

Implanting Empowerment?

A Discourse Analysis of Cosmetic Surgery and Power in *The Swan*

By  
Ashley Erin MacPherson

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Approved Dr Michele Byers  
Supervisor

Approved Dr Russell Westhaver  
Reader

Approved Dr Rachel Dubrofsky  
External

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## ABSTRACT

### IMPLANTING EMPOWERMENT? A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF COSMETIC SURGERY AND POWER IN *THE SWAN*

By

Ashley MacPherson

Saint Mary's University, 2011  
Under the supervision of Dr Michele Byers

Using the reality television show, *The Swan*, as a narrative frame, my Master's thesis explores the discursive construction of feminine subjectivity, empowerment, liberation, choice, self-esteem and resistance in the context of televised cosmetic surgery and "expert" makeovers from a feminist poststructuralist perspective. Reflecting on neoliberalism and feminist re-articulations of Foucault's theories of control and normalization, this research sought an understanding of how such televisual productions participate in the regulation of "feminine" bodies within the neoliberal context of self-care. A qualitative discourse analysis of the entire series has uncovered that *The Swan* reinforces a very specific ideal of femininity based almost solely on the physical body, while discursively constructing cosmetic surgery as a tool of empowerment and liberation, as well as a virtuous requisite for self-care.

March 25, 2011

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Although the sociological understanding of gender is one that can be distinguished from biological conceptions of male/female sex differences, it is undeniable that the formation and development of distinctly feminine and masculine identities is rooted in physiological sex differences and the physical body. In North American cultures, and a majority of cultures globally, those born with female genitals are classified, named, groomed, and socialized to have “feminine” characteristics, both of personality and physical body. In this thesis, I will focus on the regulation of female bodies through cultural definitions and discursive constructions of what it means to be “feminine” in contemporary neoliberal societies in light of the recent popularization and normalization of cosmetic surgery and an increased emphasis on self-care.

I have reviewed a wide array of theoretical literatures on feminism, power, neoliberalism, and substantive literatures on cosmetic surgery and popular culture (specifically reality television). What has sprung from my readings has left me with a question which forms the basis of this thesis: How does the recent phenomenon of cosmetic surgery reality television (hereafter CS-RTV) participate in the regulation of “feminine” bodies within a neoliberal context of self-care? Specifically, I will focus on one particular CS-RTV show, *The Swan*.

What I have determined is the following thesis statement which will be elucidated throughout this thesis: I have resolved that *The Swan* participates in the moral regulation of women and their bodies by reinforcing a very specific ideal of feminine corporeality, as well as through its discursive construction of cosmetic surgery as empowering, liberating, and as a virtuous requisite for self-care in a neoliberal context. In this thesis, I

define “discourse” to be the language we use in our everyday discussions and understandings of particular words, concepts and practices, and the concrete and abstract meanings attached to those words and concepts through the ways in which they are used. Thus, discursive constructions are the ideas and grand narratives associated with particular words as defined by a particular group, individual, or in this case, a TV show. Reference to a neoliberal context in this thesis refers generally to the contemporary pop cultural focus on consumption, commodification, self-care and self-improvement, and the notion that individual citizens have individual responsibility for their social, psychological, financial, physical and emotional success and outcomes through access to culturally defined “experts”.

In this thesis, I operate from a feminist poststructuralist perspective. Loosely, this perspective can be summarized by a concern for deconstructing relations of power which are differentiated on the basis of gender constructions and the misogynistic and patriarchal forms of subjectivity through which they are produced. The intricacies of this perspective will be more thoroughly hashed out in Chapter Three. In this thesis I define feminism based on bell hooks’ succinct definition “a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (2000: 1). Subjectivity, within this thesis, can be defined as modes of being, individual experience and a sense of selfhood. This concept will be discussed more theoretically later in the thesis. However, before going any further, I would like to provide a brief introduction to *The Swan*.

In 2004, the Fox Network released an RTV show called *The Swan* (2004-2005), on which women who were self-proclaimed “ugly ducklings” could undergo a series of radical cosmetic surgeries in order to transform themselves into beautiful “Swans.” These

women were represented, by the show, as suffering from depression and low self-esteem which had a negative impact on their lives in some way (most often on their love lives or their careers) The chosen women/participants were whisked away to a remote location where they agreed to a ban on all visual contact with their families and friends and were not allowed access to a mirror to “see” their progress for several months They underwent weeks, sometimes months, of rigorous physical training in a gym with a personal trainer, regimented diets and a whole slew of cosmetic procedures intended to fix everything from crooked smiles to jiggly thighs, all in an effort to look and feel more feminine, and thus, to end their suffering Eventually, the “Swans” were unveiled and reintroduced to their families and the women saw themselves for the first time since they began their transformation As the curtains drew back, the women often fell to their knees in astonished amazement at the first glimpse of their new bodies Most were brought to tears and many screamed with joy as they admired the finished result of their hard work and long recoveries from surgery As an audience member, it was often hard to hold back tears and secret inner desires to feel what the women on the show were feeling, to experience the sense of freedom and relief that was evident in the way they looked at themselves and the way they stood, so confident in their own bodies, for some of them, for the first time in their lives

Each episode featured two women After each woman was “revealed,” the two women were brought together with the host and one of the participants was selected to move on to the pageant round of the show At the end of each of the two seasons of *The Swan*, a beauty pageant took place featuring the “winners” of each episode The women were selected to participate in the pageant, according to the show, based on beauty, poise

and overall transformation. The pageant consisted of lingerie, swimsuit, and evening gown components, all modelled on a runway by the participants. The women were also asked questions about how the show and their transformations had affected their lives and their futures. Overall, the show left me, as a self-proclaimed feminist viewer, feeling a little conflicted. On one hand, I was drawn into, and in some cases overcome by the emotional displays of the woman participating. I could momentarily feel their “success” and the liberation and relief of feeling good about themselves, in those moments, I wanted in on it. On the other hand, I also felt defiant and resistant to all that was happening on the show, because, in the end, many of the women looked so eerily similar that I could not help but wonder if this was some sort of homogenizing television experiment led by plastic surgeons trying to boost their sales. I simply could not allow this conflict to continue between my heart and viscerally-felt emotions and my rational mind. I needed to pick it apart, to examine it and deconstruct it in order to both open up a critical space in which to move beyond an anti- vs pro- cosmetic surgery debate, and to better understand the war inside myself. This disconnection between my affective experience and my critical analysis was the motivation behind my sociological study of *The Swan*. The thesis that follows examines the results of a very personal, subjective intellectual endeavour. I chose *The Swan* specifically because it was all about women. While there were other CS-RTV shows to choose from, focussing on *The Swan* allowed me to look at a cohesive text and study how femininity and empowerment for women was portrayed in the context of CS-RTV. I also chose it because it was controversial. While it only lasted for two seasons, and most likely did not have good enough ratings for a third season, the show did create a lot of hype when it was airing. I remember the

water cooler discussions and expressions of shock from my peers who had seen the show I remember describing it as a “train wreck” when I first saw it tragic and horrific and yet too exciting and profane resist watching In fact, in 2009, Entertainment Weekly ranked it number one on their list of the “10 Worst Reality TV Shows Ever ”<sup>1</sup> Regardless of ratings, *The Swan* caught the attention of many and is still being talked about today

Following a theoretical and methodological discussion, as well as a review of the literature from which this thesis has blossomed, I will deconstruct *The Swan* from a feminist poststructuralist perspective In Chapter Four, I will look at the discursive constructions of feminine subjectivity constituted on *The Swan*, arguing that the discursively constructed options for selfhood offered to women on the show are limited through the use of hegemonic neoliberal discourses of the self and the mainstream conception of the ideal feminine body It is assumed, through the discourse of both the participants and the experts on the show that femininity is a very specific, tangible characteristic that is a requisite for achieving a successful and desirable selfhood for all women Thus, to embody one’s greatest potential self, women must gain access to more femininity, and this access is granted through the experts on the show

In Chapter Five, I will look at the specific discursive constructions of the concepts “empowerment, liberation, choice and self-esteem” on *The Swan*, and illustrate the ways in which *The Swan* contributes to historically-specific discursive constructions of these concepts as age-biased, embodied, gendered, raced, classed and sexually-oriented in many ways The brand of “empowerment” and “liberation” featured on *The Swan* alludes to the feminist formulation of the concepts as a sense of triumph over oppression However, the show contributes to an understanding of these concepts in a neoliberal

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.ew.com/ew/gallery/0,,20283069\\_20630364,00.html](http://www.ew.com/ew/gallery/0,,20283069_20630364,00.html)

society in which the power women gain through cosmetic surgery is very individualistic, the oppressor is painted as their own negative choices, inner voices, and inability to take care of themselves without expert intervention as opposed to an external Other. In order to be powerful, free and to have high self esteem, women must embody a very specific ideal of feminine beauty that is youthful, heterosexual, white, and upper middle class. The ideal of femininity explored in Chapter Four is also premised on these definitions.

In Chapter Six, I will look at the constructions of cosmetic surgery as a necessary tool of self-care and regulation of the female body from a Foucauldian perspective, and the ways in which participants of *The Swan*, although they may be empowered through their participation on the show, are also implicated in multiple and complex webs of power closely associated with the oppression and marginalization they wish to escape. Thus, in buying into the definitions of desirable feminine subjectivity offered on *The Swan*, the women participate in relations of power which marginalize and trivialize them, while simultaneously lifting them up by offering them some form of what has been produced – beauty and, subsequently, power.

It was difficult for me, as a woman, to witness the participants' reactions to themselves and their reflections upon their post-operative bodies without being somewhat moved by the emotional display in front of my eyes. I could not help but consider the potentially empowering and liberating effects cosmetic surgery could provide. I myself have struggled with weight. Through the course of this research project, I gained 50lbs, lost 20lbs, got pregnant, birthed a daughter and struggled with the many corporeal changes and challenges which that entailed. I witnessed my teenaged sister undergo a rhinoplasty and more notably the way in which her personality was transformed after her

physical change, and now the reemergence of new anxieties that the surgeon did not get it “quite right ” I contemplated a number of cosmetic procedures I could get for myself during the many hours I spent watching *The Swan* For me, the act of deconstructing the rhetorical discourses used on *The Swan* was itself an emancipatory practice It gave me a basis from which to understand that the emotions experienced by the women on the show, or more notably by myself when watching it, were real (and that is okay) While cosmetic surgery is not necessary to my survival and in my ideal immaterial non-superficial world it would need not exist in its current form, it does The reality in which we live is one in which cosmetic surgery is a real, viable, tangible option for men and women through which to solve physically tangible problems as defined by a neoliberal society of self-care, and the “perfection” of the human body

This thesis project is located within the field of Criminology, but many may wonder how, exactly, it fits within that field, as opposed to Sociology or Women’s Studies, for example The answer is simple This thesis looks at, deconstructs and builds upon understandings of power, resistance, and regulation All of these issues are topics of inquiry within criminological study I could explore these issues within the substantive topics of women in policing, corrections or crime prevention, but it has already been done Examining criminological concepts through a new lens (CS-RTV) only serves to build upon the field of Criminology and opens up new ways of looking at some of its core concepts Power and regulation are issues of Criminology whether they are accessed and studied through CS-RTV or Penology

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

In this review of the literature, I will look first at feminist discussions of and perspectives on cosmetic surgery, with a particular focus on choice, race, and the Foucauldian concept of normalization. I will then explore relevant literatures on reality television (RTV).

### **Cosmetic Surgery: Current Debates**

Chris Shilling, in his pivotal text, *The Body and Social Theory* (1993), argues that the body has been an absent presence or has had dual status in social theory. While interest in societies and the interaction of human bodies with social institutions has been a focus of social thought, it is only recently (since the early 1980's) that social theorists have taken up the physical body as a serious subject of inquiry in its own right. My thesis research project relies on Michel Foucault's conceptualization of the body as constituted by and constitutive of discourse and the site of the exercise of power in postmodern societies. My perspective aligns with what Shilling deems the "socially constructed body" (1993), and is only one of several ways in which social thinkers have theorized the body. The common thread in social theory of the body since the 1980's however, is a departure from Cartesian dualism, which figures the mind and body as completely separate entities and an incorporation of embodied social theory which acknowledges the mind-body connection, opening up a broader field of inquiry in all social scientific disciplines. This thesis situates itself within embodied social theories. It is within this context that I have explored cosmetic surgery literatures. This review of the literature will explore feminist perspectives on cosmetic surgery, as well as relevant literature on RTV, particularly that which focuses on lifestyle and make-over expertise, in order to open up

critical space around the topic of CS-RTV itself

First, it is important to locate and provide an overview of the recent works that have been written about cosmetic surgery, to ask, for example, how social thinkers conceive of cosmetic surgery in the contemporary context. Perhaps the most central debate in feminist literatures on cosmetic surgery addresses the ethical implications of cosmetic surgery, and revolves around the grand question of whether or not there is coercion involved in the “choice” to undergo cosmetic surgery. In a society in which there is significant value placed on aesthetic beauty, especially for women, is it possible for cosmetic surgery to be an empowering and liberatory experience for those who feel marginalized by the confines of their own flesh? Gagné and McGaughey (2002) would argue that there are two sides to this debate, characterised by what they distinguish as the “false consciousness” and “free choice” perspectives. According to those authors, while some feminists argue that women who “choose” cosmetic surgery do so under a system of false consciousness in which there is significant coercion involved, others argue that the choice to undergo cosmetic surgery is an empowering one that women make for themselves in order to exercise power over their own bodies. From my own perspective, both positions are overly simplistic and reductive, as are all positions which adhere to such a strict binary. However, in my research I did not find any feminist scholars who fit into Gagné and McGaughey’s second perspective, that is, those who argue that CS is a completely free choice. Typically those who represent this perspective are not involved in theoretical or scholarly debate on the topic and represent particular individual interests in a neoliberal, capitalist society, such as journalists, editors, political pundits and lobbyists.

Kathryn Pauly Morgan is one feminist scholar who argues that cosmetic surgery

is an oppressive practice which requires serious critical consideration. She offers an urgent call to feminist thinkers to take action and speak out against the cosmetic surgery industry, stating that “[i]n the face of a growing market and demand for surgical interventions in women’s bodies that can and do result in infection, bleeding, embolisms, pulmonary edema, facial nerve injury, unfavourable scar formation, skin loss, blindness, crippling and death, our silence becomes a culpable one” (2003 p 165). Morgan also argues that women’s participation in the cosmetic surgery industry can result in a number of contradictions, which she refers to as the “three paradoxes of choice” (p 169).

The first paradox Morgan discusses relates to what she believes to be women’s confusion between choice and conformity. Morgan points to research on cosmetic surgery and ethnicity, which has mostly concluded that a majority of cosmetic procedures undertaken by non-white, non-Anglo-Saxon women have been procedures which are intended to make them appear more “white” (Lakoff and Scherr, 1984, Kaw, 2003, Padmore, 1998, Schrank, 2007). From Jewish women undergoing rhinoplasty (nose jobs) to have more Aryan-looking noses (Schrank, 2007), to Asian women having their eyes Westernized and Black women trying to bleach their skin to lighten it, and using highly toxic and dangerous chemicals to straighten their hair, Morgan argues, that “[w]hat is being created in all of these instances is not simply beautiful bodies and faces, but white, Western, Anglo-Saxon bodies in a racist, anti-Semitic context” (2003 172).

According to Morgan, women’s experiences of objectification, through the media, social and cultural institutions, as well as by the individual men and women in their lives, have created a constant feeling that women are always being judged on the appearance of their bodies. Morgan points out that

A woman's makeup, dress, gestures, voice, degree of cleanliness, degree of muscularity, odours, degree of hirsuteness, vocabulary, hands, feet, skin, hair, and vulva can all be evaluated, regulated and disciplined in light of the hypothetical often- white male viewer and the male viewer present in the assessing gaze of other women (2003 172)

Thus, according to Morgan, to be a woman is to be constantly and concurrently in a state of judgement and being judged, all centring around one's body and physical, corporeal existence. As women we are being judged, and at the same time, are judging other women, based on the criteria and values of this elusive, alleged "male viewer"

Therefore, she argues, while women do ultimately make a choice to undergo cosmetic surgery, that choice is situated within the confines of a patriarchal and hierarchal society in which women's value and virtue is measured by how "hot" or beautiful they are

The second paradox of choice Morgan refers to is that the rhetoric surrounding women's motivations for undergoing cosmetic surgery is often that of liberation and self-care, however, according to Morgan, the transformation of the flesh is most often done in order to please others, both real and imagined. Morgan refers to this paradox as "liberation into colonization" (173). These assessing others, according to Morgan, are inextricably linked to a dominant culture which is racist, ageist, heterosexist, anti-Semitic, class-biased and male-supremacist. Morgan argues that,

[I]n electing to undergo cosmetic surgery, women appear to be protesting against the constraints of the 'given' in their embodied lives and seeking liberation from those constraints. [However], they are in danger of retreating and becoming more vulnerable, at that very level of embodiment, to those colonizing forms of power that may have motivated the protest in the first place. Moreover, in seeking independence, they can become even more dependent on male assessment and on the services of all those experts they initially bought to render them independent (2003 p 173)

Finally, Morgan expounds the third paradox of choice as "coerced voluntariness and the technological imperative" (174). She argues that individuals who seek to alter

their bodies through surgery typically spend a lot of time researching the desired procedures, and the doctor(s) they wish to perform them. She argues that because women who undergo cosmetic procedures tend to represent the epitome of the “rational chooser” in the zeitgeist of neoliberal consumerism, it is easy for most people to assume that there is no coercion involved in the choice to undergo such “elective” surgeries. According to Morgan, because these women are considered to be independent in their quest for truth and knowledge in seeking out a good surgeon, they are seen to exist outside of structures of power and subordination.

