

Plastic surgeons: from beauty as a divine gift to Faustian imperatives

Paula Sibilía*

SUMMARY

This paper explores the current boom of plastic surgery as a component of a wider phenomenon: an increasing concern for the body appearance in contemporary society, with the resulting urge to resort to a variety of methods so as to *adapt* organic bodies (visibly *unsuitable*) to the ideal forms inspired by models established by the media. A controversial offspring of medicine, plastic surgery often sells its prodigies as the outcomes of design techniques applied to the living body. These methods bear a relation to the edition tools used on digital images in order to correct defects in the “exemplary” body photographs spread by the mass media. It is as if rather than operating on a body by making an incision in the flesh, surgeons sculpted features and defective parts of the body with their scalpels, touching up the imperfections of bodies drawn as static, bidimensional images that will be consumed by the eyes. In spite of the novelty of this phenomenon, its manifestations echo some of the mythical characters of our philosophic and mythical tradition, which can illuminate its more curious and significant aspects.

“If one happened to see Beauty itself, clean, pure, unblended, free of the contamination of human flesh, colors, and so many other mortal trifles; if one could glance at divine beauty, unique in its specificity...”

Plato, *The Banquet*

The word ‘surgeon’ has a curious etymology: it comes from the Latin *chirurgia*, which in turn derives from the Greek *kheirurgia*, which refers to manual work: *kheir* (hand) and *érgon* (work). These roots disclose forgotten aspects of the surgical practice. Ever since ancient times and until a few centuries ago, surgical work did not enjoy much prestige. Even during the Renaissance physicians used to entrust butchers and barbers¹ with the “dirty work”. Curiously enough, with the current boom of plastic surgery and the growing prestige of the specialists, nowadays surgeons and hair-stylists have ironically shortened the distance between them, in their capacity of much sought after professionals at the service of an essential need: good looks. Still, things have changed substantially. The notion of

* Ms. Sibilía holds a Licenciante’s degree in Communication Sciences issued by the School of Social Sciences at Buenos Aires University, and a Master’s degree in Communication, Image and Information by Universidade Federal Fluminense. She has completed doctoral studies in Health and Human Sciences at Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, and is at present finishing doctoral studies in Communication and Culture at Universidad Federal do Rio de Janeiro. She has authored *El hombre postorgánico. Cuerpo, subjetividad y tecnologías digitales* and holds the chair of Cultural Studies and Media at Universidade Federal Fluminense.

¹ It is said that the white and red device that even today can be found outside traditional barbershops hints at the piece of cloth with which barbers wiped their blades after performing “surgeries”. Another etymological curiosity lies in the fact that the word ‘ciruja’ (Buenos Aires slang: beggar, bum, or scoundrel) stems from the same root; i.e., it refers to somebody dressed in rags and collects organic remains from the trash.

“dirty work” has faded, and their reputation keeps growing; or, at least, the proud practitioners of the trade struggle hard to keep as far away as possible from the dreadful memory of the butcher. On the whole, they are successful in this respect. The old bloody, violent image has become glamorized, ever more distant from Frankenstein and closer to Pygmalion.

The reference to these two mythical characters is not irrelevant. Let us start by the gothic monster created by Mary Shelley in 1818. If the creature devised two hundred years ago were to come back to life, it would look quite different. Instead of the clumsily sewn fragments of corpses and the electric shock that instilled Frankenstein with the breath of life, it is quite likely that informatics, biotechnology, and plastic surgery would step onto the scene. The hands of our scientists-sculptors – whether genetic engineers or plastic surgeons, whose accuracy and asepsis seem to have been inspired by digital logic-have overcome the old, rough, analogical procedures of the industrial era. The creatures produced by today’s scientists deceive through their ambiguity, making it hard to distinguish the natural from the artificial.

The new “monsters” scars, which could reveal the traces of technoscientific intervention on their bodies, are much more subtle than those which gave away the bizarre artificiality of Frankenstein. Now the scars are almost imperceptible, and the technique even manages to turn hybrid creatures in less “monstrous” beings than the original ones before they were tampered with by technology. This is precisely the point made by Cindy Jackson, who authored a couple of successful books, and who also authored her own new body, modeled on a Barbie doll². In order to reach her ideal, Jackson underwent thirty-eight plastic surgeries that resulted in a radical transformation of both her body and her subjectivity. She is an extreme example of a trend that is quickly earning popularity all over the world.

