

## UNMAKING DIFFERENCE: constructing a global feminine and the woman's magazine

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### ***Abstract***

*In 1981, Jane Fonda in her eponymous *Workout Book*, comments that during her visit to Vietnam she realized that a prostitute could raise her prices if she 'Americanised' her face through cosmetic surgery. The cover story of the 10 November 2003 issue of *Newsweek International* reads 'The Perfect Face: How a global standard of beauty is emerging and what people are doing to get it'. The cover 'face' is that of 'Supermodel Saira Hohan—part Indian, part French and part Irish'. The questions raised here: in the twenty-odd years since Fonda published her then controversial workout book, has the representation of 'woman' changed? Are these possible changes in the interests of woman herself?*

*I will use the methodology and theoretical framework developed by Michel Foucault to investigate what he has termed the 'Technology of the Self' (Foucault, 2000). I propose to define and interrogate the representation of "woman" in an international market with a view to its evolution over the past twenty years. I will look in particular at the ways in which the rhetoric surrounding this 'representation' is inflected by local as well as international concerns within the Australasian context in magazines such as *Australian Vogue* and *NW*.*

### ***Jane Fonda and the Problem of Embodiment***

The Jane Fonda series of exercise and self-help books marks an evolution in discourses of embodiment that attempts to reconcile feminism and femininity. In this sense these texts are evidence of the impact of 1970s feminism within a popular arena and of the ways in which the popular has replaced feminism with what film and media scholar Charlotte Brunsdon terms 'post-feminism'. These 'post-feminist' strategies are marked by a 'concern' with 'the performance of femininity' (1997, p. 81). These strategies are not feminist, but that depend upon concepts about femininity that would not have been possible without Second Wave Feminism and emerge as part of a more generalised emphasis in the 1990s 'on the claiming and reclaiming of identities' (Brunsdon, 1997, pp. 83-84). They invoke both 'familiar (if historically masculine) western narratives of individual success' and 'feminist ideas and fantasies about feminism' (Brunsdon, 1997, pp. 88-87).

Initially, the 1981 book, *Jane Fonda's Workout Book*, evokes a body that cannot be completely reclaimed by the masculine gaze—notably the model does not look towards the camera offering herself up to his gaze. Models are 'dangerous' rather than

models and are thin, small-busted, and relatively 'unmade-up'. The photographs appear 'unstyled' and designed to inform rather than to fascinate. The ethos of the 1981 volume is one of self-improvement and self-advancement. It draws upon the traditional masculine narratives such as that of Horatio Alger that invoke the 'self-made' man as the exemplar of American success. (See Radner, 1995, for a more extended discussion of the Jane Fonda workout.)

By 1986 in *Jane Fonda's New Workout and Weight-loss Programme*, the appearance of Fonda and the other demonstrators has changed markedly. She is depicted in isolation, the self-conscious object of the camera-gaze, including six photographs (out of a total of approximately 44) in which she displays her body for the camera, lounging in the traditional 'odalisque' pose of the 19th century courtesan. She is fuller figured and accentuates her heavier musculature (achieved through weight training) and her cosmetically enhanced bust through her clothing and poses. She is both more powerful and more self-consciously 'to be looked at'. Like the body builder, her body assumes a phallic dimension, pumped up for the camera; however, she is also more feminine in particular, 'bustier'. The 1986 book then through its visual rhetoric emphasises the performance of embodiment as an attribute of femininity. It also emphasises the mutability of that body and underlines the process of embodiment as one of constant renewal and change. There is no single moment of transformation (as in the makeover) but rather a series of ever-renewable strategies. She is no longer the 'self-made' woman but a woman always in the process of 're-making' herself for herself but also emphatically in the eyes of others.

Like Madonna, and more recently Kylie Minogue (among many others), Fonda's 1986 book is part of a rhetoric that defines feminine embodiment through its capacity to transform itself for the 'self'. The masculine voyeuristic and fetishistic gaze defined by psychoanalytically influenced feminist theorists such as Laura Mulvey (1992) is accommodated while another gaze—that of the woman upon her 'self'—is the privileged gaze. The post-feminist role model shops for herself—and may, if it suits her, manipulate the masculine gaze to her own advantage, as well as the envious or admiring gaze of other women. She is, however, primarily concerned with embodying herself for her 'self'. This particular articulation of a set of strategies of embodiment have been reproduced endlessly through other workout methods, such as 'The Firm', while its underlying precepts support advertising campaign's for women such as Nike's 'Just do it' campaign or the l'Oréal 'I'm worth it/You're worth it' campaign.