Neoliberal discourses construct subject/citizens as uncoerced individuals, separate from structures of power, free to choose and act as we please. According to Morgan, cosmetic surgery is sold as something one does as a rational consumer in order to better care for the self. However, she argues that the term “elective” creates, for surgeons and patients, a false distinction between cosmetic procedures and both necessary health related surgeries and bodily interventions which are involuntary and apparently “more pathologically transforming”, such as foot-binding and female genital mutilation. These procedures are, perhaps not coincidentally, also associated with the “developing world” which itself is associated in the Western/Northern world with a lack of civilization and democracy, and thus a lack of freedom. Morgan argues that the term “elective” performs a seductive role in facilitating the ideological camouflage of the *absence of choice*” (2003: 174, *emphasis in original*). She argues that the term “elective surgery” creates a powerful discursive distinction which very literally removes or significantly minimizes the possibility of coercion or regulation being associated with the practice of cosmetic surgery.

Morgan argues that there are two dynamics at work in women's decisions to undergo cosmetic surgery which diminish women's choices. The first is the pressure, in Western/Northern societies, to achieve perfection through technological intervention. According to Morgan, this pressure for perfection is perpetuated through mainstream media, advertising and popular culture in general and not restricted to the body and extends to many aspects of life, such as career, psychology, technology, home design and relationships. She argues that, within a neoliberal society, "normal" is no longer acceptable when it is possible, through technological advancements, to achieve "perfection." Morgan argues that in such societies, individuals are responsible for their own quest for perfection, and held accountable for any perceived failure to strive for success. One who accepts their flaws, potentially becomes labelled or thought of as lazy, irresponsible or less than self-sufficient in a neoliberal society. The second dynamic is the double-pathologizing of women's bodies through discursive constructions of cosmetic surgery as beneficial and sometimes necessary to women's well being, as well as something that all women could benefit from. Morgan warns that women's bodies have been represented by medical and biological experts as inferior to men's for centuries. However, women's bodies are further pathologized, she argues, in a culture which places so much emphasis on women's aesthetic "beauty" combined with the technological imperative to correct any imperfections.

As cosmetic surgery becomes increasingly normalized through the concept of the female 'make-over' that is translated into columns and articles in the print media or made into nationwide television shows directed at female viewers, as the 'success stories' are invited onto talk shows along with their 'makers,' and as surgically transformed women win the Miss America pageants, women who refuse to submit to the knives and the needles, to the anaesthetics and the bandages, will come to be seen as deviant in one way or another. Women who refuse to use these technologies are already becoming stigmatized as 'unliberated'

(175)

According to Morgan, this stigmatization of women who refuse to adhere to beauty regulations and to undergo cosmetic procedures is exercised through the discussion of these women in the media by experts

Culbertson (1999) also represents the “false consciousness” perspective. He argues that although women may seem to take an active role in the social construction of the self via cosmetic surgery, they are actually passive recipients of the desires and standards that men set in a male dominated society

R. Eugene Mellican (1995) argues that the concept of personal choice is tenuous when it comes to cosmetic surgery, speaking specifically of silicone breast implants. The focus of his study is on the way in which the American Society of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeons (hereafter known as ASPRS) neglects to locate the purely aesthetic work it does within the socio-cultural context in which it takes place. More specifically, Mellican argues that our recognition of the pleasurable effects that women may achieve by undergoing cosmetic surgery is but one small factor in the entire equation of cosmetic surgery that brings into question our understanding of medical practice as completely separate and unaffected by social norms and trends. The silicone breast implant controversy that took place in 1992 revealed a situation where, despite questions of their safety, both doctors and patients alike strongly petitioned the Food and Drug Administration (hereafter known as the FDA) in the United States to allow the use of silicone implants, even after they had been banned due to a series of severe complications that women who had had the implants were reporting. Capsular contracture (hardening of implants), inflammation, and systemic autoimmune symptoms and diseases, such as

scleroderma (hardening of skin), rheumatoid arthritis, lupus erythematosus (a disease in which the immune system attacks the heart, joints, skin, lungs, blood vessels, liver, kidneys, and nervous system), Raynaud's phenomenon (a vasospastic disorder which, in severe cases can progress to necrosis or gangrene), and Sjogren's syndrome (dryness of mouth and eyes due to immune system attacking the glands which produce saliva and tears), were all reported as complications caused by silicone breast implants (Mellican, 1995 p 11) According to Mellican,

the emotionally charged debate over the need, safety, and effectiveness of silicone breast implants sharply demonstrated how far health and illness go beyond merely physical, biological states to being so deeply embedded in, and determined by, culture-specific perceptions and values that they become essentially culturally constructed realities The diagnosis of small breasts as a 'disease' by the ASPRS is a clear illustration of this (1995 p 7)

In a society where medical experts label small breasts a disease or a deformity, it is very difficult, Mellican argues, to call women's decisions to undergo cosmetic surgery free choice Particularly with the controversy, uncertainty and corporate deception that took place surrounding breast implants, informed consent, according to Mellican, is an "empty concept" (1995 p 13)

Shapiro, Springen and Gordon (1992), in an article for *Newsweek* that was released around the same time that silicone breast implants were originally banned by the FDA, argue something quite similar to Mellican According to these authors, "[t]o 'choose' a procedure that may harden the breasts, result in loss of sensation, and introduce a range of serious health problems isn't a choice, it's a scripted response And it's worthy of the Stepford wives" (57)

Overall, those authors who represent the "false consciousness" perspective tend to understand power to be a zero-sum phenomenon Essentially, this perspective takes for

granted that when one group (in this case, men or medical experts) have power, another group (women or cosmetic surgery recipients) can not, or that there is a set amount of power up for grabs and that opposing groups are in conflict for it. Such hierarchical binaries oversimplify the complex nexus of power relations at play in the arena of cosmetic surgery.

***Cosmetic Surgery, Agency and “Free Choice”: A Both/And Perspective***

Kathy Davis is a feminist thinker who has sought to understand the ways in which cosmetic surgery is experienced by those who undergo it and has placed a significant focus on women’s agency. Although she agrees to some degree with what is often perceived to be the generalized feminist perspective on cosmetic surgery as a sort of pernicious horror committed on women’s bodies by the medical system, she is in disagreement with the tendency to describe women who undergo cosmetic surgery as cultural dupes, or deluded victims. In her pivotal text, *Reshaping the Female Body*, Davis (1995) interviewed women who had undergone, or were planning to undergo cosmetic surgery. Because her research was conducted in the Netherlands, where cosmetic surgery is included in the national health care system, it is relevant to mention that the women in the study represented a wide variety of ages, races and socioeconomic statuses. It is also relevant to mention that this study is 16 years old. Nevertheless, it is worthy of examination as it is a pivotal text upon which Davis has expanded more recently.

In her interviews, Davis heard many stories of pain and lifelong suffering. What she found was that women who undergo cosmetic surgery (or at least those involved in her study) were not actually seeking feminine perfection or beauty per se. Rather, they were seeking to feel normal and homogenous to the culturally-defined average woman.

Although Gagné and McGaughey (2002) argue that Davis' work embodies the "free choice" perspective, my interpretation of her text is different. Davis does make some interesting arguments about how, from the standpoint of women who choose it, the benefits that cosmetic surgery offers – allowing women who have struggled with their appearance to feel "normal" – outweigh the consequences of adhering to socially constructed, hegemonic standards and gender norms. However, two years later, Davis concludes that "cosmetic surgery is a complex dilemma: problem and solution, symptom of oppression and act of empowerment, all in one" (Davis, 1997, pg. 169). In 2002, Davis expanded further on this point when she argued that

[c]osmetic surgery cannot be understood as a matter of individual choice, nor is it an artifact of consumer culture which, in principle, affects us all. On the contrary, cosmetic surgery has to be situated in the context of how gender/power is exercised in late modern western culture. Cosmetic surgery belongs to a broad regime of technologies, practices and discourses, which define the female body as deficient and in need of constant transformation (Davis, 2002, p. 49)

Patricia Gagne and Deanna McGaughey (2002), in their study of women who have undergone elective mammoplasty (breast surgery including both augmentation and reduction), come to a similar conclusion, taking a dualistic approach to understanding cosmetic surgery and why people choose to do it is overly simplistic and thus, problematic. After reviewing what they deem to be two distinct feminist perspectives as outlined above, Gagné and McGaughey point out that both perspectives have two theoretical "threads" running through them which are more alike than they are different.

First, according to Gagné and McGaughey (2002), both perspectives work from a conventional understanding of power as a zero-sum phenomenon. In other words, their conceptions of power do not allow for multiple intersections – if one group has power,

the other has none, and vice versa. They argue that the “false consciousness” perspective gives all of the power to men and leaves women void of agency, while the “free choice” perspective gives power to women, but fails to locate “choice” in the existing and highly gendered power relations in which choices are made. “Both overlook the sites at which power is exercised, such as through self-perception, social interaction, the fashion industry, the media, and medicine, making both perspectives incomplete” (Gagné and McGaughey 2002 p 817). Second, both perspectives take a dualistic Cartesian approach that body theorists in general have struggled with – the idea of the mind and body as two separate entities. According to Gagné and McGaughey, both perspectives treat the human body as an object. “Both approaches perpetuate dualistic thinking by ignoring the constitutive role the body plays in forming thoughts, feelings, and actions, as well as the interaction between body and mind in the formation and experience of self” (817).

Gagné and McGaughey offer a synthesized approach to understanding cosmetic surgery as a “technology of the embodied self” which, in my opinion, is very similar to Davis’ later works which they do not critique (Davis, 1997, Davis, 2002). They interviewed fifteen (15) women who had undergone elective mammoplasty which had nothing to do with cancer or any other medical conditions. These surgeries were strictly cosmetic. They asked the women questions pertaining to how they felt about their breasts, their bodies and their motivations for elective mammoplasty. They discovered that most of the women whom they interviewed cited a combination of three main motivations for choosing the surgery, which they asserted to be liberating.

The first and most prominent reason given by the women in their study was that they felt as though their existing breasts did not accurately represent them. In particular,

women with small breasts felt as though they resembled young girls rather than women, those with large breasts, or breasts that were “saggy” after pregnancy, felt as though their breasts made them appear much older than they actually were or felt on the inside

The second reason given by the women for choosing mammoplasty was that they felt that they would increase their social opportunities if they had the breasts they desired. For example, some women stated that they would feel more confident in sexual encounters or in situations where they were required to interact with others (especially men) if they could present themselves as attractive women (which these women insisted required the “right” breasts). Finally, the women cited their own self-worth as a reason to have cosmetic surgery on their breasts. These women believed that giving themselves “better breasts” was something “nice they could do for themselves” (Gagne and McGaughey, 2002 p 821-826)

The authors go on to dissect various elements of hegemonic beauty culture which they see as having played a role in these women’s decisions to undergo cosmetic mammoplasty. They cite the media, the fashion industry, medical professionals (particularly those who specialize in cosmetic surgery), the “male gaze” and, perhaps most interestingly, the “female gaze” and regimes of beauty within female cultures as having had a prominent influence on the women in their study. According to the authors, the “female gaze” refers to the fact that many women exercise power and agency by “policing” other women within regimes of aesthetic beauty. However, like Morgan, they neglect to account for the fact that this power is not exercised by and over all women equally, and that it affects women and men in a multitude of ways based on religion, class, race, age, et cetera. Overall, Gagné and McGaughey (2002) conclude that “women

electing cosmetic mammoplasty exercise agency, but they do so within the confines of hegemonic gender norms” (835)

Catherine Padmore (1998) also argues for a “both/and” logic as opposed to an “either/or” position in the study of cosmetic surgery. She argues that the relationships and multiple intersections of power articulated by women for the various reasons they choose cosmetic surgery is simply too complex for a dualistic approach to account for. According to Padmore (1998), “this approach allows a critical analysis of certain practices in terms of the historical and social discourses within which they function while crediting the agency of the individuals involved” (p. 1). She argues that the fact that most cosmetic practices are “physically superficial,” in the sense that they are done to the surface of the body, does not discount the fact that they are “intimately connected to ontology in their symbolic social resonances” (p. 2). According to Padmore, the link between bodily practices and notions of identity is undeniable. Thus, seeing these procedures as purely superficial is in itself, as an approach, superficial. There is much more to Northern/Western women’s relationship to cosmetic surgery than the surface of the body.

### *Cosmetic Surgery and Race*

Padmore (1998) explores the notion of identity in relation to cosmetic surgery in her study which focussed on blepharoplasty (eye) operations which are typically used to remove signifiers of ethnicity. While it is important to discuss the pleasurable experiences that may come with cosmetic procedures after the incisions and bruises have healed, and to acknowledge the agency of the women involved, the fact that trends toward erasing ethnicity exist, according to Padmore (1998), is evidence of an issue that

goes far beyond individual free choice. She argues that, “[i]f decisions were free then the osmotic movement from ‘Occidental’ to ‘Oriental’ would travel both ways. The movement tends to flow only one way, suggesting that the choice is not evenly balanced, but heavily weighted in a particular direction [towards increasing the individual’s power] by culturally-specific discourses” (p. 35). One could argue that it is possible for a woman to have a pleasurable experience in making the decision to rid themselves of a racialized trait which has had an oppressive and marginalizing effect in their life, while acknowledging that such oppression and marginalization is based on deeply embedded social hierarchies within a colonial culture.

Eugenia Kaw (1997) also argues that cosmetic practices often have undertones of racial hierarchy. According to Kaw, “African Americans more often opt for lip and nasal reduction operations, Asian Americans more often choose to insert an implant on their nasal dorsum for a more prominent nose or undergo double-eyelid surgery” (243). Both of these trends represent a movement toward less ethnically-specific physical traits.

Padmore (1998) argues that “[s]uch actions do not remove racist, sexist, or ageist prejudices from society, they remove the object of that prejudice from society’s gaze. They erase the difference rather than the prejudice” (38). Thus, Padmore suggests that cosmetic practices may alter the appearance of individuals, but they do not change the society in which those individuals felt judged and motivated to undergo surgery to “correct” their appearance to fit social standards in the first place. Undergoing these procedures reinforces and reiterates the oppression of difference rather than disrupting it.