To judge from the flippancy with which it is fostered, it would seem that this thriving branch of medicine does not perform its operations with scalpels and scissors that cut into the flesh and result into frightful (and painful) scars in the post-surgical period. Still, this sales advertising does not sound weird: “the more civilized the society that inflicts pain, the more it will conceal the basis of the cruelty on which it is grounded”. The forgoing quotation has been taken from Enrique Ocaña, who wrote several works about the relation between technique and pain and who, in turn, quotes an essay written by John Stuart Mill in 1836: “surgeons, judges, and soldiers have relations of kinship with the executor and the butcher.” However, it is the task of civilization to conceal such kinship: “everyone becomes accustomed to the appearance of the carnage he is responsible for, and only a different standpoint or alienation may unveil the cruelties thanks to which we survive”³. Thus, the desired outcomes in the faces and bodies of the patients often conceal the (dirty and painful) procedures that contributed to achievement. The only thing that is flaunted is the shiny “final result”, and so plastic surgery is sold as a technique that is not only almighty but also “clean” and aseptic. Practically *digital*, as if instead of performing the surgeries with sharp metal blades that tear the skin and mangle the flesh, the surgeon worked on the most ethereal body image, handling pliable software tools as do PhotoShop and other programs that edit photographs.

We may trace the historical roots of the wary distance taken from the organic matter that stubbornly insists on composing the human body. Suffice it to think about the “civilization processes” which, for centuries on end, have been purifying, organizing, and disciplining bodies in accordance with modernizing ideals. Such hygienism brought along some “refinement of sensibility” matching the bourgeois decorum and manners that were becoming hegemonic. Such sensorial sophistication had a remarkable side effect: it seems to have given rise to a “horror of flesh” that by far exceeded that of medieval times. Mistrust and rejection of organic perishable matter, especially if pertaining to the human body, took deep roots. After the “disappointment” caused by the body and Nature, the former did not simply turn into a machine, as announced by philosophers and scientists from the 17th through the 20th Centuries, for the crevices of the body’s gearings secrete thick humors, and this organic stickiness soon took on *disgusting qualities*.

If the early Christians knew that they were inescapably doomed by the “curse of the flesh” and learnt to live under the threat of such horrors, both in terms of temptation as of corruption, it might be concluded that history is repeating itself in a farcical tone. If in those times the drama appeared under a religious aspect, with a correlation to human sin and divine atonement, the current version has

² Cindy Jackson: <http://www.cindyjackson.com>.

³ Enrique Ocaña. “Técnica y metafísica: sobre la esencia del dolor”, in *Artefacto. Pensamientos sobre la Técnica* n° 2. Buenos Aires, 1998, p. 40 a 51.

recycled ancient guilt and reorganized it round a new axis: holy appearances. It has been a long time since the market overthrew the Church in the administration of punishment. In addition, if now the flesh is a nuisance because it is still fatally drawn to temptation and corruption, everything else has changed. Temptations appear in the form of hypercaloric food, tobacco, and sedentarism, while corruption wears the countenance of flabbiness, wrinkles, and cellulitis. Besides, such misfortunes no longer make their presence felt in the hazy shadows of the soul but in the *visible shape* of the body. Even when these new fears may sound laughable, since they have lost their profound allegoric meaning and all their transcendental symbolism, they may have gathered new force because punishment is not necessarily universal and everlasting: now, salvation is individual and can be bought.

In close alliance with the market, technoscience sells the promise that the right “self-marketing” might overcome or, at any rate, evade in a temporary though not ineffective way, the problems brought about by our carnal nature. With the help of sundry techniques and branches of knowledge for sale, we are told that such obstacles may be overcome, eliminated, *liposucted*. Salvation depends on each of us and can be purchased in installments, here and now. But it has to be paid for, for universal commercialization is an indispensable ingredient for this machinery at a time when the “fetishism of commodities” stated by Marx in the mid-19th Century has expanded over the whole planet, covering every inch of its surface with its golden sheen and its dazzling “marketing wonders”⁴. Like Goethe warned us in *Faust*, money has been endowed with divine powers. This is not a gratuitous reference, as the phenomena commented on herein refer to the Faustian tradition of thought regarding technoscience, which gives off neo-gnostic whiffs; i.e., a set of practices and beliefs that reject the material quality of the body to search its superation in as aseptic, artificial, virtual, and immortal ideal.

The Western tradition strove to exorcise several myths involving a mixture of fascination and terror aroused by the potential power of technique and knowledge. Among the Greeks, there stands out the silhouette of Prometheus, a Titan that brought the gift of fire to humankind at the expense of the Gods’ cruelest punishment. His myth denounces man’s arrogance in usurping divine prerogatives by means of earthly knowledge and snares. Faust is another mythical character whose story was repeatedly narrated, with variations, over the centuries, but all the known versions yield tragedy or comedy when the protagonist “loses control of the powers of his mind, which then acquire a dynamic, highly explosive life of their own”⁵. Incensed by his thirst for eternal growth, Faust signs a covenant with the devil and assumes the risk of unleashing the powers of Hell.