### ***The Feminine Consumer and Her Predicament***

Embodiment as a process that can be bought, and that at the same time is subject to the control and ultimately self-discipline of a subject, underlines the predicament of the feminine consumer. This process of self-embodiment affirms that though popular culture itself rarely intervenes (or does so only indirectly) in the construction of the woman's status as a class with a political voice, it repeatedly represents the ideal of agency and freedom to woman as individual. As part of this process, popular culture ties the ideals of freedom and agency to individual fulfilment rather political action. This disjunction between political (class) action and individual fulfilment produces a set of contradictions in feminine culture as it is defined by consumerism.

The consumer appears to make a free decision. She chooses a given product over another. In so doing she represents her capacity to act through the possession of an object that could only belong to her as a result of a free decision. At the same time, in purchasing a given product she participates in a larger social and economic institution over which she has no control and which may very well be working against her interests (in terms of health care, retirement benefits, sense of well-being). She is participating in the reproduction of a consumer culture in which the measure of a woman's worth is 'her looks', or rather the looks that she receives from others. Ultimately she reaffirms a social institution in which she has no control over her worth.

The problems of self-embodiment are linked to those of consumer culture in that we might say that to the degree that the woman controls the process of embodiment she owns her look. Similarly, to the degree she constructs her self for her 'self', her worth appears to be solely subject to her own control. However, the measure of those looks is determined by the looks of others, and by the radical degree of investment in terms of capital and 'work' that this 'self' requires. In this sense, she is never 'free' even in her relations to her 'self'.

Influential feminist philosopher, Susan Bordo remarks that fashion itself encourages 'female bodies to become docile bodies' (1993, p. 166). She rejects 'self-fashioning' and the processes of embodiment as processes that enable women to assume agency. In so doing, she also rejects Foucault's notion that:

Power relations are possible only insofar as the subjects are free. If one of them were completely at the other's disposal and became his thing, an object on which he could wreak boundless and limitless violence, there wouldn't be any relations of power. (2000, p. 292)

Feminine culture plays a contradictory role in determining the destiny of woman. It emphasizes identity in terms of gender as a source and model for modes of self-fulfilment. It thus reinvents and sustains the distinction feminine/masculine through consumerism—but in terms of the relation of the self to the self, rather than in terms of a specific social role. In so doing, consumer culture encourage woman to act as an autonomous agent functioning in her own interest; however, it also encourages the perpetuation of social norms emphasising appearance rather than accomplishment as the primary source of feminine identity.

### ***The Surgically Altered Body***

In this sense, Fonda's method, as outlined in her written work, supports Foucault's notion of power—that is to say that the feminine subject is free to chose but that she is not 'free' in the sense of choosing outside a network of power relations that define her choices. Empowerment is written upon the body as a signified of the fit body. The shift in Jane Fonda's publications from the fit body in 1981 and the surgically altered body in 1986 is significant. Whereas the fit body invokes a programme of self-discipline, the cosmetically altered body invokes a passive body that is submitted to the skills of another. Further it should be noted that the fit body has not been abandoned. In a sense, the fit body is a *sina qua non*, necessary but not sufficient, as in the case of Fonda herself, portrayed in the 1986 volume. Cosmetic surgery amplifies the self-discipline of the body regulated through exercise but also confirms

the body as 'to-be-looked-at'. Though exercise, it might be argued, transforms the body at a profound level (in terms of physical performance for example) the effects, at least the positive effects, of cosmetic surgery are by nature in the realm of appearance.

There is a trend in feminist scholarship to see cosmetic surgery as potentially emancipatory, in so far as those who undergo the process conceive of it as a decision—in other words a free decision. (See for example Davis, 1991.) I would not want to disagree with this formulation except to distinguish this kind of 'decision' from the sustained self-discipline that produces the 'fit body'. In a certain sense these are subtle differences, but differences that I argue are worth exploring.