## Reality Television

A survey of the literature has revealed that, although significant attention has been paid, in recent years, to RTV and cosmetic surgery as separate fields of inquiry, very little social research focuses on CS-RTV. However, the small body of work that is available is very useful for this research which seeks to understand how discourses of empowerment and liberation are used in the *The Swan*, and how those discursive constructions participate in the social and moral regulation of women. Some interesting discussions of other forms of “lifestyle” RTV programming (such as cooking, style and decorating shows) offer several interesting insights and discussions of intervention, expert knowledge and self-transformation which can be applied to CS-RTV.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps one of the most illuminating works on RTV, for my purposes, is an article by Jack Bratich (2006) which explores RTV as a cultural form that illustrates Gilles Deleuze’s concept of control societies (a society in which individuals self-discipline). According to Bratich

[f]or Deleuze, the shift from disciplinary societies to control societies is marked by a change in the processes of subjectification. The ‘postindividual’ or ‘dividual’ is characterized by interchangeability, flexibility and mobility. On reality TV, subjects now become variables to be replaced, reversed, and transformed. (2006 p. 65)

Although the self is very important to each individual in each episode of series like *The Swan*, once their participation has finished, they are simply replaced by another individual who will then have a very similar formula applied to them, and so on. Thus, in CS-RTV, the “self” is stressed as being unique and yet, within the larger meta-narrative

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<sup>2</sup> It is also important to note that the RTV literature that is irrelevant to this research project will not be explored. For instance, a large portion of reality television literature focuses on “Caught on Tape” crime activities, and prank shows, which are theoretically irrelevant to the project at hand.

of each series, is indistinguishable from a host of other selves

When speaking of shows which feature intervention (in “issues” such as corporeal appearance, drug abuse, eating disorders and fashion faux pas), Bratich (2006) argues that RTV does not, despite what the name suggests, simply document real life, and in particular, these interventions in it. Rather, RTV shows act as collaborators which initiate and actually create a context for the intervention. This notion of creation and intervention is one that is important to the theorizing of many RTV shows. RTV, Bratich argues, is bigger than a genre. It is a “machine of pragmatics” in which the “truth” about reality is simply that it is malleable and changeable, and RTV has become a very important actor in initiating this change. In other words, he argues that the only “reality” or truth about RTV is that there is no such thing as “reality” outside of our interpretation of and involvement in it. The “truth” that we witness on RTV shows, then, is simply the truth that reality can be controlled, manipulated and even created. Within the context of RTV, what is real, so to speak, is our intervention into lives and moments, which creates something called reality. Thus, either our understanding of RTV as constitutive of “reality,” or our understanding of the term “reality” as constitutive of “truth,” must be problematized. While surgeons can create bodies which adhere to culturally defined standards of feminine beauty, there is no essential truth or innate measure of what feminine beauty should be, beyond that which has been culturally and discursively defined.

Dubrofsky (2007) argues that the events which take place on RTV shows are a constructed fiction. Perhaps, on TV, the only form of unadulterated representation occurs in the display of actions caught on hidden cameras, where individuals do not know that

they are being filmed, and thus, do not change their actions to accommodate being watched. However, even in such instances, there can be contrived elements based on the choices of where to place the cameras, the probability that the actors may assume they are being watched, situations which are set-up to illicit a particular reaction, as well as the editing and framing that surrounds the presentation of whatever was caught on tape to an audience (for instance, the selection of which events to show, as well as the discussion of those events by external narrators) and the way the event is interpreted by a variety of viewers.

Bratich (2006) calls attention to the importance of examining the genealogy of the term “reality” in order to better understand how what is being represented on television in RTV shows has come to be classified as “reality.” According to Bratich, the word “reality” comes from feudal times in which the “*res*” or “*rex*” (king) was given the power to define the ownership of land, the right of his subjects to live or die and the legitimacy of the *way* they lived their lives. “This etymological lineage means that reality has been less a matter of truth and veracity than about the authority and power to make things happen” (69). Reality can thus be understood in a very Orwellian sense, as the power to define how things are.

It is on the premise of his problematization of the term “reality” and its etymology that Bratich locates RTV as a technique in Deleuze’s control society. Bratich argues that RTV involves a process of “desubjectification” in which participants “learn to stop asserting themselves as isolated actors and begin to recognize themselves as variables and merge with the game” (73). This is certainly the case with CS-RTV series in which participants are often coached to “give in to the transformation” and allow the process to

happen “naturally.” While the women on *The Swan* may offer input in terms of constructing their stories of “suffering” (my nose is too big, I hate my thighs, I wish I had a smaller waist, etc.), ultimately, their transformative plan is dictated by the experts on the show, and many of these plans follow a very familiar format. Seldom does a participant necessitate a regime that differs from that of the other participants.

Many analysts have also placed RTV within the context of a surveillance society in which what was once considered private becomes a spectacle (Dubrofsky, 2006, Andrejevic, 2004, Lewis, 2007). This is certainly the case in CS-RTV, where very intimate, personal “problems” are aired on television and women who feel so insecure about their bodies that they are sometimes afraid to go out in public, stand nude in front of the camera while experts zoom in on their “problem areas” and discuss the many procedures necessary to fix them. However, according to both Dubrofsky (2007) and Andrejevic (2004), “giving in” to the surveillance of RTV shows is part of the therapeutics of the self that takes place in these shows. Dubrofsky explains the “therapeutics of the self” as arising from the intersection of RTV and the traditional notion of “the therapeutic,” which refers to both a desire to change and improve oneself and the imperative to affirm and accept oneself. The “therapeutics of the self” refers to a process by which RTV contestants or participants affirm “a consistent (unchanged) self across disparate social spaces, verified by surveillance” (Dubrofsky, 2007: 266). For Andrejevic (2004), surveillance is often coupled with self-expression on RTV. It is necessary to prove self-knowledge in order to be successful on RTV shows. He argues that “voluntary submission to comprehensive surveillance becomes a therapeutic experience” (86). Dubrofsky (2007) reminds us that therapeutic discourses encourage

individuals to focus on themselves and on creating change within themselves to become better people – a very neoliberal notion

RTV has also been tied to neoliberal governance through lifestyle programs (of which CS-RTV is a sub-genre) in that such shows provide instructions to both “actors” or participants, as well as the audience, encouraging self-responsibility, self-entrepreneurialism, and self-improvement (Bratich, 2006, Ouellette, 2004, Palmer, 2002) In fact, several authors have illustrated the relationship between the self-help movement in contemporary culture and the neo-liberal politics inherent in lifestyle RTV (Cruikshank, 1996, Ouellette, 2004, Rimke, 2000) According to Dubrofsky (2007) these authors suggest that “the self-help movement encourages people to learn to take care of themselves and behave as responsible citizens, to self-discipline” (p 17) Dubrofsky also points out that the work of Elayne Rapping (1996) draws important connections between the self-help movement and the women’s consciousness raising movement in the United States Rapping argues that the self-help movement borrowed the concept of “empowerment” from feminist discourse However, Rapping makes an important distinction while feminist discourses encourage women to seek social and political causes for their personal struggles so as to change society through activism, the self-help movement inherent in many lifestyle RTV shows encourages individuals to fix their personal problems on their own – to change themselves, rather than society (Dubrofsky, 2007 18) Thus, many of the transformations portrayed as necessary on RTV are those which involve the subject, the transformation of society is largely absent from the discourses presented here

Bratich (2006) focuses on the power of RTV to transform subjects, rendering

them malleable and providing a promise to viewers that they too can be transformed if they simply send in a video application and are selected by the show's producers

According to Bratich (2006), RTV is "best conceived as a performative phenomenon that captures, modifies, reorganizes and distributes powers of transformation"(p 67) The transformations that take place through RTV range from the mundane (such as rearranging someone's storage closet or updating their wardrobe) to the extreme (such as a full body makeover through cosmetic surgery, or transformation of "regular" people into celebrities), and the subjects involved in the transformations are given varying degrees of "power" over the transformation, depending on the show, sometimes they are a key player, and at other times they are given less agency, and must submit to "experts "

For example, in the case of *American Idol*, a singing and musical performance competition, contestants are often criticized on their musical stylings, wardrobe, and song choice However, these contestants are also guided by image consultants on what to wear, are regulated in the length of the songs they can sing, and must choose approved songs off of a defined list, which often adheres to a general weekly theme In the case of *The Swan*, contestants are given even less personal control and agency and adhere to strict dietary, exercise and surgical regimens under constant surveillance by experts Even their input into the specific procedures which they undergo is minimized by the experts' plans

According to Dubrofsky (2006) many reality TV shows operate within what she refers to as the "rhetoric of realism," by showing people who *seem* real doing things that *seem* real In her study of *The Bachelor*, she argues that the rhetoric of realism used in the series, "naturalizes the constructions of race and romance it promotes to its audience"

(41) Likewise, in the case of *The Swan*, or any CS-RTV show, this rhetoric of realism

naturalizes (or, in Foucauldian terms, “normalizes”) the particular constructions of beauty, femininity and corporeal existence that it promotes to the audience and participants. Dubrofsky (2006) and Stam (2000) both approach characters on RTV as “discursive constructions” and not “real” people. Thus, through the editing process, submission to “experts,” and the way participants are discussed and discuss themselves on the show, a fictional character who is constructed to represent the ideal of femininity-in-progress is created. This is the reordering of subjectification that Bratich refers to.

This rhetoric of realism goes hand in hand with the rhetoric of choice that Cressida Heyes (2007) argues is a strong element of CS-RTV. Dubrofsky (2006) argues that the show which is central to her research on RTV, *The Bachelor*, also “illustrates Probyn’s (1993) notion of ‘choiceosie,’ in which women making socially validated choices are represented as making choices independently based on individual motives (of their own volition, without social or economic pressure)” (45). In *The Bachelor*, the socially validated choice is “influenced by the racist harem structure of the series” (45). In *The Swan*, the socially validated choice is influenced by the sexist, objectifying structure of the series which posits “experts” as knowing more about the individual than the individual herself, and, in particular, male experts who appear to know more about femininity than the women they work on. These women are racialized as well as gendered, especially because the archetype constructed on *The Swan* has very stereotypically “white” features, even when the participants themselves are not white. They are heterosexualized in that a large part of the focus in the women’s stories is on them wanting to make their husbands proud, to look like they did when they got married, or to feel comfortable when having sex with a man. If single, being able to attract men is

constructed as a major goal in a participant's transformation. Also, all participants in CS-RTV are able bodied, and in the instances where there *are* less visible disabilities present, such as hearing loss, they are "corrected"

Dubrofsky points out that the paradigm of choice is often highlighted in RTV when participants are continuously reminded, on camera of course, that they are free to leave if ever they chose. For Dubrofsky (2006), "[t]his representation of choice fits with what Cloud (1996) calls 'the rhetoric of tokenism' a liberal notion of an autonomous individual, an individual free of oppression who is able to succeed should he or she have the necessary drive to do so. Oppression becomes personal suffering, and success is the result of individual accomplishment" (45). Like the neoliberal notions of self-discipline and self-care discussed above, CS-RTV, through discourse and representation, constructs individuals as ultimately responsible for their destinies. All change must come from within, and believing this is the only real choice participants have. Notions of political activism and external social explanations for personal suffering are absent (Cloud, 1996, Lubiano, 1997, Dubrofsky, 2006)

### ***CS-RTV and Normalization***

The normalizing trend within cosmetic surgery, the trend to produce bodies which represent a culturally specific, ideal female body, is analyzed by Cressida Heyes (2007) in her "Foucauldian feminist reading" of cosmetic surgery and CS-RTV makeovers. Focussing on the show *Extreme Makeover* (the first CS-RTV show that aired in 2002 on ABC), Heyes calls attention to the confluence of physical beauty, individual morality and character in depictions of cosmetic surgery. She argues that physical transformations in CS-RTV are always textually overshadowed by stories of psychological resolution and

individual self-discovery and affirmation, in which one alters their corporeal body to “match” the essential nature of who they are on the inside (p 17) Of course, this alleged essential nature is always a “better,” more virtuous, happier, successful person She argues that CS-RTV shows “offer a scripted narrative of ‘identity becoming’ in which the ordinary individual is aesthetically, dramatically and rapidly transformed, while also making over her life and coming to better embody the virtuous person she allegedly truly is” (p 17)

In Foucault’s own discussions of normalization he recognized that in all societies, structures of power (in this case a nexus of power involving the medical establishment, the advertising industry, mainstream media and consumer capitalism, among other factors) not only have the power to define what is considered “normal” within a particular society, but also to decide how to deal with those who do not conform Foucault argues that such power structures use knowledge to manipulate non-conformists either into conformity or into a marginalized position where conformity appears to be their best option for social gratification and survival (1978 177) This is arguably true in the case of CS-RTV Cosmetic surgeons are considered specialists, “experts” in the aesthetics of the body Such a privilege to define authoritative knowledge on the corporeal existence of regular individuals allows these surgeons to advertise and promote their businesses through CS-RTV, while being able to claim objectivity With the discursive construction of terms such as “feminine, beautiful, liberated, youthful, energetic, vibrant, happy and empowered” on CS-RTV as not only normal and desirable characteristics for a woman in our culture, but also as easily achievable through and intimately connected to cosmetic surgery, CS-RTV acts as a “normalizing” agent in the Foucauldian sense Those who do

not conform to the ideal female body (which, ironically, is rarely, if ever, attained without cosmetic assistance) can either choose to conform by prescribing to popular cosmetic practices, or can choose not to, but then, in many cases, be marginalized, “de-feminized” and often, socially disadvantaged because of that choice

Heyes applies the Foucauldian theoretical concept of normalization to the phenomenon of CS-RTV which will be further explored in *Chapter Three* of this project. However, for now it will be defined as the process “by which developmental standards for populations are deployed to measure and enforce conformity at the same time as they generate modes of individuality” (Heyes, 2007: 17). This concept is significant in that a majority of other works dealing with cosmetic surgery argue that, as a technological tool, cosmetic surgery offers individual choice while at the same time it reinforces stereotypical ideals of femininity.

Overall, Heyes argues that the representation of cosmetic surgery on CS-RTV – and the discourses used to discuss it – presents a picture of cosmetic surgery as a valuable tool for self-discovery and the actualization of one’s authentic self. According to Heyes (2007), CS-RTV focuses on the language of choice, empowerment and liberation without mention of the socio-cultural pressures which constrain the choice to undergo cosmetic surgery. While CS-RTV shows may highlight the teasing that took place in the childhood of an “ugly duckling,” discussions that follow often focus solely on the pain endured, or how “children can be so cruel.” Rarely, if ever, does the host or “expert” talk about why children are “cruel” or why we may focus on the body as a source of knowledge about individual worth. Echoing the arguments of Bordo (1998), Covino (2004) and Fraser (2003), Heyes asserts that “[t]he language of choosing cosmetic surgery “for oneself”

rather than for others is represented as an authentic and pure motivation that can be ontologically distinguished from social pressures” (2007 p 24) Heyes argues that the regime of normalization reflected in the current phenomenon of cosmetic surgery and CS-RTV minimizes the conformist aspects of bodily transformation and creates an image of women who choose cosmetic surgery as powerful, strong go-getters who take charge of their destinies and become eternally happy Accordingly, she argues that

[c]ontrol and self-determination are fetishized in this culture at the same time as we lack feminist contexts in which these qualities can find an alternative purchase With this deft inversion, a cultural product as manifestly conformist and disciplining as the TV makeover comes to embody feminism’s own values of autonomy and self-realization for women, while resistance to cosmetic surgery is tacitly rendered as a lack of character, and thus can be construed (like resistance to wearing make-up or high heels in an earlier feminist era) only as a failure to make the best of oneself (28)

### **CS-RTV and Postfeminism in Neoliberal Times**

According to Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer (2006), CS-RTV shows have been created within and are legitimated by the context of postfeminism They argue that

consumer post-feminism is often individualized and constructed as personal choice or individual equality, and thus is figured quite differently from a historical feminist emphasis on social change and liberation This is the feminism of reality makeover shows such as *The Swan* and *Extreme Makeover*, where a ‘celebration’ of the body, the pleasure of transformation and *individual* empowerment function as a justification for a renewed objectification of female bodies (257, *emphasis added*)

While cosmetic surgery may supply the women who use it with a solution to the problem that many women’s value is derived from their appearance, it only reinforces the particular prejudice and particular forms of exclusion that caused the problem in the first place In their comparison of CS-RTV with the Miss America pageant, Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer (2006) highlight the similarities between the way participants in beauty

pageants and CS-RTV shows perform liberal narratives much like those put forward by liberal feminists. They argue that participants both draw from and resist the mainstream feminist agenda. “Contestants perform liberal narratives about women’s rights, individual achievement, pluralism, self-determination, and voluntarism in a similar way and on similar grounds as liberal feminists who have articulated these very same narratives” (p 259)

Lewis (2007) argues that CS-RTV and more generally, “makeover culture” is a big trend in late modern society and that discourses of self-help and personal choice “operate as forms of neoliberal governmentality” (287). According to Lewis, the “reflexive individualism promised by makeover culture often involves a reinscription of ‘traditional’ forms of identity”(287). We never see women on *The Swan* choosing to have cosmetic surgery that makes them “unique.” Each of the participants on the show follow very similar regimes in order to “feminize” themselves, and all come out looking eerily similar. So while individuals may choose to appear on the show and follow its program, what is ‘new’ and individualistic about each participant is that he/she is changed to become “better” based on the standards of experts, which translates, ironically, into conformity and sameness being presented as “newness.” So, to be “better,” in the context of *The Swan* is to be less individualized and more like others, even though each choice must be made with the neoliberal discourse of the individual.

