressure to get hair implants, or any other cosmetic surgery men undergo, does not compromise men's status as the sex in the more powerful position in public life. Therefore, it cannot be concluded that cosmetic surgery is gender neutral. Many forms of it may be, others not. Breast augmentation surgery is not just one form of cosmetic surgery people undergo, like Wijsbek seems to assume. Not only does it still seem to be a fact that cosmetic surgery is required for women in ways that it is not required for men. There is still more pressure on women to look good and women do emphasize good looks more than men do in general. There is also a difference between a facelift and breast implant surgery. Breasts are intimately linked to femininity, not the least on a symbolic level, and breast surgery has more implications for ideas about femininity than other forms of cosmetic surgery. Symbolic meanings that represent ideas about femininity and women’s role in society have always been linked to ideas about the female breast. But can a comparable thing be said about male sexual attributes? In this context it is thus necessary to consider whether penis enlargement surgery is a phenomenon that entails for men as a group similar implication as breast augmentation does for women.

**Breast augmentation vs. penis enlargement surgery**

Judging by the amount of advertisements for penis enlargement surgery on the web one is tempted to conclude that men are flocking to have such operations done. That is not the case. In Iceland there are 200–300 breast implant surgeries a year, but perhaps one or two penis enlargement operations. One reason is that these operations can only lengthen the
penis about one or two centimetres, and they are therefore not as effective as the breast implants to gain size or girth. But does the emphasis on penis size manifested in these advertisements for enlargement operations affect men as a group in a similar manner that women are affected by the big breast fashion? A small penis may make individual men feel more uncertain about themselves for the emphasis on length sets uniform standards. The symbolic connotations of breasts and penises however are not the same. Penises are not publicly displayed to the extent breasts are. Also, male stars can hardly enhance their market value with penis size in a manner similar to the way in which Pamela Anderson’s breast are a feature of her image and market value as a film star. Phallic symbols are however prevalent in our culture’s imagery, but as the findings of cultural studies tell us, phallic imagery serves to prove virility, strength, and the power of men. The big breast imagery is on the other hand an important part of pornographic body imagery. Phallic imagery does in general not serve to Humiliate men, denigrate them and put them in their place like pornography to a larger extent does to women. Therefore there is a reason to see a relation between the rise of pornography and the big breast fashion in the last decade. But before addressing the question whether and how pornographic beauty norms are reflected in the big breast trend, and if and how that disempowers women as a group, one has to ask whether the big breast fashion can in fact empower women collectively.

**Empowerment and disempowerment, subversion and womanly power**

Could it be argued that the emphasis on big breasts is reflective of women’s growing power in the public sphere in some way? Compared to earlier times women now have more functions in society, more authority, more social, professional and political presence. Can the big breast trend be considered a reflection of or even an appreciation of women’s increased role in society? It is possible that it does do precisely that in some trivial manner in popular culture. The curvy figure of “Wonder woman” or similar cartoon (or cartoon-like) characters may convey the idea that women can have super-
Images of big-breasted women like these cartoon figures do not underscore the maternal nature of women. Nude womanly beauties in classical painting have not done so either. Throughout the ages breast imagery has however to a large extent consisted in images of the breast-feeding mother, most prominently incorporated by the holy Mary breastfeeding the baby Jesus in classical painting. The breast-feeding mother points to women’s role as nurturers in the domestic sphere. Are there any residues of the maternal aspect of the breast in the big breast imagery of popular culture? Perhaps in some aspects of it, but it seems that the voluptuousness of the breast is the main issue, and if there is a maternal aspect to it (for example if the big-breasted woman is maternal looking) it is part of the breast imagery as a sexually enticing object. But even if the breast is mostly visualized as an object that is pleasing to the male gaze, one can still wonder whether it can in some way be reflective of some womanly strength that in turn can have an empowering effect on women as a group. Women are strong in a certain "natural" way due to their female features. (Traditional forms of misogyny have to a large part been based on fear of women's ability to give life, resulting in the need to denigrate women.) One can therefore ask if the big breast trend in popular culture celebrates women's
strength in some way. But if that is indeed the case, such a trend can only have an empowering effect if it entails an emphasis on the strength needed for women to have more power and influence in society and not only in the private sphere.

The modern day icon Madonna with her Jean Paul Gaultier bust has certainly become a symbol of certain aspects of this kind of strength. She is a Madonna who has more means of self-realization than being a mother. In the photo below she adds a warrior like dimension to the image of the holy mother with the goal of giving this modern interpretation of the Madonna an empowering effect. Madonna’s gear here is a bit akin to the armour of Wonder woman, and it is a far cry from the mainstream pornographic looking images of big breast in popular culture.