Portuguese sociologist Herminio Martins falls back on both Faust and Prometheus to examine the bases of our technoscience⁶. With his unwavering confidence in progress and in the benefits that rational domination of Nature would bring to man, “Prometheus’ followers” lay heavy emphasis on science as “pure knowledge”, while their notion of technique is purely instrumental: if it were capable of gradually improving living conditions, it would contribute to eradicate human misery. But this is not a project without a deadline: there are limitations to what can be known, done, and created. For example, mysteries like the origin of life would surpass scientific rationality. Hence, these scientists have understood the lesson taught by the Titan: certain matters belong exclusively in the divine sphere.

Perhaps this explains why the well-known story of the monster created in Dr. Frankenstein’s laboratory was given the eloquent subhead of *The Modern Prometheus*. We may remember that the story was written in the early 19th Century, amid debates and experiments aroused by the discovery of electricity and its “vitalist” powers, which included the possibilities of bringing the dead back to life and rekindle “the spark of life”. In the novel, the physician-creator confesses of the uncanny drive that ruled the enormity of his project, inspired by electricity, that enticing technical vAryant of fire. “I intently and impatiently searched the hidden places of nature”; “gathered bones from the graveyards and, with unholy fingers, tampered with the fearful secrets of human structure.” In repentance, he then wonders, “who could ever have imagined the horrors of my secret works, while I defiled newly-dug graves and tortured live animals to breathe life into lifeless clay?” But it was too late; and punishment was to reach him soon enough. “On recalling what I did, my limbs shake and my eyes are filled with

⁴ A phrase coined by Gilles Deleuze.

⁵ Marshall Berman. “El Fausto de Goethe: la tragedia del desarrollo” in *Todo lo sólido se desvanece en el aire*. Siglo XXI Editores, Madrid, 1988, p. 28.

⁶ Hermínio Martins. *Hegel, Texas y otros ensaios de teoría social*. Siglo XXI Editores, Lisboa, 1996.

tears; still, at that time, an irresistible, almost frantic drive urged me forward”⁷. It was a Faustian drive with a Promethean moral: man’s knowledge and techniques are not all powerful; his “unholy fingers” are not to disturb every realm, for some limits must be respected.

Progress of Promethean knowledge would result in an “improvement” of the body, without ever crossing the boundaries imposed by “human nature”, for the technical tools involved in this type of progress are mere extensions and more elaborate forms of a *natural* tool. This where Promethean-inspired technoscience stops. It does not intend to trespass beyond the threshold of life –those “fearful secrets of human life” defiled by Dr. Frankenstein. Nevertheless, the resistance of organic life to penetration by technoscientific tools sets serious limitations on development, and no doubt things have changed in our times. For example, developments in biology, with all its informatic artillery aimed at “decoding life” are bent on defeating the last vestiges of intransigence about the sacred condition of nature that opposed technoscientific advances. In the other hand, faith in rationality, trust in progress and in the sense of history, all three of them pillars that supported the scientific project of modernity, were severely shaken. In a word, the good old Promethean tenets are in full decline.

This is where the other philosophical side of our technoscience takes a step forward. Here comes the *Faustian* tradition, assuming the technological characteristics of scientific knowledge. In this field, its productiveness would be a mere byproduct of science, pointing at pure, abstract knowledge, but science’s primary objective. According to the Faustian view, scientific procedures do not seek the truth or the hidden nature of things, but intend to comprehend the phenomena in order to foresee and control them. This view suggests that, over the past decades, the philosophical base of technoscience has been undergoing a rupture with the Promethean characteristics of modern thought and fostering an opening towards new horizons. Old Prometheus exits the stage and gives way to ambitious Faust. Nevertheless, the symbolic might of the Greek Titan still persists: fire is still viewed as one of the great conquests of humankind, if not the greatest. Flames began to give shape to both living and dead matter in prehistorical times, and the whole of industrial production was based on the use of fire and fossil fuels. But our brand new technoscience, of Faustian inspiration, seems to be ready to leave behind the old art of fireworks. The age of Promethean fire seems to be reaching its end while tools and fuels typical of the industrial society will be replaced by a different set of utensils and other sources of energy of electronic and digital origin, capable of shaping live or dead matter in unprecedented ways.