Lewis (2007) argues that *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* provides a good illustration of how “lifestyle consumption itself is not necessarily valued for its own sake, rather a particular kind of lifestyle connected to certain normative notions of identity is what is put on display throughout the makeover process” on RTV (p 302). Based on

personal observations of these types of shows, I would argue that this statement can be applied to *The Swan*, and other makeover RTV shows as well. Such RTV shows insist that living our lives by the standards portrayed as best, or even acceptable, by their experts will be the key to our happiness and success.

Lewis, borrowing from Becker (2005), argues that “[o]ur everyday lives [are] seen as a therapeutic self-help ‘project’ to be worked on while enterprising individuals are exhorted to ‘empower’ themselves by finding better and smarter ways of living” (2007: 287). To support this argument, she cites the emergence of a new type of expert – the “lifestyle expert” – in makeover RTV, as well as the emphasis on a reflexive, “do-it-yourself” understanding of identity in contemporary culture. She notes that “makeover television documents a shift to a conception of selfhood that is both individualized and self-managing at the same time as it is increasingly reliant on the figure of the lifestyle expert and associated forms of ‘everyday’ expertise” (287).

Lewis (2007) notes the manner in which, in makeover RTV, participants’ “problems” are broken down into smaller problem sets which are tackled by various experts. She argues that “the life and selfhood of the flawed individual at the centre of the show’s narrative is seen to be divided into sets of problems which are then targeted and solved by specific forms of expert knowledge” (p. 288). On *The Swan*, these different types of experts range from lifestyle coaches, personal trainers and psychological counsellors, to cosmetic dentists and surgeons. Lewis (2007) concludes that RTV, and in particular *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, “frames the makeover process in terms of an ethics of responsibility to self” (p. 303) and presents a definition of taste (the rough equivalent of beauty in the case of CS-RTV) that is intrinsic to the expert eye. According

to Nikolas Rose (1996), the discourse of endless self-shaping and transformation presented in makeover RTV encourages individuals (participants and viewers) to self-regulate and transform through the “neoliberal model of entrepreneurial identity” (in Lewis, 2007 p 306) via a “seductive ethics of the self” (Rose, 1996 153)

In the context of CS-RTV, authenticity is presented in terms of an intrinsic essence – something that resides within flawed, unfeminine women which requires radical exterior transformation in order to make visible and tangible According to Heyes (2007)

These shows exploit fantasy narratives of radical transformation, and make clever use of normalization’s language of identity, within which an outer self must be brought into line with an inner truth An authentic personality of great moral beauty must be brought out of the body that fails adequately to reflect it Thus, in this context, cosmetic surgery is less about becoming beautiful, and more about becoming oneself (p 21)

A similar argument is put forth by Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer (2006), when they point out that Foucault’s notion of the docile body – a body willing to be disciplined – is present in the participants of CS-RTV “as they willingly and emotionally surrender their bodies to cosmetic surgeons ready to coax the ‘authentic’ beautiful self out of the ‘old’ body” (p 261)

But what exactly is “authentic feminine beauty”? According to many theorists, there is only one prototype Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer (2006) argue that CS-RTV shows are “premised on the notion that in order to lead a rewarding, fulfilling psychological and personal life, the cost is nothing less than a perfect, medically enhanced body firm breasts and buttocks, no cellulite, white sparkling teeth, beautiful healthy hair” (261) All of these physical characteristics are presumed, within the discourses of CS-RTV, to signify a type of “natural” feminine beauty that all women

have (whether it is visible on the surface of the body, or hidden under signifiers of unhealthy choices, such as bulging waist lines and crooked teeth)

Heyes (2007) points out that these shows also tend to ignore economic motivations for wishing to undergo cosmetic surgery because doing so may attract critical attention by politicizing the narratives presented, “raising the spectre of sexist and ageist [heterosexist, racist and class-biased] discrimination that the show represses” (p 25) She argues that the fairytale is a very useful heuristic device for these shows because the phantasmic nature of the characters also functions to draw attention away from the “political messiness” that is actually tied up in real-life cosmetic transformation Overall, Heyes (2007) argues that critical commentary is absented from CS-RTV According to Heyes

To think that surgery might be too risky, to decide to plow on in and through one’s ordinary vulnerability, to be satisfied with imperfection, or to act as if one’s bodily flaws do not signal flaws of character are all, in the perverse language of these televisual narratives, rejections of one’s individuality never has the term ‘reality TV’ seemed like more of a misnomer (29)

According to Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer (2006), the political messiness that Heyes refers to as missing from CS-RTV goes back to the paradox of choice revealed in my earlier discussion of cosmetic surgery in general They argue that

In makeover shows, using a reframed rhetoric of individual choice, technological transformation, and celebration of the body, the individual women featured claim to be freeing themselves of their earlier lives In fact, what is happening is a more intense policing of the body, a body that is ever more docile as it is literally reshaped according to a set of dominant norms (263)

While this is observable in CS-RTV to the critical viewer, as the post-operative women all emerge with eerily similar appearance having undergone many similar procedures by the same doctors, this point is never acknowledged by the show itself – and why would it

be? Afterall, it is not the business of show business to critique itself

As the “reality” transformation process is repeatedly shown in consecutive episodes, and across a wide range of shows, cosmetic surgery can become intricately woven into the definitions, and symbolic representations of women’s empowerment and self-actualization in our culture, and not only cosmetic surgery, but a very particular representation of cosmetic surgery as put forth on CS-RTV shows. If, according to the literature on RTV, experts are given legitimacy to define our subjecthood, then the definitions they put forth require deconstruction and study. If we understand ourselves in part through televisual portrayals of other “selves” and our connection to them as regular individuals, and understand their experiences as “reality,” then surely we must study that reality which experts and participants of RTV are writing from a regulatory perspective. My review of the literature on RTV as well as that of cosmetic surgery has thus led me to the questions which guide this research. How does CS-RTV participate in the regulation of “feminine” bodies within a neoliberal context of self-care? How do CS-RTV shows with their particular focus on female bodies and femininity regulate and define for women the goals toward which they are supposed to work and for the achievement of which they are responsible? If cosmetic surgeons have the power to define femininity, then how do their definitions affect me as a woman? What implications do these normalizing definitions of femininity and power have for the way I am expected to conduct my life?

What I have discovered through several years of research and contemplation is that *The Swan* participates in the moral regulation of women and their bodies by reinforcing a very specific ideal of feminine corporeality, as well as through its discursive

construction of cosmetic surgery as empowering, liberating, and as a virtuous requisite  
for self-care in a neoliberal context

### **Chapter 3: Theory and Methods**

This chapter provides an in-depth discussion of the theoretical framework for this thesis project – feminist poststructuralism – as well as the methodological approach inherent in that framework and the research methods I used to study *The Swan*. I begin with a discussion of neoliberalism, feminism and poststructuralism generally, and then move deeper into a discussion of feminist poststructuralism and Michael Foucault’s theories of discourse and power which I have found to be relevant to this project. I will then discuss the methodological approach and research method used in this project—discourse analysis.

#### **Neoliberalism**

I begin with a discussion of neoliberalism to set the stage for the socio-political context in which this research takes place. As will be illustrated later in the chapter, it is very important, from a poststructuralist perspective, to locate all theoretical endeavours in the specific social and historical locations in which they occur.

Neoliberalism is a broad socio-political term meant to denote the rise of the “new right.” According to Jary and Jary (2000), “new right” is a “term applied to a range of ideologies and groups which aim to promote free-market, anti-welfarist, libertarian, and paradoxically sometimes socially authoritarian policies” (416). According to Brown (2006), neoliberalism can be characterized by a market-political rationality. The liberalism in neoliberalism refers solely to economic liberalism rather than political liberalism, and it “depicts free markets, free trade, and entrepreneurial rationality as *achieved and normative*” (p. 694, *emphasis in original*). Despite its central focus on the market and economic life, however, neoliberalism reaches into other spheres of social

life For the purposes of this research project, perhaps the most important elements of neoliberalism are its policies, which

figure and produce citizens as individual entrepreneurs and consumers whose moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for “self-care”– their ability to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions, whether as welfare recipients, medical patients, consumers of pharmaceuticals, university students, or workers in ephemeral occupations (Brown, 2006 694)

The main focus of neoliberalism, then, at least for my purposes, is the individualistic approach to social life that it endorses, making individuals responsible for their own progress and success Civilian accountability rests solely on one’s individual capacity to care for oneself and transform/conform to meet specific socially defined standards of value

According to Brown (2006), neoliberalism participates in and generates a process of de-democratization of its citizens through four main tenants which are as follows

the devaluation of political autonomy, the transformation of political problems into individual problems with market solutions, the production of the consumer-citizen as available to a heavy degree of governance and authority, and, the legitimation of statism (703)

Brown (2006) argues that private autonomy supersedes and replaces political autonomy in a neoliberal context, reducing political action to another consumer choice based on personal or private interests No longer is political participation and input considered the practice of citizenship To partake in democracy in neoliberalism is to choose which products and services best serve one’s own interests Problems once considered political are privatized and a slew of market solutions are provided to solve them Brown provides an example of the use of bottled water as a solution to the political problem of contaminated water tables (p 705) In the case of CS-RTV, the once political issue of

body image and objectification and exploitation of female bodies is shown to be resolvable through cosmetic surgery. In a neoliberal context such as the time in which *The Swan* and other CS-RTV shows have been produced, choice and governmentality go hand-in-hand. Neoliberal preoccupation with choice and the satisfaction of individual needs within a consumer market economy creates a situation in which individual exercise of choice (deciding which brand of deodorant to buy, or which size and type of implants to get) implicates neoliberal citizens in the process of being governed. Thus, if the object of our choices is the market, then the market has the power to dictate our range of possibilities on many levels. Finally, Brown argues that neoliberalism paves the way for statist legitimation of action based on the principle of good management under a market model – effectivity and/or profitability. In the case of CS-RTV, cosmetic surgery is legitimated based simply on the rationalization that “it works” – the practice of cosmetic surgery produces characters who fit the ideal of femininity.

### **Postfeminism**

Kim (2001) describes three approaches to defining and understanding postfeminism. The first approach is to simply define postfeminism temporally, in terms of the present context, marking it as beginning in the 1980's with the transition from second wave feminism to third wave feminism. The second approach is to define it as a backlash against feminism beginning with the idea that women have achieved equality with men and that there is no longer a need for feminism. The third and final approach is to define postfeminism in terms of the wider anti-foundationalist movement in social thought (along with postmodernism, poststructuralism, etc.) – in other words, to see postfeminism as a feminism that moves beyond strict binaries and the explanation of

“women’s problems” based on hierarchical systems

What Kim (2001) regards as the third approach to postfeminism is akin to what I call feminist poststructuralism. However, I feel feminist poststructuralism should not to be confused with postfeminism. Postfeminism has rarely, if ever, been considered a critical school of feminist thought. Like Kim, I am working from the second understanding of postfeminism, seeing it as a backlash against all forms of feminism, it presumes that women have fought and won their battles and no longer need to mobilize to action. In my understanding, postfeminism is a cultural phenomenon, it is, in a sense, more of a lovechild of neoliberal ideologies and the backlash against mainstream conceptions of feminism than a theoretical or socio-political perspective (Kim, 2001). Postfeminism is rooted in the idea that equality for women has been achieved (now that some white women are common players in the workplace and hold prestigious positions of power) and that “feminism” as a political movement, is no longer necessary. It is a way of speaking about issues typically associated with “feminism” from a position that appears to be feminist, without actually being so, it is the use of terms such as “empowerment” to exploit and objectify female subjects, or actively undercut gains achieved for broad (rather than elite) groups of women by various forms of feminism. Postfeminism employs emancipatory language strategically to undercut emancipatory gains.

Postfeminism is intimately connected to neoliberalism in the sense that both discourses imply that individuals should be reflexive in monitoring their own behaviour, should focus on themselves as individuals instead of as collective political actors, and argue that being responsible for these tasks is a requirement for successful, happy and

meaningful lives. Problems once located in the political realm are individualized and thus, depoliticized and dehistoricized. Postfeminism and neoliberalism are examples of the types of morally and socially regulating discourses that I will be looking for in my research.

### **Poststructuralism**

According to Best and Kellner (1991), the most significant developments in postmodern theory occurred in France, stemming from a drive to explain the tumultuous changes that took place in that country after WWII. According to Westhaver (1996), older theories which characterised European thought were falling short in their ability to account for the large-scale changes taking place in France at the time, and these were replaced by “linguistic theories which advanced new ideas around language, meaning and subjectivity” (p. 107). Among these was structuralism, which sought an objective, scientific approach to understanding the rules and structures that make up social systems. According to Westhaver (1996), in structuralism, “[t]he subject, the thinking human, was not the cause of the ways in which society was organized, rather, the thinking and conscious human was the effect of universal structures” (p. 107). This conception is problematic, most importantly because the idea of a reified, universal structure fails to acknowledge the necessity of individual actors to legitimate it.

Poststructuralism developed largely as a reaction against the emphasis within structuralism on objectivity and the desire for a universal, scientific approach to understanding social systems. According to Westhaver (2006)

[w]hat poststructuralism brought to the study of social phenomena was an awareness of the importance of the historical, political and everyday lived contexts of the constitution of the subject – dimensions often erased by the universals of structuralist theory. Unlike the structuralists, poststructuralists like

Derrida and Foucault gave primacy to the signifier over the signified, suggesting that language and the meanings to which language referred, are dynamic and changing (108)

Proponents of poststructuralism argue, much like structuralists actually, that language is an abstract system of signs whose meanings are arbitrary. However, while structuralists argue that signs have meanings based on the contexts in which they are developed, poststructuralists would argue that the meaning of signs comes from the interpretive discursive schema attached to them by individuals. On an individual level, interpretive discursive schema refer to the webs of understanding we each have surrounding particular discourses—the mode by which we interpret and understand incoming information in relation to what we already know about the subject and the implications, connotations and interpretations attached to it, based on our individual experience. According to Westhaver (1996), “[b]ecause the meanings of experience are not an effect of an objective reality, but are the effect of a variety of discourses, those meanings and their effects are open to change and negotiation” (107). Thus, because meanings are an effect of the interpretive discursive schema attached to them by individuals, there is a subjective element to the process of discursive constructions, making meanings of signs unfixed and open to change.

Perhaps the two most important concepts which I take from poststructuralism are discourse and subjectivity. It is important to note the intricate connections between these two concepts, because from this perspective, as already mentioned, individuals are seen to be discursively constituted. While subjectivity refers to an individual’s sense of self, this sense of self is understood to be in constant flux, as multiple discourses intersect at the site of the subject. These discourses, in effect, alter or contribute to the definition or

understanding of the individual self, and contribute to the formation of individual subjectivities

### **Feminist Poststructuralism**

One thing that some forms of feminism and poststructuralism share is the challenge of the universality of metanarratives. Feminist poststructuralism is concerned with deconstructing grand metanarratives of gender which suggest, for instance, that gender could be universally experienced and understood. Feminist poststructuralism aims to deconstruct apparently stable categories of femininity and womanhood. Although not a particularly hospitable thinker according to some feminists, psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan does spell out the importance of a non-dualist approach to gender and femininity/masculinity. Valerie Bryson argues that, "[a]ccording to Lacan and his followers the terms 'woman' and 'man' are not unified or stable categories, to treat them as such is to forget that all women and men have different (and ever-changing) subjectivities and that the categories are linguistically constructed rather than biologically given" (2003: 235). This understanding is central to the feminist poststructuralist position I am operating from.

The concept of subjectivity is used extensively in feminist poststructuralist work, particularly in the literature which focuses on the corporeal body. Subjectivity refers to individual experience, privileging each individual experience as valuable in its own right, the exemption of which renders the study of the social world incomplete and problematic. For Chris Weedon (1987), subjectivity refers to "the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world" (p. 32). This is not to argue that every individual has a knowable,

true, authentic self that can and should be discovered. Rather, Weedon is referring to the importance and validity of locating oneself for the purpose of research, of speaking from the position of one's own knowledge and experiences, while also recognizing that this knowledge is always partial, shifting and contingent. According to Weedon (1987 in Westhaver, 1996)

Feminism, in all its forms, and poststructuralism, share a concern with subjectivity. The recent feminist movement began with the politics of the personal, challenging the unified apparently ungendered individual of liberalism and suggesting that, in its gender blindness, liberal-humanism masks structures of male privilege and domination. Poststructuralism, too, has been anxious to deconstruct the liberal-humanist subject in order to theorize how meanings are produced, how they are effective, why they conflict and how they change (p 40)

Thus, some forms of feminism and poststructuralism fit together quite nicely in their pursuit of ways of understanding subjectivity through the deconstruction of the individualism associated with neoliberal ideologies, most of which have been promoted by individuals and groups who enjoy enormous privilege within existing social hierarchies. It is important to note here that this may not be the case for all forms of feminism or all forms of poststructuralism, as the meanings of both are highly contested, both internally and externally. However, Weedon summarizes the goals of feminist poststructuralist work which coincides with my project quite succinctly when she says that feminist poststructuralism is concerned with deconstructing "patriarchal power relations, showing how they function, both institutionally and individually, through the production of patriarchal forms of subjectivity" (1997: 171). The concept of "patriarchy" is not used as a stable, unified category, but is seen, rather, as a discursively constructed everyday practice representing a hierarchical privileging of male power.

