Body Modification and Popular Culture

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It is safe to say that contemporary North America is obsessed with the body. Popular culture abounds with references to the body: from products for the body (hair care, skin care, teeth whitening products, fashion, etc.) to representations of the body (the white body, the gay body, the beautiful body, etc.). All of these references create a discourse around the body, which is commodified through a process of hegemony. This process is significant to the production of people’s identities, as the body and the mind are connected, and the body is a main site from which identity springs. Therefore it can be said that body modification is a way of shaping identity.

Plastic surgery, piercing, and tattooing are all practices of body modification that have been appropriated hegemonically by popular culture. These practices are negotiated through narratives of identity, and of the significance of the body itself. The film *Western Eyes* explores the practice of plastic surgery within popular culture and deals with the ways in which two women negotiate the discourses surrounding the practice. Tattooing and piercing are practices that mark the body in a different way than plastic surgery, and although they have been appropriated by popular culture, can still be discussed as important signifiers of identity and the body. Other more extreme practices, such as suspension, may completely resist the narratives of popular culture that surround the body. In any case, it is clear that body modification is a complex issue that entwines discourses of identity, the body, and popular culture.

The body underscores identity, and to modify the body is to negotiate in some way with identity. In some ways, identity changes depending on the context it stems from. It can be said that identity and place are mutually constructed. As every place is inextricably linked with culture, and popular culture is so pervasive, it is necessary that the formation of identity must negotiate within popular culture, and will be affected by it. There is evidence of this negotiation in the commercialization of bodies, which are produced hegemonically. Hegemony is a process whereby dominant values are exercised through a combination of consent and coercion, with consent being the operative term. Popular culture works in this way by presenting ideals of the dominant class (white, male, heterosexual) as having the highest cultural capital.

These ideals are problematic in that they are often impossible to attain, and are used as a measuring stick which people are marked against, creating groups of others who may not “measure up” to these ideals. Among the many problems that this creates is the construct of gender, and how important it is in signifying how one can relate to a body, which becomes problematic for identities who may not relate to their bodies in the expected ways. Eleanor MacDonald describes a paradox created by these ideals, saying that “gender is viewed as mutable and socially constructed while, in the same breath, it is contradictorily presented as a determined immutability by one’s assigned sex at birth and
It can be argued that the link between gender and the body can never be fully negotiated, as these discourses intersect and are changed by others, such as the effect of place on identity, which in turn affects things like gender and the body. This is a complex issue, but is useful in demonstrating the importance of the body to identity, and how practices like sexual reassignment surgery must negotiate with the body and identity and are also influenced by popular culture.

The body as linked to the mind is significant in that it means that the body symbolizes the mind through its actions, which shows how the body conceives itself in the space it inhabits. Identity is inscribed on the body, and this is significant in that the body is the first noticeable aspect of a person. It follows then that to modify the body is to modify how others see the body. This is problematic, however, and we must recognize that not everyone has the freedom to modify their body in the same ways, and that we modify our bodies within a patriarchal society that limits any form of body modification. As well, as established in the previous section, a person may not identify with the way in which their body is conceived by others. The recognition of mind and body as inseparable led to embodied subjectivity, which characterizes contemporary practices such as health and fitness regimes, and forms of body modification such as tattooing, piercing, and plastic surgery, which view work on the body as a means of self-enhancement (O’Brien and Szeman).

Plastic surgery is a practice used to change the body that has become common in the twenty-first century. There are many possible motivations behind plastic surgery, many of which are entangled with discourses of popular culture such as the ways in which the body is used to construct identity, and how bodies are commercialized in popular culture. Plastic surgery is an embodied subjectivity in that it is taking the ideals produced hegemonically in popular culture and trying to embody them. Embodiment inscribes the impact of these ideals on to our bodies. This is not necessarily an active process, and is most commonly found in the differences in gender comportment. Iris Marion Young describes comportment as a person’s “situation,” saying that “the particular existence of the female person is no less defined by the historical, cultural, social, and economic limits of her situation” (“Throwing Like a Girl,” 29). All of these forces combine to create a feminine comportment that is “frequently characterized, as in the throwing case, by a failure to make full use of the body’s spatial and lateral potentialities” (32). The throwing example that Young uses is an unconscious form of embodiment, whereas plastic surgery can be seen as an active form of embodiment, in that it is taking the ideals produced by popular culture and trying to inscribe them on the body. This idea is seen in its extremity in the case of Cindy Jackson, who had plastic surgery eighteen times in order to become a living version of Barbie (Urla and Swedlund, “The Anthropometry of Barbie,” 299).