Plastic surgeons play a prominent role in the new project. Worthy heroes of the Faustian era, they embody the updated version of the mythical character: “the doctor who works miracles, with the devil watching in the wings”⁸. Gone are the days when beauty was a divine gift, and when lack of beauty was deemed a curse, a grievous punishment from the Gods that demanded adaptation or, at the most, led to discreet (and Promethean) *cosmetic* arts to conceal plain looks⁹. Gone are the days when the first “beauty surgeons” –true pioneers of this special branch of medicine that has now attained victory on the field –were despised by their colleagues because of their frivolous aims and accused of being frauds, in an attempt to establish a difference between them and “earnest” plastic surgeons, dedicated to the “reconstruction” and “restoration of bodily functions” –all of these proud Promethean objectives.

Like eugenics, genetic experiments, and other medical practices with a controversial past (and a clear affiliation to Faustian projects to reformat the human body –plastic surgery also seems to be the product of a rather undignified though less known history. Ancestral bonds connect its origins (in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries) to the “correction” of features regarded as *inferior*, such as the surgical operations that “restored” noses and ears associated with the Jewish phenotype, and other physical characteristics condemned by disciplines such physiognomy and phrenology, which still

⁷ Mary Shelley. *Frankenstein: O Moderno Prometeu*. Editora Círculo do Livro, San Pablo, 1973, page 53.

⁸ Erich Kahler. “El Doctor Fausto, de Adan a Sartre”, in *Nuestro Laberinto*. Editorial Fondo de Cultura Económica, México, 1972, p. 305.

⁹ There is an interesting difference between the terms ‘cosmetics’ (*kosmetike techne*) y ‘comotics’ (*kommótike techne*) in Ancient Greece. The former refers to hygiene and the care of the body, such as gym and massage. These practices are intended to enhance ‘natural beauty’. The latter had a pejorative connotation and referred to make-up artifices, related to deception, trickery, and artfulness. Perhaps these differences evoke the dual nature of female beauty, protected by two practically opposed goddesses: Aphrodite, “harmonious and sweet”, and Pandora, “evil and fatal”. See Dominique Paquet. *Historia de la Belleza*. Editorial B, Barcelona, 1998, pp.18 to 21.

enjoyed prestige in those times¹⁰. Nowadays, plastic surgery has become popular in every corner of the world, with an unprecedented impact on Asian countries, where success focus on techniques that promise to provide a Western appearance to the natives by doing away with typically oriental features such as the natural shape of eyes and cheekbones. China has already engineered an annual beauty contest only for women who have undergone this transformation; that is to say, for women who have been “Westernized” through surgery.

It would seem unavoidable not to speak of Nazi eugenics. However, there is a significant difference between both ideas. All the aberrations that conspire today against the “perfect body” seem likely to be “cured” through plastic surgery and other techniques on the market. Therefore, unlike the tenets of eugenics theories in the first half of the 20th Century, condemnation does not necessarily lead to death and is in no way handled through nationwide public policies. In the new “eugenics” of beauty and the market, salvation depends on each individual. It is a most profitable business, even when it stands on rather illusory foundations: as early as in the 80s, the cosmetic industry invested up to 80% of its budget in advertising, and the figure keeps increasing¹¹.

In such a delicate context, the growing dread of adiposity encroaching on the body enriches booming markets such as liposuction; by the way, this particular dread has already earned a name: lipophobia. The disgust aroused by fatness is not only related to the will of removing it from the “sufferer’s” body, by purifying it with neo-ascetic techniques such as slimming diets and gym, but also to an impulse to condemn it in others. As William Ian Miller has written in his works on *disgust*, it is “a moral and social feeling”¹². As such, it is also complementary to *purity*: it classifies people and things according to some sort of cosmic order, since purity implies the creation of an order and the adaptation of the world to an idea. Thus, purifying is not a negative act aimed at getting rid of dirt, but a *positive* act in that it implies struggling for an ideal. Each model of purity has its own notion of the type of filth that must be actively fought. Thus, both disgust and contempt for the impure take on a strong political connotation, since along these lines some people are labeled inferior while others spread allegedly legitimate claims of superiority and distinction. Besides, according to the warning issued by anthropologist Mary Douglas in her classic book *Pureza y peligro*, there is another universal constant residing in the fact that contamination distilled by the *inferior* is always stronger than the *superior’s* capacity to clean up¹³. This is an invitation to give a free hand to all Faustian excesses in purification processes, but they will never be enough.

Amid the virulent hatred of flabbiness and fatness it is not difficult to sense the moral burden that accompanies the idea of purity and its connotations of goodness, beauty, and cleanliness, as opposed to the undesirable opposites: the bad, the ugly, and the dirty. In short, the impure. If the *impure* is a necessary condition of existence for the *pure*, we have come across another problematic category: that of the *chosen* ones, those who are nearer purity than is anyone else. Ruled by Hitler, Germany embarked on an esthetic project whose aim was to annihilate everything that did not conform to a supposedly harmonious order. The Third Reich was “a profoundly *artistic* State”, as stated by Spanish essayist Felix de Azúa. The State sought to impose a universal model of “body beauty”. A whole political project grounded on the “construction of a living work of art: the Aryan, who was not to stand out for his soul, his spirit, or his intellect, but for his physiology, as is the case with our well-liked and nice *top-models*”¹⁴.