While notions of empowerment, liberation, and most prominently, choice are all

common threads within neoliberal and postfeminist discourses, this is not their original source. Rather, they have been taken up by these discursive regimes, in large part because of the meanings already attached to them, and they have been used in ways which suit the interests of those with power. The terms “empowerment,” “liberation,” and “choice” have contested histories and their meanings have never been unified or cohesive in mainstream culture. However, although it would be a difficult task to locate the original usages of these terms, “empowerment,” “liberation,” and “choice” have long been associated and discursively paired with feminist movements, and thus possess a general connotation of being innately “good” for women. Through postfeminist and neoliberal lenses, these concepts have been resignified, their meanings have been somewhat reordered. Liberal feminists – those whose aim is to gain economic equality with men within the existing social order – have used the term “empowerment” to refer to women gaining power to overcome obstacles as a means to success in the endeavour for equality. In a neoliberal context, CS-RTV shows directly participate in the defining of cosmetic surgery as a legitimate and sensible means through which women can “empower” themselves. This discursive construction of empowerment is based on overcoming the obstacle of a non-feminine body to gain power in a society which hierarchically orders women based on their physical appearance, and thus leaves a society which objectifies and disempowers women intact. *The Swan* uses the notion of empowerment, without acknowledging the complex power relations and the government and regulation of women’s bodies inherent in the practice of cosmetic surgery in a neoliberal context. Thus, the idea of empowerment as a means to gain equality for women in general is replaced by an understanding of empowerment as a means to find higher standing in the hierarchy of

women as defined and reinforced by male experts

### **Feminist Rearticulations of Foucault: Discourse, Normalization and Docile Bodies**

Feminist rearticulations of Foucault's theory of language and social power form the basis of the feminist poststructuralist perspective of this research through their dispute of universality (and insistence on the plurality of meaning) and in their emphasis on the discursive nature of subjectivity

For Foucault, discourses are means of constituting knowledge. The way we speak about things, the social practices that surround them, the forms of subjectivity they inhere and the power relations they entail, all provide knowledge to individuals about what can be understood as "reality." Feminist interpretations of Foucault posit that power is not centralized or reducible to a single source, but, rather, that power is a relation which inheres in the material discursive practices of everyday life. For Foucault, discourses create modes or forms of subjectivity which play into relations of power. Discourses constitute subjectivities, and it is through subjectivity that individuals are consensually regulated in discourse. As individuals repeatedly identify with particular subject positions within different discourses, those discourses define individual identities and the pleasures that may be derived from them (Weedon, 1997: 109)

Reflecting on Foucault, Weedon (1997) argues that "the most powerful discourses in our society have firm institutional bases, in the law, for example, or in medicine"

(105) That is why it is important to critically examine medical discourses of empowerment-via-cosmetic surgery, such as those on *The Swan*, and to deconstruct them as I do in this thesis. The association of empowerment, choice and liberation, for women, with cosmetic surgery, is legitimated and made powerful through CS-RTV discourses

constructed by those labelled as medical experts

Foucault's theory of discourse places significant value on historical specificity. For Foucault, one can not theorize of anything without first locating that subject in a specific social and historical moment. In the case of CS-RTV, that historical moment is characterized by neoliberalism, postfeminism and consumer capitalism – all of which are apparent in the discourses of *The Swan*.

Perhaps it is not surprising, taking my theoretical perspective and research questions into account, that the methodological approach to this project is discourse analysis. The particularities of this characteristically poststructural method will be expanded upon below. However, I will start by discussing several key concepts which are crucial to my research method in this project.

First of all, my methodological approach takes for granted the idea that “meaning can never be ultimately fixed, and this opens up the way for constant social struggles about definitions of society and identity, with resulting social effects” (Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002: 24). In other words, in discourse analysis, as in poststructural theories of discourse, objects, linguistic constructions, texts and symbols are all assumed to have meaning within a society or culture, however, because they are represented by various discourses, the meanings attached to them are in constant flux or conflict as they are “taken up” by various individuals and groups. At the most basic level, discourse analysis is the examination of various meanings of particular words and the different ways they are used by different groups in particular moments.

For Laclau and Mouffe (1985), the aim of discourse analysis is to deconstruct the ways in which meanings are defined, how they are contested, and how some meanings

become so conventionalized that they come to be seen as natural and fixed. Theoretical models of discourse analysis suggest that researchers should focus on particular examples of articulations of meaning, in order to understand the types of meanings they establish, through the positioning of elements in relation to other elements, and identifying the meaning potentials that are excluded through this process (Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002: 29). In other words, informing the research method in this project is an interest in how specific discursive constructions of concepts are related to dynamics of power, and how discourses, in general, constitute and are constituted by the particular societies or cultures in which they are used. Weedon argues that poststructuralism “suggests that history writing is a site of struggle over meaning which has important implications for how we understand the present and the possibilities for change open to us” (1997: 171). Since RTV participates in the writing of modern history, it is illuminating to examine the discourses involved in it, in order to better understand the implications such discursive constructions have for mainstream understandings of how power is defined for women.

I have selected *The Swan* as my source of data for four basic reasons. First is the fact that it is available in its entirety in a DVD box set, so it is possible to take a comprehensive, in-depth look at the whole series with unlimited access to every episode. Second, *The Swan* was, in my view, one of the most controversial RTV shows as it is explicitly sexist (restricted to women) and thus provides more data to shine a brighter light on the power of CS-RTV to define femininity. *The Swan* is unique among other CS-RTV shows in that it is focused exclusively on women.<sup>3</sup> Finally, *The Swan* is also unique when compared to other CS-RTV shows because its competitive element adds

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<sup>3</sup> Although, I will argue that *The Swan* excludes women along many axes other than sex/gender, such as age, race, class, etc.

another dimension to the analysis that can be performed. The competition is one element that I find particularly interesting from a feminist poststructuralist perspective because not only does this show have the potential to minimize plurality through assimilatory surgery, but, in the end, contestants and viewers are still left with a dichotomous distinction between winner and loser – those who are beautiful (those who best fit the model of normative feminine beauty that is literally constructed by the experts on the show) and those who do not quite make the cut, and finally, the one who is “most beautiful” (as a canvas) and is crowned “The Swan”

I purchased the entire series of *The Swan* on DVD. This includes two seasons, with each season consisting of the transformations of 16 different women, 9 of whom are selected to go on to the “Swan Pageant” in each season. I spent many hours watching, rewinding, rewatching, transcribing, and analyzing this show. I experienced a range of emotions from disgust, anger, envy and annoyance to love and jubilation. I laughed and cried and had many intellectual discussions with my friends and family on the matter. The following is a detailed account of how, exactly, I conducted my research.

I initially sat down with my TV and DVD player, got comfortable and, on my own, simply watched the entire series, one episode after the other, with breaks every so often. This process took me five days (with four discs approximately 225 minutes each, that’s a solid 15 hours worth of *The Swan* to examine). Through the first viewing, despite my scholarly instincts to start writing and analyzing, I restrained myself to simply watch, unabated by critical endeavours. However, I would be lying if I were to say that some themes did not begin to emerge, I just did not write them down at this stage. This process was a journey of its own and it was primarily in this viewing that I experienced the gamut

of affect which intrigued my later analysis and conclusions

The second time I watched *The Swan*, I sat down with a notepad and pen and allowed myself to sketch out some of the themes that emerged. My aim was to compile a list of concepts used in the show which contributed to neoliberal and postfeminist discourses of feminine self-care. What I found was that “feminization,” feminine and femininity were, perhaps, the most prevalent in the entire series. I also found that empowerment and liberation, although not explicitly labelled as such emerged as themes, particularly in the ways in which the women’s stories and their psychological transformations were presented. Self-esteem, of course was another prevalent theme, also presented as an outcome of the women’s transformations. Finally, the notion of choice emerged as another theme and stuck out to me in instances where women opted to go against the expert-provided plans and “broke the mold”, so to speak. Out of these themes, I compiled a table, with the heading of each column corresponding to one of these themes.

Armed with a laptop and this table, I then watched the entire series a third time. This time I focussed solely on the discourse. I spent a lot of time pausing, and typing, and rewinding and replaying segments and transcribing quotes from the participants, the experts, the host and the narrator. I also jotted summary notes of particular scenes which demonstrated the themes I was now looking for. Instances of the use of the identified themes were tracked. I then reviewed my data and pulled out specific moments to focus on which I determined to be representative of the major themes of the show. For instance, quotes which clearly demonstrated the experts’ use of the term “feminization” that allowed a reader who has not seen the show to comprehend the way in which the term

was used were highlighted for direct use in the thesis. During this viewing, I also compiled an inventory of procedures based on each woman's "plan" so that I could come back and analyse any trends. I kept a complete list of any surgical procedures, as well as diet, fitness and dentistry plans for each participant.

Finally, I watched the series a fourth and final time, to ensure that I did not miss anything important to my analysis. During this viewing, I focused on how it felt to observe *The Swan*, as a viewer and as a critical social scientist, and began the long and enduring process of attempting to resolve the conflicts I was having inside of myself, as a woman living in a body that has never seemed to fit right, and one who self-identifies as a feminist and would never allow myself to ever resort to surgical intervention to feel beautiful. This dissonance between affective experience and critical analysis was something I was aware of going into the project, however, this dissonance grew more complex through my immersion in the discourses of *The Swan*. Overall, this research project involved an ongoing reflexive process as I watched the entire series several times.

There were many themes employed on *The Swan* (such as "feminization") which were assumed to be stably defined and finite. This method of watching the series several times allowed me to keep track of and analyze the discursive context in which key themes were being employed. I learned much about what empowerment and choice mean in a neoliberal context by examining the specific moments in which themes such as "feminization," empowerment, and choice were discursively constructed through their use by experts and participants on the show.

#### **Chapter 4: No More Plain Jane: Constructing Feminine Subjectivities on *The Swan***

In this chapter, I will explore how feminine subjectivities are constructed within the neoliberal discourses of self-help in which *The Swan* is situated. Specifically, I will focus on answering the following questions: How are feminine subjectivities constructed and portrayed on *The Swan*? What feminine subjectivities are offered through the discourses and metanarratives of *The Swan*? How do both postfeminist and neoliberal discourses of the self align with and help to structure the metanarratives and discourses of the self portrayed on *The Swan*? Fundamentally, I will argue that within the CS-RTV series, *The Swan*, the discursively constructed options offered to women for selfhood are limited through the use of hegemonic postfeminist and neoliberal discourses of the self and the mainstream conception of the ideal feminine body.

Postfeminist and neoliberal discourses of the self privilege individual choice and self-care as the epitome of freedom and the pinnacle of success. The following quote from a plastic surgeon represents, perhaps, the quintessence of postfeminist and neoliberal discourse about cosmetic surgery: “It’s hard to say why one person will have cosmetic surgery done and another won’t consider it, but generally I think people who go for surgery are more aggressive, they are the doers of the world” (Morgan, 2003: 164). This expert opinion represents a shift in thinking toward an emphasis on self-care, and the importance of the body and its appearance in the neoliberal conception of success. The experts’ role, within this discourse and the neoliberal market economy, is to define what is acceptable or desirable and then to call individuals out to care for themselves. The experts can only do so much – the surgery, for example – but unlike under older medical and social welfare models where physicians initiated medical procedures based on need,

under the new model, the individual must make the choice to change and come forward themselves. This need for the individual to elect cosmetic surgery for themselves is perpetuated by the fact that the new type of legitimate need within the realm of medicine is internal and not observable without the patient telling the doctor that it is there – although treated medically such needs are less biological or medical, and more psycho-emotional.

### ***The Swan and the Art of “Feminization”***

Weedon’s discussion of language and subjectivity points first to the importance of and appeal to common sense understandings of gender and femininity as natural in the maintenance of hegemonic, mainstream conceptions of feminine and masculine subjectivities, or to the range of subject positions available to men and women in a given social and historical moment. She posits that

[c]ommon sense consists of a number of social meanings and the particular ways of understanding the world which guarantee them. These meanings, which inevitably favour the interests of particular social groups, become fixed and widely accepted as true, irrespective of sectional interests (1997: 74)

Such common sense notions of femininity are rampant in the discourses, particularly those deployed by the expert cosmetic surgeons, on *The Swan*. Specifically, these discursive constructions of femininity all centre on particular parts of the body and the characteristics they should ideally have. Every single episode of this series contains at least one justification for a particular surgical procedure based on the premise of the possibility of appropriately “feminizing” the subject via her body. The construction of this notion of “feminization” on *The Swan* comes directly from the discourses used by its experts. Very simply, to feminize, as the term is used by the experts on the show, is to give a woman more ideal, stereotypically feminine bodily characteristics. According to

the experts, the smaller, softer, curvier and more child-like the body parts are, the better. The following are only a few examples, but are the most representative of a plethora of instances where feminization as a process is tactically employed on *The Swan*. In defining femininity, the experts on the show make very explicit what is *not feminine*:

Your nose is too big for your face and it hangs down a bit and it's not **feminine**. What we need to do is make it **feminine** and your nice eyes will start to come out and what you will realize is everything harmonizes. (Cosmetic Surgeon, S01E04)

She's on the verge of looking masculine and I need to **feminize** her face. (Cosmetic Surgeon, S02E05)

Cinnamon's a cop, so she's really a woman in a man's world. So, today we're going to change all of that and really **feminize** her body. (Cosmetic Surgeon, S02E06)

She's a handsome woman. The goal is to make her a pretty one. Her body has **masculine** issues as well. She's so bulky and **masculine**. I really need to lean her out. (Cosmetic Surgeon, S02E07)

This is amazing. So much for the **strong** army girl. I can feel more **girly**. I feel great. (Kristy, S02E07)

She's a dream Swan because we can totally change her smile – take away her **strong masculine** teeth and give her a **softer**, much more **feminine** smile. (Cosmetic Dentist, S01E02)

According to the surgeons on *The Swan*, what femininity is *not* is strength, bulkiness and overall size, with the implication that in order to be feminine, women should be soft, dainty and small. If a woman does not possess the particular characteristics identified by *The Swan*'s cosmetic surgeons, feminine subjectivity remains out of these women's reach. That is, until the experts come to her rescue. What was once out of reach to women who were living in "masculine" bodies, is now accessible through the use of cosmetic surgery, access to which is literally granted only by surgeons themselves, as they are the only ones trained and qualified to perform such procedures.

Other discursive constructions of femininity on the show focus on what is missing (as opposed to what is too big or too masculine) These particular discursive constructions rely on particular body parts thought to signify femininity and the procedures needed in order to achieve “feminization”

She needs to be **feminized** We’re going to fix her nose, chin, the bump on her nose, give her a breast augmentation and some strategic liposuction and this will really help to bring out her **feminine** side and help her feel more sexy (Cosmetic Surgeon, S01E02)

We **feminized** Kristy by raising her brows, refining her nose, enlarging her breasts and doing total body lipo – it’s awesome (Cosmetic Surgeon, S01E02)

How do you make someone less plain? – we used subtle procedures to enhance the **femininity** of her face and liposuction to contour her body (Cosmetic Surgeon, S01E06)

You have **hefty** calves here We need to bring **elegance** to your legs You don’t have that here It’s gone! Not there! We’re going to do liposuction to your legs to give you a more **feminine** contour to your leg (Cosmetic Surgeon, S01E07)

It’s not just about her ears, but she has a bland bone structure to her face I have to straighten her nose to give her a more **feminine** face (Cosmetic Surgeon, S02E08)

In order to maximize Amy’s potential, she’s going to need a lot of **feminine sensuality** invented into her face We’re putting in these jaw implants to give her more of a **model** look (Cosmetic Surgeon, S02E09)

These attempts to discursively construct femininity emphasize the importance of body and face contours, sensuality, and, perhaps not surprisingly, breast augmentation It is either explicitly stated or at least implied in the above examples that feminine subjectivity is highly dependant on women possessing these very particular physical characteristics, characteristics which none of the women selected to participate on the show seem to have

Finally, there are many instances on *The Swan* when a definition of “femininity”

or “feminization” is not employed through descriptions of the body. Rather, the idea of the “process of feminization” is simply celebrated in its own right as innately positive.