### ***Normalisation***

Today when *Newsweek* discusses "The Global Makeover" in the Australasian context, it is referring specifically to the ever expanding cosmetic surgery industry and to the norms propagated by that industry, typically in terms of what *Newsweek* calls the "Westernisation" of features (*Newsweek*, 10 November, 2003). The emphasis on 'Westernization' underplays the equally growing emphasis on an aesthetics based on cosmetic surgery in high fashion magazines targeting what would commonly be thought of as 'European women'. (See for example *Vogue Australia*, February 2004.) In the instances documented by both *Newsweek* and *Vogue*, these changes wrought on those electing surgery are incremental, especially in comparison with the more commonplace 'makeover' pushed to its limits in television shows such as *Extreme Makeover* (ABC, TV2 NZ, 2004). The extreme makeover incorporates cosmetic surgery, but relies on fashion, hair, make-up, etc., for more dramatic effects.

The constant reiteration of 'before' and 'after' echoed in popular magazines in which cosmetic experts hypothesise upon the degree of surgery or airbrushing to which a star's image may have been subjected becomes an exercise in discrimination and in reading the details of facial expression or lack thereof. (See *Woman's Day*, NZ Edition, 16 February, 2004.) Though I have titled my essay 'unmaking difference', it is equally true that these exercises serve to construct new terms of difference as signifying differences. The details of skin surface, for example, become signifiers that are subject not only to interpretation, but also to disciplinary action by the subject on herself.

Foucault, himself, is known for his dismissal of popular culture as a possible terrain upon which an ethics of the self might be constructed. For example, when it is pointed out to him that many people feel that all aspects of life should be 'perfected', and that thus, in a sense, everyday life becomes the project of a work of art, he replies 'most of the people think that if they do what they do, if they live as they live, the reason is that they know the truth about desire, life, nature, body, and so on' (Foucault, 2000, 262). For Foucault, to construct one's life as a work of art is to do so without reference to an already known truth. In this sense to 'care for the self' is part of an ongoing project that searches for truth without, in fact, assuming that truth can be 'known' as such. Foucault scholar Paul Rabinow comments: 'For Foucault as a thinker, the ethical substance, the prime material of moral conduct, is the "will to truth"' (xxix). Foucault elaborates that the 'obstinate search for a certain style of existence' in antiquity that might be 'common to all', in the sense of 'uniform' and a function of 'normalization', was 'a profound error' (Rabinow, 2000, xxix). Foucault specifies that it is not the 'search' for a style of existence. according to Rabinow. that

is incorrect *per se*, rather it is the tendency of this search to result in normative criteria that constitutes its error.

I would argue that the shift to cosmetic surgery as a major strategy in the self-discipline of embodiment propagated by feminine culture is part of an increasing shift towards normalization within feminine culture—thus the project of embodiment becomes not an ‘ethical’ project, but a project that Foucault would characterise as defined by the ‘will to knowledge’ (Rabinow, 2000, xxix). Within feminine culture, then, the project of embodiment may appear to be characterised by ‘the will to truth’ and the ‘search for a certain style of existence’ and, thus, to be an ethical project; nevertheless, the pursuit of embodiment is more accurately understood as defined by normalisation and the will to knowledge. In this sense, I agree with Bordo in that the project of embodiment is one ultimately designed to produce the ‘docile’ body (see above). This ‘docile’ body, however, is one that assumes in error the aspects of the disciplined self of an ethical project. We might say, then, that the project of embodiment is a difficult one, one that not only ‘errs’ in the sense of ‘wanders’, needing to be constantly corrected, but also one that is flawed by fundamental errors. Certainly, on the one hand, the pursuit of a ‘style of existence’ that would define the self for the self must involve the body; however, on the other hand, to involve the body ultimately leaves the subject prey to projects of normalisation. To illustrate my point I will turn to a recent article in *NW*, 22 March, 2004 (pp. 34-37).

### ***New Bodies***

This article recounts the experiences of two women who seek to slim down after having children. Unlike Fonda, these women do not posit the project of embodiment as a life-long task—rather, it is project of recovery. The initial project of recovering the pre-maternal body becomes something different, perhaps more profound, a project that will ‘change your life’ (p. 37). The women both lost weight; however, *NW* reports that ‘Although they’d been able to improve their appearance by dieting and exercising, both girls realised plastic surgery was the only way to bigger breasts’ (p. 35), a realisation that Fonda also came to in the 1980s. However, unlike Fonda, these are ordinary women who have no particular pressures put upon them to appear ‘beautiful’ in the public eye. Both were also of modest means. ‘Buffy’ was ‘a full-time mum living on a single wage with her husband, mechanical plumber David, while Miranda, a single mother, was studying to be an accountant and working part-time’ (35). *NW* continues: ‘While their bodies got firmer and fitter each day, their yearning for a more feminine figure still remained’ (p. 35). Their solution was to journey to Thailand where they could ‘get some hols, shop and still come home with bigger boobs’ (36).