In the Nazi context, purification of the race entailed zeal to eliminate impurity. As Zygmunt Bauman recalls, it implied protecting their spotless ideal “from the obstinate presence of people that *did not adjust, that* were out of place, that spoiled the picture.” These maladjusted individuals “offended the esthetically pleasant and morally soothing sense of harmony”¹⁵. It is to be noted that the

¹⁰ Sander Gilman. *Making the Body Beautiful: A cultural History of Aesthetic Surgery*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2001.

¹¹ In the United States alone, and taking only the figures for 1985, this would amount to 900 million dollars. See Anne Higonnet. “Mujeres, imágenes y representación”, in Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot (comps.): *Historia de las Mujeres en Occidente*. Volume 9. Editorial Taurus, Madrid, 1993, p. 383. Interesting aspects of this same issue are discussed in a striking essay by Naomi Wolf, entitled *El mito de la belleza*. Editorial Emecé, Barcelona, 1991.

¹² William Ian Miller. *Anatomía del asco*. Editorial Taurus, Madrid, 1998, pp. 22 y 31.

¹³ Mary Douglas. *Pureza e Perigo*. Editora Perspectiva, San Pablo, 1976.

¹⁴ Félix de Azúa. *Diccionario de las Artes*. Editorial Planeta, Barcelona, 1995, p. 68.

¹⁵ Zygmunt Bauman. “O sonho da pureza”, en *O mal-estar da pós-modernidad*. Editora Jorge Zahar, Río de Janeiro, 1998, p. 13.

reasons for inadequacy did not reside in the carefully wrought inner aspects of their soul or psyche, but in the outward appearance of their bodies. Maladjustment lay in full sight, in the body, the color of the skin, hair, and eyes, in anatomic measurements, and in the privilege of a certain type of blood or a given genetic inheritance¹⁶.

From this viewpoint, and exaggerated as they may sound, the parallelism between the Nazi view of the world and the images of health and beauty that lurk around us cannot be denied. There is persistent luring to join *fitness*, to adjust, to achieve the longed-for body ideal. Apart from turning a “*poor body*” into the favorite target of judgment and moral condemnation, such values as can categorize the individual’s hierarchy stem from “*a good body*”, an organism that has adapted, adjusted, and converted to *fitness* with the boisterous aid of an alliance among technoscience, the market, and the mass media. This trend is not free of risks, for the revival of biological criteria to classify individuals may land in new forms of discrimination based on scientific data, which amounts to saying that they would be unquestionable. This strategy is much appreciated by Faustian projects to reformat the human condition. If in the 20th Century such threats became embodied in heinous fascisms of exclusion and in the ruthless elimination of the maladjusted, modern times are recreating “pleasant, nice” versions of the same idea, with a certain amount of totalitAryan inclusion and kind hints to *adapt*.

The notion of purity also gathers strength in a different sense. In our “risk society”, besides legitimizing stigmatization, the impure involves an enormous negative load, as it can contaminate world order through both *symbolic* and *real* action. Some foodstuffs and “lifestyles” regarded as pernicious endanger none other than the purity of the “*good body shape*”, the ultimate sublime ideal shared by the whole of the Western society. No strategy is too excessive to fight such pollution. However, one might ask, why to invest such an amount of energy in the name of such an insignificant ideal? With the present crisis undergone by “inner life”, and the concomitant shift of the *essence* of individual identity toward the recondite, immaterialized DNA molecules and brain chemistry, the body, that last refuge of subjectivity, seems to be turning into a valuable image to be exhibited and watched¹⁷. The body *shows* what we are, and the image we exhibit cannot be just any image. It is highly codified, and must therefore be young, beautiful, and lean; otherwise, we will have to resort to technoscientific tools and upgrade our looks.

It is well worth bringing to mind a series of physical prototypes. In the 1920s, Charles Atlas’s body permeated the collective imaginary of his times by selling the possibility that any body –even the least “favored”–could, through effort and dedication, become an archetype of virile strength. Rather than the value of the image evoked, such a body highlighted the ability to stand out through strength and vigor. According to historian Jean-Jacques Courtine, the 40s saw the advent of another male body ideal, introduced by Johnny Weismuller, the everlasting Tarzan whose fascination lay in the “natural elegance of his muscles” and his jumping and swimming abilities. In the 80s and 90s, a third body type claimed first place: that of Arnold Schwarzenegger. “Frozen in the crude light, the body-builder draws attention to the tiniest details of his body mass.” The description goes on as follows: “striations of the muscular fibers, ramifications of the vascular network, , the throbbing of a swollen thorax.” According to the French historian, these bodies have been subjected to “the tyranny of anatomic detail” typical of those who are “doomed to their looks”¹⁸.