The surgery just brought out her **feminine** side and you can see it just changed her attitude by looking at her face (Life Coach, S01E06)

Anything to **feminize** her face will help her – she needs a lot of body work actually (Cosmetic Surgeon, S01E07)

Dawn really needs more **feminization** – that’s the goal of surgery. If we could achieve that, she would be a really pretty girl (Cosmetic Surgeon, S01E07)

The key to Dawn’s transformation was to **feminize** her and we designed a series of procedures to do that (Cosmetic Surgeon, S01E07)

I’m planning to create some form of **femininity** and harmony to her face which, at this point, she’s lacking (Cosmetic Surgeon, S01E08)

We’ve really achieved what I think is a **feminization** of her body, but now we need her face to match (Cosmetic Surgeon, S02E08)

I want to **feminize** her and find the beauty under that hard hat (Cosmetic Surgeon, S02E09)

Such statements play a key role in the discursive construction of femininity as dependant on cosmetic surgery – defined as procedures of feminization – and emphasize the positive outcomes of the apparently inextricable relationship between the two.

Overall, the dominant construction of “femininity” offered in *The Swan* is taken for granted, particularly by the experts but also by the participants, to be common knowledge. It is obvious, in *The Swan*, that a thin, large-breasted, curvy, soft and sensual (big lips and eyes) body is the definition of femininity and beauty, and to suggest otherwise is not an option, at least not in what is being aired. Based on what is presented on the show, the series’ experts stress that this process of “feminization” is crucial to a woman’s overall transformation, both inside and out. The discourses of femininity employed in *The Swan* are almost always defined by the body. The power of the mostly

male experts to define “femininity” while being faced with a brigade of women who do not physically conform to the way femininity is being described is a brilliant illustration of just how powerful discourse is in constituting subjectivity. There is never any resistance to this discursive construction of femininity from the women, either. Owing, perhaps, to the discursive constructions of femininity in popular culture and advertisements as dependent on specific physical attributes, the experts do not have a lot of work to do to convince the participants that they need specific surgical procedures in order to become feminine. All of the women participating have applied to be on the show with hopes of being selected, precisely because they already agree that this is what they need in order to feel better about themselves and to live more valuable and productive lives. In this way, *The Swan* plays a major role in defining cosmetic surgery as something that is not only useful, but *necessary*, for those who embrace the neoliberal values of self-care that these discourses espouse, in order to access a successful or desirable feminine mode of subjectivity.

Kathy Davis, in her work with women who have undergone cosmetic breast surgeries, argued that women who choose to have the surgery typically do not want to be extraordinary, but rather, simply want to feel normal. However, on *The Swan*, being average looking, or plain is constructed as undesirable and a main motivation for seeking out cosmetic surgery. Since femininity seems to signify and necessitate a particular brand of beauty, beauty becomes normalized as feminine. Thus, the construction of femininity as dependent on physical appearance creates a marginal boundary within which women must strive to stay, lest they not be considered feminine. On *The Swan*, the normal femininity that these women seek is equated with bodily perfection and glamour.

Resolutely, plainness is constructed as an abnormality

Two **average looking** women will go head to head to compete for their dream to become a beauty queen (Host, S01E01)

I feel **average** because when I look at myself in the mirror, that's what I see (Rachael, S01E01)

I'm just there I'm not ugly, I'm not pretty, I'm just there I see a **Plain Jane** in the mirror (Sarina, S01E06)

Amy doesn't have a feminine face Her bone structure gives her a really **plain** look (Cosmetic Surgeon, S02E09)

Thus, according to the discourse of femininity on *The Swan*, successful feminine subjectivity must be extraordinary, particularly on the basis of physical appearance, which helps to explain why only women with the potential of being extraordinary (based on the standards of beauty constructed in popular discourses), are selected to participate in the show *The Swan* does not feature women with disfigurements, women who are obese, or women who could not fit the standard ideal of femininity after undergoing the prescribed set of "feminizing" procedures used on the show *The Swan* presents cosmetic surgery as the only and most logical fail-proof option for average women to become more feminine, and thus, more powerful as women

According to Weedon,

[w]hereas, in principle, the individual is open to all forms of subjectivity, in reality, individual access to subjectivity is governed by historically specific social factors and the forms of power at work in a particular society Social relations, which are always correlations of power and powerlessness between different subject positions, will determine the range of forms of subjectivity immediately open to any individual on the basis of gender, race, class, age and cultural background Where other positions exist but are exclusive to a particular class, race or gender, the excluded individual will have to fight for access by transforming existing power relations (1997 91)

Thus, participants in *The Swan*, while they are in their preoperative form, are confined by

the “plainness” of their appearances to the range of subjectivities offered to unattractive, or unsuccessful women in a society that places significant value on women’s attractiveness, sexuality and youth. According to feminist poststructuralism, these women must challenge the patriarchal discourses surrounding women’s bodies in order to be empowered. In the case of *The Swan*, however, the women do not challenge social structures but, rather, change themselves according to very specific definitions of femininity to fit better within society as it is.

### **Neoliberal and Postfeminist “Selves” on *The Swan***

Another form of subjectivity offered in *The Swan* is a more generally neoliberal notion that, as rational beings, we should be consistent and in control of the meaning of our lives. On *The Swan*, the central goal of the physical transformation is to bring into harmony how a particular woman feels she should and wants to look, with how she actually feels she looks, and to reclaim the power to define who she is, usually as a confident, powerful, and in this context most importantly, beautiful and feminine woman. For example, in the first season, one contestant, Beth, upon seeing her new self for the first time exclaims, “I look so beautiful! Oh, thank you! My outside finally matches the inside. I can’t believe that’s me” (S01E04). Another contestant, Dawn, professes, “I need to see the change to feel better – I know it’s time to change so some day I can be happy. I don’t want to wait anymore. Especially because, you know, I just had surgery. What a great time to feel better on the inside, now that I changed the outside” (S01E07). Finally, Gina, when asked during the pageant how the program had changed her life, explains

This program has given me a true sense of self respect and taught me that I deserve to put both time and energy into becoming the best woman I can become, both inside and out. For the first time in my life, I am truly confident and I believe I can accomplish anything. (S02E10)

The idea that these women had to live in bodies that did not represent who they knew themselves to be – “essentially” – and how they wanted to be seen, is portrayed by both the women and the experts on the show as devastating, the rectification of which is constructed as their right. Overcoming these physical and emotional obstacles through cosmetic surgery was constructed by the same players as a highly positive, liberating and empowering act.

The show’s “experts” also perpetuate the neoliberal and postfeminist emphasis on personal responsibility. While they are “in charge” when it comes to designing the “new” women, they clearly state, in each case, how important each woman’s input into the program is to their overall transformation and successful outcomes. In other words, they make and define the rules and she is responsible for the work (aside from the surgical work). Such an idea of choice – as tightly controlled – is crucial to the neoliberal paradigm.

I can give her the head start she needs to change her body and change her life, but the rest is up to her. Remember, liposuction is not a licence to eat (Cosmetic Surgeon, S02E08)

Her body’s going to be killer. That’s for sure. The rest is going to depend on her attitude (Cosmetic Surgeon, S02E04)

She is so strong. She looks three weeks out of surgery, but needs to stick to the gym if she wants to make it to the pageant (Cosmetic Surgeon, S01E05)

Cindy’s positive attitude helped her make the transformation from a self-proclaimed witch to an elegant beauty (Host, S01E03)

While the experts define what femininity means and what it looks like, they also require the women on the show to buy into these definitions and work toward the goals that the

experts set out for them. Despite having cosmetic procedures which necessitate reliance on medical experts, the women on the show must take responsibility for the choice to take part in and work for their recovery and transformation. If the transformation fails, it is the women's fault. A focus on the individual women's experiences during the show, as well as those experiences which led each to participate in the show (i.e., being teased or rejected because of the appearance of their bodies) emphasized to me, as viewer, the importance of individual responsibility and call to action. It is she who has suffered and continues to suffer and only she who can pull herself out of this rut (with the guiding help of experts, of course), because, ultimately, it is she who will reap the benefits of her transformation (self-esteem, job promotions, relational success, sex, etc).

### **Experiencing the Life of a Swan**

Each individual contestant brings to *The Swan* a story of past difficulties, either with romantic relationships, a difficult childhood or an overall struggle with low self-esteem. At the end of each episode, despite being offered vignettes depicting their struggles with surgical recovery in the middle of the episode, each contestant quotes the experience of being on the show as one of immeasurable rejuvenation and happiness. In other words, the end result is worth all of the physical pain, emotional turmoil and time away from their loved ones. These stories emphasize that these women's experiences are proof of the value of cosmetic surgery in helping women attain the type of feminine subjectivities offered by postfeminist and neoliberal discourses.

"Experience," although highly contested theoretically, is privileged in mainstream neoliberal culture. In fact, this is one of the major conundrums of feminist work in the current period. Marnina Gonick, in her 2006 examination of the constitution of neoliberal

girl subjects argues that, “[w]hile in the 1950’s women were recognized as having the potential to exhibit the active agency characterizing the modern subject, subjectivity under current conditions has been marked by an intensification of what Beck has called a ‘social surge of individualisation’” (from Beck, 1992: 87). Feminist conceptions of women’s personal experiences as political, within the discourses of neoliberalism, are lost. Individualism and a withdrawal from the political sphere to a market, do-it-yourself climate changed the ways in which subjects, in this case, women, are constituted.

According to Weedon (1997), “[t]he power of experience in the constitution of the individual as a social agent comes from the dominant assumption in our society that experience gives access to the truth” (p. 76). Thus, in the case of cosmetic surgery as it is presented in *The Swan*, if a woman feels as though her negative emotional experiences in life are tied to her perception of her inadequately feminine body, *The Swan* presents the “truth” of her experience as a legitimate mobilizing factor for seeking to change her outer appearance through cosmetic surgery. *The Swan* provides many examples of discursive constructions of an emotional transformation as dependant on a physical one. One contestant, Kelly, provides a precise example when, upon her reveal—the moment when the women first see themselves after the transformation is complete—she states, “I feel like I’ve completely changed my inside and I feel like I can tackle anything now” (S01E06).

In their journey to become more “feminine”—based on the discourse of the experts who design their transformation plans—many of these women discuss past experiences which have played a role in the constitution of their individual subjectivities based on inadequacies ranging from “too fat,” to “too droopy,” “too loose,” “too old,”

“too average” and “too scarred,” to name but a few. In each case, the woman discusses, with the therapist, her feelings of inadequacy and her discontented existence in order to provide background information, in the context of the show, on what has led her to “let herself go” and end up stretch-marked and overweight with bad hair and crooked teeth. Each of their explanations implies insecurities, mental distress, lack of emotional control, and, ultimately, the need for change. Key examples of their pre-transformation inadequacies are presented in the statements made by the contestants when they are first introduced.

This transformation is going to change my life. How you feel about yourself physically plays a part in how you react to the world, and the environment. (Rachael, S01E01)

My husband kissed another woman in a bar. I didn't leave him even though it devastated me. I was just afraid no one else would ever love me. I have a disgusting stomach, stretch marks, and an abnormal belly button. (Beth, S01E04)

I've always been self-conscious about my nose, my hair, my chest size. I've always felt frumpy. I don't feel comfortable in my own body. (Andrea, S01E05)

I got teased for having a bump on my nose. It wrecked a lot of years of my childhood. A big part of my self-esteem is my face. I want to be a professional cheerleader, but physical things hold me back. (Kelly, S01E06)

I don't feel handicapped by my disability [deafness]. But when I look in the mirror, I feel handicapped because I don't feel confident. I can't stand my nose. I have no chin. I really want to lose some weight. (Gina, S02E03)

When I met the father of my children I was excited. We had two kids together. Then, he decided he didn't want the responsibility and he took off. I feel like I failed as the mother of a normal, functional family and it is heartbreaking. (Marnie, S01E07)

I find this last example particularly interesting because it points to the failure that Marnie

feels based on decisions that the man in her life made—as though if she had only been more beautiful, he would have stuck around and she would not see herself this way. Of course there are many other examples, but the overall story is relatively the same—the women all want to feel sexy and beautiful after struggling with low self-esteem. They all believe that undergoing *The Swan*'s physical transformations will help them to achieve their goals and feel better about themselves. One contestant, Erica, states “I want to be somebody” (S02E04), suggesting that she feels as though she will not even exist or be relevant or worthy of acknowledgement until her body is more representative of a feminine ideal.

One very interesting trend in the women's transformations on the show is highlighted in a special episode at the beginning of the second season. “Where Are They Now?” is a reunion that features the “Swans” from the first season six months after their experience on the show, discussing how their lives have changed since being transformed. Almost every single one of the women brought exciting stories about how their lives – at least in relation to men – have gotten better. Two of the women who had not dated in years now have boyfriends, or active dating lives. Three of the women were proposed to upon returning home and there was absolutely no mention of the men having wanted to marry them before their physical transformations.

I love the fact that I can look in the mirror and know that I look good. My boyfriend proposed to me and we can't wait to get married. If I didn't go through *The Swan* program it would be a complete wreck. I don't think it would have worked out the way it did (Kelly, S02E01)

I'm the luckiest guy in the world because my girlfriend goes away for three months and comes back looking like a supermodel (New fiancé, S02E01)

My life has changed drastically. It's like I've gone from being a thirteen

year old girl to a voluptuous woman. My relationship with my boyfriend is like day and night. In the bedroom, it's really good. We got engaged two weeks ago. He's in awe of my whole transformation (Merline, S02E01)

The women are tickled pink at the opportunity that their new bodies have afforded them for romance and marriage and do not seem to be bothered by the fact that the men in their lives place so much value on their physical appearances. Increased interest from men is celebrated by the host and the contestants as an exciting, positive effect of their transformations.<sup>4</sup>

Overall, the discursively constructed options afforded to women for selfhood, and ways of understanding “the self,” on *The Swan* are premised on idealized conceptions of what “femininity” should look like. The discourses represented on the show which discuss and define femininity rely heavily on physical appearance and the overall look, shape and size of specific body parts. The discussion of “feminization” as a process constructs cosmetic surgery as a tool to be used in the process of identity creation. What is missing from these discourses, however, is an understanding or acknowledgement of the constitutive force of expert discourses on individual identities of the characters on *The Swan*, and thus, the regulation and subjectification involved in the process.

*The Swan* spells out very clearly that in order to be happy and successful, women should seek to be “feminine,” “sexy,” and desirable to men. The neoliberal and postfeminist discourses used on the show create an impetus to achieve femininity and beauty as personal responsibilities and measures of good character. The forms of

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<sup>4</sup> It is perhaps relevant to note that as I edit this thesis I have been made aware, through its discussion on the *Dr Phil* show, of a new series called *Bridalplasty* (2010) in which women who are engaged to be married compete for cosmetic procedures which they believe will make them feel more feminine and worthy of marriage. The women and their fiances do not see the final results of their transformations until the veil is lifted at the wedding. The doctor featured on this series is none other than *The Swan*'s own Dr. Dubrow!

subjectivity created by the discourses on the show contribute to metanarratives which are sexist, patriarchal in practice and oppressively marginalizing to those women who internalize neoliberal feminine ideals of the body, but who do not have financial access to the neoliberal solutions such as aggressive cosmetic surgical transformation. What we witness on the show, however, is the shedding of an old identity and subjectivity that was unfeminine, and thus, according to the show, repressed, marginalized and depressing.

Ridding themselves of the “Plain Jane,” unfeminine identity that has made them feel ugly, tired, lonely and unsuccessful has resulted, or so it seemed to me as a viewer of *The Swan*, in more than simply a transformation of the flesh and the ability to fit into a new pair of jeans. Undergoing the transformations on the show seems to give these women a sense of self that they have been searching for and esteem in that self that they have never experienced (or perhaps once had, but lost). Not only are these women proud of the way they look post-surgery, but they are proud of themselves for having worked for it and having made the choice to regain control of their lives. Shedding the “Plain Jane” pounds, stretch marks and saggy skin, and “doing something for themselves for once” – becoming more feminine, sexy and desirable – was about empowering the will to succeed and to experience a liberated zest for life in the women on the show. That is how the story is portrayed, albeit alongside a pride in one’s perseverance in adhering to the regimen put forth by the experts. The following chapter takes a closer look at how these notions of self-esteem, choice, empowerment and liberation were woven into the discourses of femininity and transformation on *The Swan*.