This project of self-improvement is lost in another project that is more directly related to pleasure—albeit not ‘your pleasure in your own discipline’ (1981, p. 56) that Fonda evokes. Instead, it involves the pleasure of shopping, of holidays (away from family, we assume, in particular the burdens of childcare), and of consumer culture more generally. The article underlines that these women are intelligent consumers. They research the internet, and compare prices and technique in order to save between \$2,000-\$4,000 Australian each by choosing to have procedures done in Thailand rather than Australia. ‘Breasts’, like any other item, are subject to supply, demand, comparison-shopping and product reliability. Yet it should also be pointed out that though the young women purchase a new look, this look must be enhanced with

clothes and makeup in order to render it apparent to NW readers. The depiction of Buffy and Miranda in NW suggests that the process of transformation is a function of intelligent and tasteful consumerism (by the standards of NW) that is available to 'every woman'.

Less obvious, 'femininity' in the form of a 'feminine figure' is a product of appearance and was 'at risk', so to speak, because of the 'costs' of maternity upon a woman's body. This notion of a 'feminine figure' is, then, at odds with any biological definition of femininity as maternity. It is finally consumer culture rather than motherhood, within this system, that confers femininity.

### ***The Global Body***

Even, more striking here is the growth of a global industry that targets women's bodies in which 'Westernisation' is clearly an abstract category that applies equally to Australian women of European origin and to their Malaysian and Asian counterparts, as depicted in the *Newsweek* article cited above. *Newsweek* suggests that the new standards of beauty, exemplified by 'supermodel Saira Mohan—part Indian, part French and part Irish'—who appears on the issue's cover (November 10, 2003), depend upon 'a kind of plastic aesthetic, in which all features can be smoothed over and blended into a seamless, ambiguous form' (p.49). *Newsweek* also points to what it calls a 'democratisation of cosmetic surgery' (p.50) which now gives 'ordinary people, not just the rich and famous, the means to do something about it' (p. 46).

The 'it' to which *Newsweek* refers in the previous sentence is ambiguous. Strictly speaking, 'it' refers to the fact, according to *Newsweek*, that 'East and West have traded ideals of beauty for centuries'. More intuitively, 'it' refers to 'ideals of beauty' and the fact that now everyone can 'do something' in order to achieve those ideals. Nonetheless the implicit reference to trade remains—not only trade in women, but also trade in the conventional sense of products and services.

In terms of 'representation' the coarse 'political economy' analysis offered by *Newsweek*, in which the West dominates the East, stands in stark contrast to the account offered by NW in which two women of European origin travel to the 'East' in order to participate in the 'democratisation of cosmetic surgery'. The woman's magazine (NW) highlights not only personal choice and personal fulfilment, but also the ways in which 'East' and 'West' are determined by a central perspective, somewhere mid-Atlantic in the Northern hemisphere between North America and Europe. Like *Newsweek*, the woman's magazine ignores the financial investment entailed by surgery and the imagined as well as the actual financial return that a woman might acquire on such an investment.

In 1981, Jane Fonda, comments that during her visit to Vietnam she realized that a prostitute could raise her prices if she 'Americanised' her face through cosmetic surgery (p.20). Her remark seems in line with *Newsweek's* representation—that is to say, that it is the non-European woman who is largely the victim of cosmetic surgery. In fact, however, as the 1986 volume demonstrates, Fonda herself is the victim and the villain in a system of representation that promotes normalisation in the name of individuality. In asserting that within feminine culture, the effects of normalisation have seemingly overwhelmed 'the search for a certain style of existence', I do not wish to pathologise feminine culture: the significance of that search as 'a will to

truth' remains, I would argue, the underlying impetus behind feminine culture, even if it oftens 'errs' from this initial path. And for this reason, one of the crucial tasks of feminist scholarship is to chart the changes, the differences in the ebb and flow of feminine culture as a process of self-examination and self-construction.

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