In our society, every more often, ideal bodies move into the cruel, “crude, almost surgical lamps” under which the most trivial details are scanned by the camera lens and clearly enlarged by the zoom. Later on, when they have become a bidimensional representation, they are often improved with the aid of digital techniques. Under such circumstances, it is not only dated Charles Atlas of the 20s and Tarzan of the 40s that lose their scepter in a humiliating manner. After reigning indisputably for

¹⁶ Esthetic ambitions in pursuit of “corporal purity” and in the beauty of the Aryan race can be found in Leni Riefenstahl’s movies, especially *Olympia. La fiesta de la belleza, la fiesta del pueblo*, 1936. It is worth watching documentary films by Swedish director Peter Cohen, *Homo Sapiens 1900*, 1998), and *Arquitectura de la Destrucción*, 1989.

¹⁷ On the transition between both subjective paradigms, see Benilton Bezerra. “O acaso da interioridade”, in Carlos Plastino (comp.): *Transgressões*. Editora Contracapa, Rio de Janeiro, 2002; and Paula Sibilia. “Do homo psico-lógico ao homo tecno-lógico: a crise da interioridade”, in *Semiosfera* magazine, Year 3, # 7. Editora ECO-UFRJ, Rio de Janeiro, 2004.

¹⁸ Jean-Jacques Courtine. “Os Stakhanovistas do Narcisismo: Body-building e puritanismo ostentatorio na cultura americana do corpo”, in Denise Sant’Anna (comp.): *Políticas do corpo*. Editora Estação Liberdade, San Pablo, 1995, p. 105.

five hundred years, Michaelangelo's *David* has lost its prestige as "the perfect body". A team of anatomists and experts in esthetics has discovered that the famous male Renaissance statue "is not perfect". Precisely the figure that, for five centuries, has embodied, from its stone massiveness, the great icon of "perfection of the body", going back to Classic criteria of perfect proportion and a harmonious whole. Strictly inspected under the "surgical light" of contemporary technoscience, the beautiful marble body fell to the scans of the *digital* examination. The scientists diagnosed that the famous statue had a "flaw" in a muscle of its back, and naturally, the media spread the verdict¹⁹. Still, a few doubts arise: has the flaw always been there and been recently spotted? Alternatively, perhaps the "flaw" is in the eyes that examined the statue under a Faustian light?

It is not by coincidence that graphic editing programs like the well-known PhotoShop play an ever increasing role in the composition of media photographs that are exhibited under the label of "beautiful bodies". These photographs constitute a forceful source of body images in the contemporary world. The techniques used endow body images with everything that ungrateful Nature tends to whisk away from living organisms and that harsh neo-ascetic practices (so Promethean and analogical) still refuse to give them. With these *software scalpels*, "flaws" and other excessively organic details are removed from the bodies photographed, which are corrected and touched up on a computer screen. Finally, the images exhibited follow an ideal of digital purity, far from any coarse analogical imperfection and excessively organic viscosity.

The digitized –and, above all, *digitizing* –model juts out from the screens and glossy pages of magazines and billboards to pervade our bodies and subjectivities, for images that are thus edited become objects of desire that we would like to reproduce in our own *virtualized* flesh. It is the mission of plastic surgeons to make such dreams come true, to cleanly and effectively *delete* all imperfections of the flesh in order to generate a type of beauty that is so aseptic as it is raw.

I have already mentioned Pygmalion, the mythical sculptor from Ancient Greece who fell in love with a gorgeous ivory statue that he himself carved and that came to life through his magic touch. Worthy patron of plastic surgeons, it is easy to realize the distance between Pygmalion's transparent happiness (a classic artist who married his most perfect work) and Frankenstein's tragedy (a physician who, with the attitude of a necrophilic butcher haunted by devious regrets, earned public condemnation for having created an evil monster)²⁰. A few decades after Mary Shelley's novel was published, American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne published a short story entitled *La mancha de nacimiento*²¹ in 1843. It is a hair-raising Gothic story about a "maddened woman" named Georgiana, who would go to any lengths to remove a tiny crimson birthmark that marred the beauty of her face and that had become an obsession to her husband. The story explicitly intended to denounce the ravings and blind ambition of Aylmer, her husband and a crazed scientist, as an allegory of the dangers involved in the reckless scientific advances of the times. The Faustian drives of science were beginning to throb underneath its Promethean achievements.