A figure like Madonna does indeed represent strength that reflects women’s
stronger stand in society. The breast imagery portrayed in this photo has a subversive element that undermines clichés about women, and thus contributes to a destabilization of stereotypes that sustain gender discrimination. Her breasts in this image are not surgically enlarged. As opposed to the breast imagery Madonna embodies in the example described here it seems doubtful that surgically enlarged breasts or the “silicone look” can be seen as a sign of women’s stronger stand in society.

The big breast trend underlines primarily the role of women as sexual objects. It serves mostly to attract the other sex according to ideas about what the male culture is thought to prefer about women. As research has shown many men are not necessarily keen on this trend. That also goes to show that there are other factors that dominate ways in which standards of bodily looks are determined. The mainstream and hardcore pornography industry is certainly a powerful force in setting such standards. That does not rule out the possibility that there are other strands within pornography (e.g. lesbian pornography or other forms of off-mainstream pornography) that introduce subversive images of female embodiment. Big breasts do however not seem to have a fetish status in such branches of it comparable to the one it does in mainstream and hardcore branches of pornography.

Breast augmentation surgery for cosmetic reasons is for individual women most likely a strange kind of mixture of both empowerment and disempowerment. It is victory and defeat at the same time. It means that these women can surpass/go beyond their natural boundaries, so to speak, and gain a greater sense of strength and power over their natural limits and fate. On the other hand the need for displaying strength in this way also means succumbing to external pressure of ambiguous values concerning the role of women. As such it is an example of an ambivalence that seems typical of many aspects of the situation of women today. It is therefore a curious blend of liberation and oppression for individual women who go for the mega breast size. But since the issue at large is whether breast implant surgery and the emphasis on big breasts contribute to forms of
systematic denigration of women in general, it is really not an issue whether individual women undergo cosmetic surgery like breast augmentation as a free, deliberative act for their empowerment. In this article it has already been granted that, in many cases, breast enlargements can empower individual women in a certain personal way. Things looks differently when we look at women as a group because the big breast trend is part and parcel of a pornographization of beauty norms that denigrate women. Other forms of cosmetic surgery women undergo do not have a similar effect because the meanings we attribute to breasts are signifiers about the gender contract of society.

Silicone breasts and pornographic beauty norms

In contemporary Western culture pornography is ubiquitous. As Jean Baudrillard has remarked, “pornography is in fact hardly noticeable as such because it is all over, its basic elements are interwoven into all visual techniques, TV and visual culture as a whole.” Pornographization is one of the major reasons why for example Islamic fundamentalists accuse Western societies of humiliating women. A Taliban most likely sees Pamela Anderson as a symbol for the oppression of women in the emancipated and secularized culture of the West. To the Western eye, on the other hand, the burqa-clad women in the Streets of Kabul are oppressed because of Islamic fundamentalism. So both, the Westerner and the Taliban, each in their own way, see women who are oppressed by their own culture. There is however a difference. Under the Taliban regime women who did not adhere to the fundamentalist Islamic dress code where punished, whereas women in the West are not subject to any comparable, direct sanctions about their appearances.

From an external perspective it becomes even more obvious in what way pornography has affected standards of beauty that are upheld in Western popular culture and in segments of the fashion-beauty industry. The majority of actresses in pornographic films (the largest sector within the US film industry) have breast implants. That does not necessarily mean that the influence of pornography on certain beauty norms is the sole reason for the increase in breast augmentation surgery. There can be no monocausal explanation for it. The oppressive features of this kind of cosmetic surgery women undergo mainly have to do with pornographically affected beauty standards. Pornography is more instrumental in denigrating women as a group than men. The negative effects of pornography may nevertheless in the end be equally detrimental to men and women in so far as pornography is a factor in undermining relations of mutual respect between men and women. In the worst cases pornography encourages a violent attitude towards women and reduces men to the position of an impotent gaze.

The disempowering aspect of pornography is that it is an example of how products of popular culture use women’s bodies to influence and direct women’s behaviour. As Sandra Lee Bartky has noted, “normative femininity is coming more and more to be centred on woman’s body – not its duties and obligations or even its capacity to bear children, but its sexuality, more precisely, its presumed heterosexuality and its appearance.”\(^\text{19}\)

The link between pornographically tinted beauty standards and breast augmentation surgery is obvious in the many photos of happy patients in advertisements for such surgery, as for example seen in the overabundance of such ads from the web.