## Chapter 5: Discourses of Empowerment, Liberation, Choice and Self-Esteem

From a feminist poststructuralist perspective, it is necessary to acknowledge that the concepts of “empowerment,” “liberation,” “choice,” and “self-esteem” are problematic and in need of deconstruction. In this chapter, I will seek to deconstruct these concepts, in particular the way in which they have been constructed on *The Swan*. Essentially, I will argue that *The Swan* contributes significantly to socially and historically specific discursive constructions of “empowerment,” “liberation,” “choice,” and “self-esteem” which are age-biased, gendered, raced, classed and sexually-oriented.

It should come as no surprise that feminists have different views on the issue of empowerment and liberation, as elsewhere, in the context of cosmetic surgery, particularly the sensational full-body makeover featured in CS-RTV. Different feminist perspectives on the issue of cosmetic surgery were discussed at great length in Chapter Two of this thesis. Perhaps the most prevalent fissure I have located in the literature centers on the issue of whether or not women who undergo such procedures are suffering from “false consciousness,” that is, are dupes of the beauty industry and victims of an oppressive “patriarchal” media culture. Proponents of this perspective argue that in the context of mainstream beauty culture, it seems antithetical to feminism to suggest that adhering to standards set forth by a male-driven, sex-obsessed, idealized image of beauty could be liberating or empowering for women. There is a growing body of feminist literature that argues otherwise. Most members of this second group do not attempt to argue that cosmetic surgery is an entirely empowering and liberating experience. Rather, they refuse an either/or binary, and argue for a more holistic understanding of women's experiences of cosmetic surgery as potentially liberating, empowering and oppressive at

the same time

I do not intend to argue that the discursive constructions of concepts such as empowerment, as portrayed in *The Swan*, are necessarily antithetical to the way some feminists have theorized these terms. Nor do I intend to suggest that they have been appropriated by the cosmetic surgery industry in order to garner support from women. Rather, I will seek to delineate how these concepts, as deployed in *The Swan*, can be understood as historically specific constructions which allow for both liberation and empowerment, while contributing to the social reinforcement of particular "ideals" of femininity within the context of neoliberal, consumer society. Thus, from a feminist poststructuralist perspective, these concepts are understood to be both ambivalent and multivalent, like most concepts within this theoretical perspective.

### **Self-Esteem**

Discussion of the self is often featured on *The Swan*, most often alongside the concept of self-esteem. In the midst of a televisual experience that documents cosmetic surgery, there exists a recurring trope of low self-esteem amongst the women who are selected for the show. The context in which self-esteem is discussed on the show is inextricably linked to poor body image. This discursive construction of self-esteem is in line with the argument put forth in the previous chapter: many of the women's stories suggest a clear connection between the corporeal body and the "self" – a connection that is constructed within the metanarratives of the show as "natural" and permanent. Thus, the discursive construction of self-esteem in *The Swan* involves positioning cosmetic surgery as a necessary and obvious recourse to, and a means of correcting, low self-esteem. In many instances, this connection is explicitly stated, and in other instances it is

strongly inferred

Here is one example of this process at work. When asked why she wanted to participate in *The Swan*, one contestant stated that, “when you don't have a lot of self-esteem, you feel like, why do I bother? I want to make a difference in my life. I don't want to feel sorry for myself” (Rachel, S01E01). The assumption put forward here is that Rachel's self-esteem will be repaired after she has undergone a series of cosmetic surgical procedures. Having, at one time, been a model, another contestant indicated that a physical transformation would actually let her re-learn a sense of self-worth after having struggled with a series of abusive relationships with men. “I used to have a perfect body, be pretty, be able to walk down the street and have guys chase me. Not having that now makes me feel horrible about myself. My dream is to learn to know I deserve someone who treats me good” (Belinda, S01E05). Once again, the assumption here is that undergoing cosmetic surgery will help her to achieve her stated goals. Another contestant indicated that improving her self-esteem through physical transformation would allow her to be a better mother. “I want to be the best mother out there, but if I can't love myself and my life, I won't be able to give that love fully to someone else” (Andrea, S01E05). All of these women assume that they will become better women and better mothers, and, perhaps most importantly, be more worthy of love and respect, by participating in the makeover program, and ultimately, getting a better body.

Another contestant, Dawn, espoused the idea that a physical change would have a direct impact on her self-esteem when she said, “I need to see the change to feel better. I know it's time to change so some day I can be happy. I don't want to wait anymore. Especially because, you know, I just had [cosmetic] surgery. What a great time to feel

better on the inside, now that I changed the outside” (S01E07) In this case, while talk of internal transformation is present, the participant clearly feels that she needs a physical transformation in order to feel better. Tanya identifies the emotional damage done to her in school as a young girl as her reason for wanting to be involved in *The Swan*. “I got picked on a lot in school. I didn't want to go. It makes you feel really bad. It leaves a scar and one that you can't get rid of. The people that did that to me went on with their lives and never gave it a second thought” (S01E08). This contestant framed her participation in *The Swan* as her way of healing her past, and thus, participated in the therapeutic narrative of the show. Although one might have suspected that a sub-theme of “proving one's worth” to those who put them down or ignored them in the past would have been mobilized, *The Swan* did not seem to play up this aspect of the women's transformations, rather, the series focused on the future and how beautiful each woman was now that she had undergone surgery. I suspect that focusing on the back story during the moment of the reveal could have overshadowed the relationship between cosmetic surgery and positive affect for the viewer.

Perhaps the most interesting constructions of self-esteem as being intricately connected to the physical body appeared in the pageant episodes of each season and came from those who were selected by the experts to participate in the pageant for their “superior” transformations. One contestant made a very explicit statement about the connection between her self-esteem, confidence, and her body, when she said, in regard to modeling lingerie, “I want people to see my confidence. I worked for it. I want to show it off” (Cindy, S01E09). For Cindy, confidence is something tangible, to be “witnessed” through the flesh. Another contestant, when asked what she had learned about self-esteem

through her participation in the program that she would like to pass on to her kids, stated that she had “learned that you only limit yourself and can accomplish more than you think. You have to put your best foot forward and always do the best you can, and hopefully, that will make your life easier.” (Marnie, S01E09) Of course, this statement is not entirely about physical appearance, but in the context of *The Swan*, in which physical transformation is the key element, Marnie’s statement suggests that working to improve upon one’s appearance will make life easier and thus, better. In fact, the self-imposed limitations she speaks of, in the context of her story, clearly refer to her lack of motivation for improving her appearance before coming on to the show.

The winner of the first season’s pageant put the same sentiment forth. Rachel, when asked why she deserved to be crowned “The Swan” said “I believe this program has given me so much—self-esteem and a sense of who I am. I would like to give that back and teach everyone else that they matter, they have a place in this world. Even though you think it’s a dream, they come true and I am living proof of that standing right here today” (S01E09). In other words, Rachel stated that she wants to help others, essentially, by telling them that with access to cosmetic surgery, anything is possible. The fact that this answer helped to win her the title illuminates the type of ideas that the producers, judges and experts on the show wanted to hear. The message portrayed by such sentiments is that *The Swan’s* extreme makeovers were perhaps about more than just individualistic self-interest and physical appearance, and had more complex social and political resonances. The runner up echoed with a similar sentiment—if with a more individualistic focus—when she stated “I came here with very little self-esteem, and with the help of everyone, I found my heart and soul here. I have a man in my life whom

I love dearly and will be with him forever, and if I can share this with just one person, that I've accomplished one goal in my life then that's why I think I deserve to be the Swan" (Beth, S01E09) Both of these women drew a clear connection between becoming "beautiful" and gaining confidence and self-esteem, and effecting change in their lives and potentially the lives of others

The contestants were not the only ones participating in the discursive construction of self-esteem as a physically tangible goal, however. The "experts" featured relied on the same set of assumptions when they discussed the women's transformations. One surgeon stated that, "the Merline from a few months ago was just a girl with really bad teeth and low self-esteem and now she just looks like a goddess" (Expert, S01E08). This statement assumes not only that one cannot have bad teeth and good self-esteem simultaneously, but also that looking like a goddess – beautiful and powerful – can only be accomplished through cosmetic surgery, and that all goddesses are beautiful in a very particular way. The experts also discursively constructed determination as being associated with physical beauty when they described one transformed contestant as "a confident beauty who is determined to get what she wants" (S01E04). Determination and confidence, in my opinion, are constructed here as characteristics of self-esteem.

Through all of these examples, a clear connection is made between physical appearance and the way that self-esteem is constructed on *The Swan*. Mainstream "ideal" feminine beauty is constructed as an essential criterion for self-esteem. However, throughout the show, the contestants and the experts made statements that seemed to contradict this discursive construction of self-esteem as dependent on corporeal appearance. For instance, one contestant stated that, "the one thing I learned from my

time here is that beauty comes from the inside” (Belinda, S01E05) At first glance, this statement seems almost ironic Belinda came to the program seeking to improve herself and sense of self-worth by physically transforming her body The vast majority of her time in the program was spent in surgery, working out in the gym, or in recovery, with a very minimal amount of time (1 minute and 36 seconds of the episode) spent documenting her experience in therapy Yet, the one lesson that she is claiming to have learned is that beauty is not a physical thing As an observer, it is difficult not to ask why, if this is the most important thing she has learned (and ostensibly what the experts wanted to teach her), physical trauma, pain and drastic bodily transformation were necessary

If beauty is something that comes from inside, why did Belinda have to change her outer appearance in order to regain her sense of self-worth? This question is neither broached nor answered on the show I would argue that this subterfuge is a necessary component of *The Swan* because her realization is accurate for many women cosmetic surgery is not the solution to emotional and psychological disorder However, the show is about cosmetic surgical transformation and its value in creating internal transformations is the reality of *The Swan* The message being portrayed is that physically altering a woman’s body to adhere to ideal characteristics of femininity has the power to transform that woman into a “better,” more virtuous and psychologically and emotionally powerful person In the discourses of the show, self-esteem is a mode of subjectivity that is constructed as being highly dependent on cosmetic surgery, and more specifically, on particular cosmetic procedures designed to transform and conform women’s bodies to a very narrowly defined ideal

## Empowerment

Searching for a definition of “empowerment” that works in the context of my research has been a very difficult process, as there are many different definitions available and very little cohesion and agreement on what exactly is meant by the term. For example, the Oxford English Dictionary defines “empower” very simply as a verb, meaning “to give authority or power to, authorize [or] to give strength and confidence to”<sup>5</sup>. However, the conception of “empowerment” as an action that “gives power” is problematized by several theorists. Pease (2002) gives a postmodern reappraisal of empowerment in the therapeutic context. In light of the heavy representation of “experts” in *The Swan*, Pease’s comments are important to keep in mind. He argues that, as empowerment becomes another “tool in the professional's kitbag” (137), and because “experts” or professionals are placed in positions of power over others through the nature of their work, the very idea of engaging in “empowerment work” becomes problematic. The authoritative nature of the knowledge espoused by “experts” in a quest to give power to marginalized or oppressed individuals may play a subversive role in the process.

According to Pease,

those in positions of power are able to determine how situations are to be understood and what knowledge is to count as relevant. Thus, professional discourses afford the statements of professionals the status of truth. This is so even with radical discourses where the intentions of the professionals are emancipatory. In spite of the good intentions of those who seek to empower others, the relations of empowerment are themselves relations of power (2002: 137).

This problematic assessment of empowerment in the social work setting is applicable to CS-RTV makeover shows with all of the expert-imbued discourses of change and

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5 < <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/empower?view=uk> >

empowerment they provide

According to Bob Pease, a feminist social work theorist, many people involved in the field of emancipatory practice (for example, in social work, wellness/health, and development professions) highlight the importance of the term “empowerment” in legitimating the work they do. Adams (1996: 2), for example, argues that empowerment “could be, if it has not already become, the central emerging theme of social work.” He says that the concept of empowerment is central to his social work theory and practice. Cruikshank (1993: 333) also notes that “empowerment is almost mandatory in mission statements’ of social welfare agencies,” while Bairstow (1995: 40) maintains that it “is at the heart of health/welfare professional legitimacy” (in Pease, 2002: 136).

Thus, one can see how the concept of empowerment could play a key role in the legitimation of cosmetic surgery. The idea being put forward on *The Swan* is that something therapeutic is being done for these “poor, ugly, and sad” women, who would otherwise never have a chance to feel beautiful, through cosmetic surgery the women are being given a new lease on life, a life in which they are empowered. This discourse not only plays into the neoliberal culture of self-help engaged on the show, but also gives medical surgeons access to treat psychological and emotional problems by surgical means, thus, broadening the scope of their expert privilege and their practices (in practical terms).

It is important to mention that the word “empowerment” is not used extensively on *The Swan*. However, in my reading, many of the sentiments expressed by the contestants and the experts on the show hint strongly at the concept of empowerment as I understand it to be defined. The way in which the women’s experiences are discussed and

the overall presentation of their transformations suggests that what they are talking about is “empowerment” without actually saying the word. For the purposes of my research, operationalizing the term to better understand its construction is necessary. While use of the term “empowerment” itself was limited on the show, there were many instances where related words, and ideas that referred to processes of empowerment, were presented. For example, despite the absence of the word empowerment, the following response from Rachel, the winner of the first season's pageant, in her follow-up interview, clearly contained discourses of empowerment: “I go out and attack each and every day with zest. I walk down the street now and I am completely confident. I went from average to cover girl of *People* magazine” (S02E01). While Rachel does not say “I was empowered,” the outcomes that she speaks of suggest, to me, that she was empowered, particularly her uses of the terms “attack,” “zest” and “completely confident.”

One participant, Beth, provides an illuminating example of the popular equation of the need for physical transformation in order to achieve empowerment and liberation. In her pre-operative appearances on the show, Beth is often shown crying and depressed. Her major psychological problem rests on the fact that her husband had kissed another woman, it was killing her. She could not leave him, despite admitting that she felt that this is what an empowered woman would do, because she felt as though nobody else would ever love her. Beth felt imprisoned by the (not really visible through the camera lens) faded stretch marks and loose skin caused by her pregnancy. Before she began shooting *The Swan*, Beth said that she “want[ed] to walk into a room and have people oooooo [She said] this will change my life forever” (S01E04).

During her time on the show, Beth underwent the following procedures: endobrow lift, nose job, FATMA—lip enhancement, chin liposuction, Lasik eye surgery, breast augmentation, tummy tuck, liposuction on the calves and ankles (to “feminize” what the experts on the series referred to as her “cankles”), zoom bleaching of the teeth, full veneers, raising of the gums, lower orthodontics, and deep cleaning of the teeth. During her three month long participation in *The Swan*, she restricted herself to eating only 1200 calories per day (the average adult female requires approximately 2350 calories/day<sup>6</sup>), and spent, in total, over 120 hours in the gym. She also underwent therapy and coaching to address her marital problems. When Beth was revealed in her “brand new” form at the end of the episode, she was shown wearing a lot of make-up, and had extravagant hair and dress, any possible comparison to her “before” picture seemed futile. The dramatic difference between the “before” and “after” shots made the final “product” look “better.” In their before pictures, each of the participants wore baggy, grey underwear, an unsupportive grey bra, had her hair pulled back, wore no make-up and stood in dim lighting. The after pictures present the women in satin, bright coloured push-up bras and lace underwear, wearing make-up and hair extensions and standing in bright light. When asked about how she would deal with her marriage when she returned home, Beth stated “I feel like a whole new woman. I have learned to love myself, so now I have this whole new deeper love for my husband and I can’t wait to see him.” It is as though the sources of her marital problems were rooted in her not being beautiful, her husband’s infidelity seemed to be excused by her brand new body. Based on the comment that an

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<sup>6</sup> According to the Canada Food Guide, this is the number of recommended daily calories for women between the ages of 19-30, who do moderate exercise for one hour per day. This is the category that most, if not all of the women fit into on *The Swan*. <[www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/food-guide-ailment/basics-base/1\\_1\\_1-eng.php](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/food-guide-ailment/basics-base/1_1_1-eng.php)>

“empowered” woman would have left him for his indiscretions made before the transformation, Beth’s understanding of empowerment seems to also be a part of her transformation. She says that she cannot wait until her husband can see her new “hot” body, and she can share her love for herself with him. It seems as though through changing her physical appearance, her psychological insecurities with his infidelity was removed with her extra fat cells and saggy skin. Beth’s understanding of “empowerment” shifted when she transformed her physical body and it seemed as though she accepted her husband’s infidelity as her fault—a problem which she corrected with cosmetic surgery.