The dread aroused by the dark powers of knowledge was not unusual in the early 19th Century. Fear appeared embodied in myths like the one of "the wizard's apprentice", who knew just enough magic to start an experiment but not to stop it at the right moment. There is still a third Gothic physician, equally crazed and ambitious: Dr. Spalanzani, a character in E.T.A. Hoffmann's *El hombre de arena*, written in 1816 and developing the fatal robot doll named Olympia²². If Dr. Frankenstein was a "modern Prometheus", his colleagues Aylmer and Spalanzani could also have assumed the role of the mythical Greek Titan. After having used their bold devices and their even bolder ambitions to defy the boundaries set upon humans, all of them were ruthlessly punished by the gods.

Anyway, it is a long time since the gods have exited the stage. Nearly two centuries after such fantastic inventions, the risks became earthly and individual. We are even told that taking them may be well worth our while. After all, in these times of virulent individualism and supposedly obligatory equality, we all have (or should have) a basic *right to risk*. Responsibility is individual, and we can

¹⁹ Elisabetta Piqué. "El David de Miguel Angel no es tan perfecto como se creía", in diario *La Nación*. Buenos Aires, October 11th, 2004.

²⁰ It would be interesting to find the motives underlying the choice of the phrase "*aesthetic surgery*" rather than the "less literary *esthetic surgery*" which, according to historian Sander Gilman contributed to ground the "serious purposes of the field" when it was still very controversial (in the 30s), endowing it with a "classic lineage". Gilman. *Op. cit.*, p. 15.

²¹ Nathaniel Hawthorne. "La Mancha de Nacimiento" (1843), in Miquel Berga (comp). *Cinco mujeres locas. Cuentos góticos de la literatura norteamericana*. Editorial Lumen, Barcelona, 2001.

²² E.T.A. Hoffmann. "O homem de areia", en *Contos sinistros*. Editora Max Limonad, San Pablo, 1987.

freely decide whether or not we wish to get rid of –even when the riddance may be temporary–body imperfections that are whimsically inherent to each of us. All of us can (or perhaps *should*) choose the neo-ascetic technique that best suits each case –not just plastic surgery, but also slimming diets, workout, etc.), evaluating risks and benefits so as to reach the “perfection” that the gods insist on denying us, just as they denied it to the beautiful yet blemished Georgiana. After all, this was the path chosen by Miss Brazil 2001, who admitted having had nineteen plastic surgeries: liposuction in various parts of the body, silicon in her breasts, and corrections on the nose and ears. When this became known, there were debates in the media and timely arguments against her being “naturally beautiful”. Obviously, these were not due to the already customary type of operations, but to the outrageous *number*. It seemed as if the artificial quality of female beauty extolled by Charles Baudelaire with a tinge of scandal in his *Elogio del maquillaje* had gone too far, but it was impossible to determine the exact moment when the exaggeration had begun.

This is why, in our complex days, technoscience seems to encourage the rise of new mythical characters, farther and farther away from bound Prometheus (who was, after all, a rebellious Titan and, therefore, guilty) and as close as possible to daring Faust (a man, after all, whose ambitions drove dangerously along the road to divinity). A Pygmalion rather than a Frankenstein. The passage from one archetype to another enables us to envisage, in the Gothic physicians of the early 19th Century (Frankenstein, Aylmer, and Spalanzani) disquieting ancestral echoes of today’s triumphant species: our plastic surgeons. Contemporary counterparts of Pygmalion, and far from protagonizing Gothic dramas with horrifying endings, they boast of their dainty collection of “happy endings”. It is not hollow bragging: they often sculpt the best specimens of female beauty that can be admired on the screens of the world.

Robert Rey is a case in point. Besides his huge success at his Beverly Hills clinic and *Dr 90210* reality show (watched by 330,000,000 viewers in 120 countries), he descends in a direct line from the mythical Greek sculptor. Among his best works, he takes pride in the “unbelievable” transformations operated by his scalpel on his own wife. We may remember that, before creating his “perfect ivory virgin”, Pygmalion had opted for celibacy, since he thought all women were “sinful and blameworthy”²³. Moreover, Faust’s first historical ancestor (of the character and his name, for this was the nickname he adopted) was Simon Magus, a notorious practitioner of black magic who is supposed to have lived at the time of the apostles and who, interestingly enough, is said to have founded gnosticism. This character identified himself with the Sun, the Star-King, and his wife was called Helena after Selene, the moon goddess: the human soul fatally sunk into matter, who could be redeemed only by her Faustian husband. However, the decisive figure for the crystallization of the myth in the Western imaginary was Sabellicus Helmstedter. Inspired in Simon’s writings, he made his public appearance in the 16th Century under the name of Faust II, earning great fame thanks to his “supernatural powers”. Some critics have, in fact, called his gifts into question by suggesting that his merits responded to a different reason: “his remarkable ability to advertise himself”²⁴. Going back to Dr. Rey, his Faustian lineage seems to find confirmation in more than one way, especially when he boasts of possessing “the technology to turn any person into a beauty”²⁵, without concealing the origin of his magic powers: “I am an artist at the service of the Lord”, for “He has given us science as a means to relieve our experience and take off some of the burden of the Cross we must all carry”. In addition, he adds: “the beauty that we create is so perfect that now everybody covets it”²⁶. Everybody wants to *buy* it.