Ads like this are often accompanied by a testimony of the happy patient, her body measurements after the surgery, as well as a photo of the proud doctor dressed in a suit and standing next to the operation table.

Without going into much discussion on pornography in general, it can be seen as a reaction to feminism and the emancipation of women in the last decades. Pornography is the greatest backlash movement feminism has been confronted with in recent times. It is patriarchy’s strongest weapon in counteracting women’s stronger standing in society. One of the common denominators for definitions of the effects of pornography on women as a group is that it thrives on a gaze culture that gains control over the viewed object with the purpose of suppressing it by denigration.

**Pornography and oppression**

In a few final and very sketchy remarks I would like to tie this aspect of pornography in with Simone de Beauvoir’s phenomenology of oppression. Her book *America Day by Day* contains among other things observations on the troubled attitude of white people towards black people around the mid 20th century in the US. These notes on the problem of racism in the US focus on the problem of white people in their attitudes towards themselves and towards black people. Beauvoir’s perceptive diagnosis can also be used as a description of the attitude towards aspects of femininity in pornography. Not the least in light of the fact that Beauvoir developed her phenomenology of racial oppression in relation to sexual relations as well.

Beauvoir analyses sexual and racial relations using the concepts of interdependence, recognition and disrespect. The oppressor in Beauvoir’s description is dependent on the oppressed in the sense that there is always a relation of interdependence

---


or mutual recognition (be it in the form of respect or disrespect) between the two. If the one in the superior position views or treats the other disrespectfully then the attitude of the oppressor, Beauvoir maintains, is based on a misrelation of the self. It is white people’s own discomfort with their superior status “that leads them to project onto blacks images of animal sensuality and naturalness. White people’s fear of blacks … is the reverse of their own self-hatred and remorse. White people live the privileges of their skin in bad faith.”

Whether this misrelation to the self is still – more than fifty years later – paradigmatic for racist attitudes towards people of colour cannot be discussed here any further. Neither can the issue of whether it is still applicable to sexual relations be addressed as this would call for a lengthier discussion. The point of convergence between Beauvoir’s description and the effects of pornographic beauty norms on women as a group is the idea that the sensuality and naturalness are projected onto the less respected and less powerful group.

Narrowing of free choices

Women’s breasts are intimately linked to reproduction and sexuality. Cosmetic surgery that enhances these features of women’s bodies obviously accentuates these aspects of women’s biology and femininity, but in a very one-sided and reductionist way underlining the role of women as objects of sexual desire. Breasts have for the most part in the history of our culture a more varied meaning than entailed in these aspects. As Natalie Unger has remarked breast milk and breast-feeding alone have been “accorded a magical status […] they have been the source of endless exhortation, celebration, guilt, joy, and pain.” Needless to say, much of the history of ideas about women’s breasts (be it in science, medicine, art, politics or mass culture) has lead to dubious conclusions about “female nature” and has thus legitimized the inferior position of women in society throughout the ages. Therefore, we seriously have to ask ourselves how the weight given

to big breasts in contemporary Western (popular) culture is a reflection of prevailing attitudes towards women. The fact that women themselves take part in this branch of the cosmetic surgery industry both in an active (as plastic surgeons) and passive manner (as patients) does not undermine the claim that inherent in these practices are mechanisms that sustain and promote discrimination of women. Free choice and external pressure dictated by “technopower” often go hand in hand. Technopower’s external social pressure and individual self-determination or free choices thus have to be looked at not as independent of each other, but as intertwined with each other. Increased pressure on people to optimize their looks obviously undermines free choice in the bold sense of an autonomous and uncoerced decision. “Free choices” for breast implants for cosmetic reasons are a case in point for how the concept of free choice has been narrowed. Free choices are less and less representative of emancipatory ideals or democratic demands. Free choices, as exemplified in the cases such as the one discussed here, mean the unavoidable acceptance of social restrictions and relations of power. Free choice thus comes to mean an acceptance of a necessity rather than a free deliberation of choices and possibilities. That in turn puts individual empowerment resulting from such choices in a context of mechanisms that have disempowering effects on women as a whole.

26 For discussions on this topic I thank Anna Gulla Rúnarsdóttir, Lydia Voronina, Ólafur Páll Jónsson and Steindór Erlingsson. I also thank an anonymous reviewer for helpful comments.