Barbie is an example of a hyper-feminine body, which carries a “complex and contradictory set of possible meanings that take shape and mutate in a period marked by the growth of consumer society, intense debate over gender and racial relations, and changing notions of the body” (Urla and Swedlund, 278).
Urla goes on to say that Barbie “serves to crystallize some of the predicaments of femininity and feminine bodies in late-twentieth-century North America” (279), which shows the extent to which a product of popular culture like Barbie has an effect on the production of bodies-in this instance, on the female body. In this light, the practice of plastic surgery itself does reproduce hegemonic ideals of beauty, but it is the motivations and discourses surrounding plastic surgery (wanting to look like Barbie) that are problematic. These ideas are problematic because the ideals that inspire this form of body modification are nearly, if not completely, impossible to attain.

Ann Shin’s documentary *Western Eyes* is a film that presents the issues surrounding plastic surgery in all their complexity and is anything but one-sided. The film’s approach evokes the upbeat and trendy style of music videos and high fashion media, both of which espouse the importance of physical appearance (Tom Knuston). The film connects plastic surgery to popular culture, and opens the floor for discussion of how popular culture produces certain body images which people are very susceptible to. People are susceptible to wanting these types of bodies because the ideal that popular culture produces is so mythical that it is impossible to attain. Surrounding this narrative is the belief created by embodied subjectivity that if you look better, then you feel better, which is itself dependent on what constitutes “looking better.” Suffice to say that it includes subscribing to ideals of beauty that are commercialized in popular culture.

Such ideals provide the motivation for both of the women in *Western Eyes* to get plastic surgery. They have grown up in North America as the children of immigrants, painfully aware of their differences. Their otherness is constantly pointed out to them as children, and by their own mothers, who encouraged them to desire the beauty ideals of the status quo. What is especially troubling is that, post-surgery, one of the women seems to regret the procedure because it did not in fact make her “feel better” about herself. This points to how important the production of identity is for practices such as plastic surgery, which rely on selling consumers a lifestyle or identity. Again, the emphasis is that the body underscores identity, and body modification is therefore a part of negotiating with identity.

There are, of course, other types of body modification. Many of these are linked with subcultures such as punk, where, for example, it is common to see such modifications as piercings, tattoos, and mohawks. Although the subculture of punk and the practices of tattooing and piercing have largely been appropriated by popular culture (evident in the recent success of bands such as Green Day), they can still be important signifiers of an identity that is separate from the dominant ideals of popular culture. In some ways, these practices can be seen as a form of subversive consumption. As previously stated, bodies necessarily negotiate within popular culture, and popular culture hegemonically produces bodies through commodification-the buying and selling of identities. Therefore, some forms of body modification can be seen as subversive consumption since a product is being sold, which is linked to a practice, which is used to produce identity. That being said, such subversive practices are limited by many factors, including the fact that they must negotiate within a patriarchal
Any subculture, in a position of minority against popular culture, is often reacting to the dominance of popular culture, which can be seen as oppressive. Looking at a university campus, it is very common, and almost expected in contemporary times, to find students with lip, nose, tongue, and eyebrow piercings. The same can be said about tattoos—many people have them, and they are much more widely accepted today when compared to a decade ago.

I have both a tattoo and facial piercings (nose and lip), and have never encountered problems in terms of employment or overt discrimination. This is in large part because these practices have been hegemonically appropriated by popular culture, which makes piercings and tattoos seem less threatening. There are many possible motivations for getting a piercing or a tattoo, some of which can be considered subversive. For myself, my tattoo is an expression of my eternal love for music that I will never be able to express in words. This in itself points to the practice of tattooing as a way of signifying identity, because of the fact that the practice has meaning or motivation behind it.

If tattooing and piercing are practices that can be considered somewhat subversive, there are forms of body modification that completely reject popular culture’s production of mythical norms. I am thinking of suspension, which is the act of hanging the human body from (or partially from) hooks pierced through the flesh in various places around the body. Although the ultimate goal of suspension is not to alter the body per se, the practice does leave scars, and the body itself is the central focus of the practice. There are other practices, such as ritual scarring and cutting, that do involve extreme modifications to the body and which also deny the narratives of popular culture. Suspension is unique, however, in that it is experience-focused, and can therefore be useful in demonstrating this aspect of body modification. There can be many reasons for doing a suspension, among which is “the opportunity to discover a deeper sense of [self] and to challenge pre-determined belief systems which may not be true. [O]thers are looking for control over their body, or seeking to prove to themselves that they are more than their bodies, or not their bodies at all” (www.suspension.org). These motivations are illustrative of the presence of alternative narratives to the system of mythical norms used to sell identity in popular culture. Although this is an extreme form of body modification, and may have many different motivations than the ones listed here, it does give some insight into the various ways in which to view the body.

The practices themselves, varying from suspension to plastic surgery, illustrate how complex a topic body modification is. It is further complicated by the fact that bodies must negotiate within popular culture. These practices must be examined within their contexts in order to better understand them. Each individual person negotiates with plastic surgery differently, as each body is different and contains a unique personality. Although the narratives that are behind practices such as plastic surgery are problematic and seemingly all-pervasive, they can be disrupted by viewing the body in different ways.
Works Cited


Young, Iris Marion, On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005