Paradoxically –or perhaps not –gone are the days when beauty was a rare “divine gift” which you *possessed* or did not *possess*. From a Promethean standpoint, it was risky to meddle with its sublime arbitrariness. Until the mid-20th Century, beauty handbooks addressed to women recommended “enriching, preserving, and restoring Nature, without daring to try any deep, irrevocable change of body shapes, colors, and volumes”, as it was deemed “dangerous to perform an intervention on one’s own body in the name of personal goals and fashion whims”²⁷. It was only in the 50s that beauty slowly became one of women’s *rights* (and probably also one of their *duties*), and this attitude extended to men as well. In previous times, it was hardly believed that beauty was an individual

²³ “Pigmalião”. *Dicionário de Mitologia Greco-Romana*. Editora Abril, San Pablo, 1973, p. 150.

²⁴ Erich Kahler. *Op. cit.*, pp. 302 a 334.

²⁵ Revista *Veja*. San Pablo, november 5th, 2004.

²⁶ Revista *Época*, nº 335. Río de Janeiro, october 18th, 2004.

²⁷ Denise Sant’Anna. “Cuidados de si e embelezamento feminino: Fragmentos para uma historia do corpo no Brasil”, en *Políticas do corpo*. Editora Estação Liberdade, San Pablo, 1995, p. 126.

conquest. As historian Denise de Sant'Anna explains, the past decades witnessed a change of mind: "rather than just doing something about the 'ugly' parts of the body so that they might pass unnoticed, the new decision is to 'prevent them and correct them'"²⁸. This marks a clear transition between two different types of technoscientific intervention on human bodies: a passage from Promethean procedures (to conceal, to improve, to enhance) toward Faustian methods (to correct, to create, to surpass). The passage includes also a shift from the mechanic to the bioinformatic paradigm, and from the analogical to the digital field. Thus, a seeming contradiction is stripped bare: dreams of "virtualization" and the cult of the "body beautiful" are not contradictory trends in contemporary society. They both reveal a common root; behind them lies identical contempt for the impurity of the flesh and its organic viscosity, apart from the Faustian will to get rid of them with the aid of technoscientific tools.

This why we the tragedy lived over one hundred and sixty years ago by Aylmer and Georgiana does not sound to us as something "crazy" or excessively allegorical. Such worries are entrenched in our 21st Century daily lives, and have become part of our common sense. This may be proved by bearing in mind the international success enjoyed by reality shows in which guests subject themselves to a variety of techniques leading to physical improvement (particularly plastic surgeries), facing serious risks and excruciating pain in order to obtain a certain degree of purity in their body image to at least approach the ideal model that appears to be ever more unattainable. On the face of the tools deployed in these new television programs, Dr. Aylmer's alchemy tricks look like dated games. However, as she walked round her husband's laboratory, awe-struck Georgiana may have caught a glimpse of the serpent's egg: "she could not help noticing that his most outstanding successes were nearly always failures as compared to the ideal to which he aspired"²⁹. In an era still ruled by the Promethean myth, new drives began to throb recklessly. Now, hurled into Faustian vertigo, our technoscience keeps announcing all sorts of heroic deeds, such as the recently launched "face transplant". It does not take much imagination to think that it will eventually develop a *cosmetic application*, to be integrated into the menu offered by plastic surgeons.

*"As the last crimson tint of the birthmark--that sole token of human imperfection--faded from her cheek, the parting breath of the now perfect woman passed into the atmosphere.... Then a hoarse, chuckling laugh was heard again! Thus ever does the gross fatality of earth exult in its invariable triumph over the immortal essence...."*³⁰.

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²⁸ Denise Sant'Anna. *Op. cit.*, p. 135.

²⁹ Nathaniel Hawthorne. *Op. cit.*, p. 39.

³⁰ Nathaniel Hawthorne. *Op. cit.*, p. 19 a 48.

Translated by Marta Ines Merajver

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