On *The Swan*, experts and contestants often comment on how positive, confident and strong the women are after they undergo their transformations. Yet, these transformations are largely dictated and controlled by the experts. Somehow, in these particular instances, empowerment and obedience (adherence to the expert transformation plan) are conflated. In one reveal, a participant named Christina breaks down and drops to the ground upon seeing herself. She is screaming and crying in disbelief, “I am so beautiful.” She then says, “I am in love with myself!” to which the hostess of the show replies, “So you should be. You owe it to yourself, but also to the fabulous experts” (S01E02). This is a pivotal moment in the show because it not only illustrates feelings of empowerment as it is defined on *The Swan*, but it also highlights the importance of the experts, the pivotal role they have played in each woman’s transformation, and, thus, in the alleged empowerment of the women on the show.

So, while each participant should be proud of herself for what she has accomplished, there is a noticeable stress on the importance of the experts, and the fact that without them she would not have been able to feel the way she does about herself.

Thus, within the discourses of *The Swan*, empowerment is not something that women can access without the help of experts, and yet, these women have to be able to tell their personal stories and take responsibility for themselves in a very neoliberal way. In a neoliberal context, an expert consultant class is created, from whom one is empowered to buy subjecthood. Experts sell an outline- a vision of femininity- and the women tell the stories of their selves based on that outline.

Most of the “empowering” moments, or the discursive constructions of *The Swan* process as empowering, came in a more nuanced form, however. While some participants did express sentiments like Christina’s after seeing their new bodies, other discursive constructions of empowerment came in the presentation of the women’s histories. *The Swan* presents its expert-designed transformative process as helping women to overcome abusive and/or neglectful childhoods, abusive relationships, single parenthood, parenthood in general (and the ravages it apparently wreaks on ones' life<sup>7</sup>) and even poverty. For example, after being shown her new body, one contestant states, “I waited 27 years to say I came for the American dream, like all the Latinas do, and I got it!” (Christina, S01E02). When she was selected to move on to the pageant over her competitor, the reason given by the experts was that “she overcame all of the obstacles that were thrown at her” (Expert, S01E02). In fact, this expert reasoning based on empowerment is pervasive throughout both seasons of the show. In essence, “empowerment” is constructed as a process of overcoming obstacles which the women have been facing in their lives, but doing so with specific cosmetic surgical plans dictated by experts. The following examples reflect this definition of empowerment used by the

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7 The show frequently features pregnancy as having played a pivotal role in the “downfall” of a woman's life, particularly through impacts on her body which make it less desirable.

experts as legitimation for one woman's "success" over another

Beth worked very hard in every single aspect of this program. She rose to every challenge with everything she had (S01E04)

I think Belinda made it to the pageant because she thought, 'I'm on a quest', and she did it (S01E05)

I think Sarina won a spot in the pageant because she has let go of thinking that she needs to put her energy into other people [*in particular, her ex who cheated on her*] and focus on herself for the very first time in her life (S01E06)

Jennifer made it to the pageant because she was so committed to all the work she had to do. She rose to every challenge (S02E02)

Gina made it to the pageant because she overcame incredible obstacles. She has found her voice through this program and feels comfortable in her own skin (S02E03)

I am proud that Erica made it to the pageant because this is truly the first thing she's ever done by herself (S02E04)

All of the above examples allude to the fact that one woman is more deserving to move on to the pageant component of the series because of having overcome more obstacles and fought against greater odds than her opponent.

I argue that such discourses suggest that "empowerment" is an important feature of the process through which the sometimes drastic surgical procedures presented on the show are legitimized. On *The Swan*, empowerment is highlighted as a positive outcome of not only having been selected for, but also of agreeing to undergo, the surgical procedures recommended for many of the women on the show. The feelings of hope that are expressed by the women when they see their new bodies—and their publicly expressed newfound belief in themselves and their abilities to be functioning, valuable and effective mothers, partners and members of society because of their new bodily confidence—contribute to the discursive construction of women's empowerment as

linked to surgical, corporeal transformations. When discussing one contestant (which could have been any of them, the experts stated that she was “going home an improved wife, mother and very empowered young woman” (S01E04)

### **Liberation and Choice**

Investigating and analyzing the correlation between those who are selected to move on to the pageants on *The Swan* reveals, in my reading, interesting observations about the construction of the concepts of liberation and choice. Liberation is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as a verb meaning “to set at liberty free, *specifically* : to free (as a country) from domination by a foreign power”<sup>8</sup>. Liberation is also defined as a noun meaning “a): the act of liberating; the state of being liberated, or b): a movement seeking equal rights and status for a group <women's *liberation*>”<sup>9</sup>. From a feminist poststructuralist perspective, liberation is, much like empowerment, difficult to define. To be freed from the networks and relations of power would be to cease to exist. Thus, from my theoretical perspective, liberation would be more suitably conceived of as a process of deconstructing the sexist and patriarchal hegemonic discourses which constitute, govern, and marginalize feminine subjects. From a feminist poststructuralist perspective, then, to make choices which create constructive resistance within these discourses is a process of liberation. With these definitions in mind, I was interested in whether or not the concept of liberation offered on *The Swan* was compatible with a feminist poststructuralist approach.

What I saw in *The Swan* was a recurrent theme wherein women were portrayed as being liberated from low self-esteem, and while many stories featured men—such as

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<sup>8</sup> (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/liberation>)

<sup>9</sup> (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/liberation>)

cheating husbands—or peers as the main causes of this low self-esteem, the liberating process being offered on *The Swan* suggested the women’s biggest obstacles were within themselves. A combination of an “unfeminine body,” as discussed in the previous chapter, and low self-esteem, based primarily on poor body image, were recurring themes used to signify the women’s obstacles in every episode. Low self-esteem was portrayed, in combination with an “unfeminine” body, as being the most oppressive force in the women’s lives. The freedom to “walk tall” that the women express in their moments of glory is compared to a weight being lifted off of their shoulders. They are not only freed from their “ugly” former bodies, but, inevitably, from the internal dialog of self-loathing and lack of self-worth that is inextricably linked to having such bodies. This is the liberation said to be offered by *The Swan*.

When liberation and choice are looked at together, however, an interesting dynamic between the two seems to emerge. I looked at these two concepts simultaneously because, as discussed in detail in the review of the literature, freedom is usually understood by most to be a necessary prerequisite of choice. One can not be said to have free choices if one is not free to choose. So how does choice play out on *The Swan*? Because all of the women selected to participate in *The Swan* had to apply to do so, that they have made the choice to participate can be assumed. And while one could debate whether or not the women were truly free in making this choice given what are presented as their options—lives of desperation and disgust with themselves and their bodies—it would be difficult to argue that any direct coercion was involved. However, once they have applied to become contestants, the women's agency is minimized. First, out of thousands of applicants, the experts and producers of the show decide who will

participate and who will not, second, the “experts” and producers start to take over by making all the important choices that organize each woman’s quest to “become a better person” through cosmetic surgery, psychotherapy and weeks working out in the gym

The women who were selected to participate as contestants on the show brought with them a story of the past focused on low self-esteem which has precipitated their desire to be on *The Swan*. The scripting and representation of these stories, however, was in the hands of television producers, undoubtedly with the aim of sensationalizing and garnering viewer attention and ratings. Typically, the participants were teased in school for being chubby, or having big noses or some other distinctive feature which now constantly reminds them of their struggle to be seen as “sexy” and “beautiful” and “feminine” every time they look in the mirror. Others’ stories relate to having had children and the sometimes extreme and permanent physical changes that their pregnancies or motherhood in general, has left on their bodies. Other stories involve being or feeling unfeminine, unworthy of heterosexual romance and commitment, or struggles involving abusive relationships with men who cheat on them, or leave them for younger, more beautiful women. All of the women involved in heterosexual relationships talked about how their low self-esteem has had a negative impact on their love lives.

When *The Swan* process begins, each of the women consults a cosmetic dentist and plastic surgeon who analyze their bodies and their distinctive flaws to come up with a “plan” for them. It is also relevant to note that these experts are not chosen by the women, but, rather, by the producers of the show. While the women do play a role in pointing out their most embarrassing body parts and features, ultimately, the plan is left to the experts and their ability to beautify and “feminize” the women and to acknowledge

and give legitimacy to each woman's flaws. A personal trainer is put in charge of deciding which diet and exercise regimen each woman will undertake, and the topic of discussion for the counselling sessions is determined by a therapist. Typically, this counselling focuses on troubles in heterosexual intimate relationships, and/or some form of childhood trauma endured by the women, such as teasing from a father or mother, or from childhood peers. Very little program time is actually allotted to the psychotherapeutic work done on the show, however, when the therapist actually makes statements on camera, they are often very directive. "This woman *needs to* , she *has to* let go et cetera." Basically, a woman's choice on the show is to stay and do what the experts say, or go home without fixing the problem they came to fix.

During the course of the season, if the women are having trouble sticking to the program, a life coach, Nelly, is sent in to set them straight and get them back on track. Resistance is not dealt with kindly, and women are belittled and told to "shape up" when they fail to follow all of the rules set out for them. When one contestant shows resistance to the program in her indecision over whether or not to allow the surgeon to perform a rhinoplasty (nose job) on her, the life coach intervenes and says, "I'm a little concerned that you're not letting the professionals do what they need to do" (Nelly, S02E02). Later in the show, when the same woman shows resistance again, this time to her diet, the life coach intervenes once again, saying "if you don't change your attitude Kim, you're not going to lose the weight!" (Nelly, S02E02). While in writing, this appears to be a rather subtle reprimand, the underlying implication of the statement, that the woman is failing, not living up to her responsibilities, combined with the tone of voice and body language used by the life coach, appears to be very belittling and oppressive. The hegemonic

discourses of expert knowledge, as well as the discursive construction of thinness as beauty and success on *The Swan*, are imposed upon this contestant who, by way of her being on the show, is in a very vulnerable situation. She is unable to see herself in a mirror, her body is in a state of physical trauma after undergoing aggressive cosmetic surgery, and she is living in a highly controlled environment under the intensive scrutiny of a series of experts who are gathered to give her “the opportunity of a lifetime” (Host, S01E02). The stakes are high and there is even an element of competition involved. The life coach’s aggressive reaction to Kim’s relatively modest resistance provides, in the context of *The Swan*, a strong assertion of discursive power in defining Kim’s goals – goals for which Kim herself is being held accountable by the experts (and, ostensibly, the viewer in the context of RTV). Resistance, then, is not a choice that Kim is free to make if she wants to stay on the show.

The following quotes point to more incidents where lack of adherence to the strict rules set out by “the experts” is portrayed as detrimental to the woman’s transformation, and ultimately, her overall well-being.

I don't know how she's going to turn out now. Her defiance may put her physical transformation in jeopardy. (Expert, S02E04)

Christina needs a reality check if she's going to make it to the pageant. It's time to get tough. She's the only Swan who's ever gained weight. She's eating full fat yogurt! (Expert, S01E02)

One older woman who had endured a lot of emotional trauma in her family decided, at the last minute, not to change her nose, when she realized it was a distinguishing feature that she shared with her daughters. The surgeon who was working with her said

If Tawnya had given me the carte blanche to do whatever I wanted to her, I would have taken the bump off her nose. I would do an even further refinement on her tip, and I would have given her a face lift. (Surgeon, S01E03)

This is the first woman on the show who actually opts for less surgery, and this defiance garnered significant attention on this particular episode. Perhaps it is not surprising that a plastic surgeon would say something like the above statement, but what is relevant and significant about the statement is its implication in the discursive operation of power and meaning. In the context of the show, Tawnya's rejection of one particular procedure is presented to the viewer, through productive editing, as a personal failure, a shortcoming in her neoliberal quest for feminine beauty, her failure to fully take responsibility and care for herself, an obstacle to her participation in a beauty pageant and a lack of dedication to *The Swan* program- a program which she is one of very few to have the privilege of participating in.

The life coach spoke to Tawnya to try to talk her into following through with what the plastic surgeon wanted. Disappointed, she asked, "Do you think you're going to regret your decision?" (Life coach, S01E03). Tawnya asserts that she is happy with her decision, but concedes and acknowledges that her success in *The Swan* program is inhibited by that choice. Tawnya's understanding of "the game," however, is not portrayed as an articulation of conscious resistance to the rules of *The Swan*. Rather, her acknowledgement that her choice to avoid rhinoplasty will impact her eligibility for participation in the pageant is portrayed through expert discussion as a lesson learned, that following expert opinion leads to success, and that there are consequences for resistance. So, while the women ultimately have a choice as to whether or not to follow through with the plan set out by the experts, that choice is made in a hegemonic discursive context that marginalizes and trivializes the women participating and privileges expert opinion about what should be done for the betterment of the woman.

herself Essentially, *The Swan* constructs Tawnya's resistance or exercise of free will as a failure on her quest for their expert-privileged definition of liberation that she could experience if she were to participate in the beauty pageant

Ultimately, Tawnya sticks to her guns, and keeps her nose She does not make it to the pageant Interestingly, neither does Kim, the only African American woman on the show, and the woman who showed the most significant resistance in the second season These were the most significant cases of even minimal resistance that occurred on the show in two years The only other moments of resistance involved one contestant, who was caught with a mirror, and who later dropped out of the contest, left the show and went home In fact, in each case where women resisted the program, they did not make it through to the pageant, even when their transformations, in my reading, were more dramatic than those of their competitors Ultimately, those who could adhere best to the strict regime provided by the show's "experts" had the most success, ultimately, they were the ones who were represented as experiencing the most liberation and freedom These are the women who walked down a runway in lingerie on primetime television and expressed confidence in doing so

No women of color are featured in the pageants in either season, and where non-Caucasian women do appear, they often "look" Caucasian and can only be distinguished by their self-identification as minority women Race is not portrayed as an impediment to the liberated, empowered vision of beauty sought through participation on *The Swan*, yet those crowned in the pageants of both seasons just happen to be middle class Caucasian women However, as argued in my discussion of subjectivity, there is something to be said of the absence of race (and perhaps class) as a distinct category in

an otherwise very hierarchically conceived environment. While race and class are rarely broached in the text of *The Swan*, what *is* said about race and class, as well as age and sexuality is very specific on the show. Both surgeons on the show applied a very particular set of surgical procedures to all of the women. As a viewer, the similarity in appearance in virtually all of the post-operative women on *The Swan* is eerie. All of the women emerge from their transformations with a very specific and prescribed set of physical characteristics, the same teeth, jaw line, eyebrows, nose, lips, breasts, arms, legs, etc., clearly and concretely defining what beauty, power and femininity look like within the discourses of the show.

Ultimately, in the context of *The Swan*, liberation, empowerment, self-esteem and beauty (both inner and outer) are premised on women's abilities to overcome obstacles, to be stereotypically feminine, maintain beautiful physical appearances (long straight hair, large breasts, small noses, clear and pale skin, small waist size and large, straight white teeth), and be self-disciplined by following rules in order to achieve goals based on expert knowledge. This relationship between empowerment and governance is one which persisted throughout my study of *The Swan*, through cosmetic surgery the participants could be empowered at the same time that they are implicated in relations of power which oppress them. What I realized through writing this chapter is that not only were these seemingly incompatible positions able to exist simultaneously, but one was actually predicated on the other – in essence, to experience empowerment one must give in to the rules of governance in place. Empowerment is probably achievable through resistance to cosmetic surgery in many instances and for many women, but in the context of CS-RTV and *The Swan*, empowerment is dependent on following the rules set forth by the experts.

on the show. The following chapter explores these relations of power as they play out on

*The Swan*

## Chapter 6: Governing the Body: Foucault, Normalization and Resistance

The issues of power and control are important in the context of feminist discussions of cosmetic surgery. These issues have been addressed in various ways in the previous chapters of this thesis. However, here I would like to incorporate a Foucauldian analysis of discipline and power into my reading of *The Swan*. Using Foucault's concept of disciplinary control, and particularly normalization, I seek to better understand the nuances of control present in the culture of CS-RTV. In this chapter, I will apply Foucault's ideas about normalization and his concept of docile bodies to the discursive construction of cosmetic surgery and the subjectivities of the women who use it on *The Swan*. I will also take a deeper look into the ways in which resistance played out on *The Swan*, from a Foucauldian perspective.

Foucault's notion of normalization refers to processes of social control and disciplinary power whereby certain ideas, behaviours and symbols come to be seen as "normal" (and, by default, those outside the norm as deviant) through their discursive construction as such. For the purposes of my research, the normalization of interest is that of bodies and, in particular, women's bodies. According to Cressida Heyes (2006), whose work on CS-RTV I have already examined in my review of the literature,

Foucault offers a complex account of normalization as a set of mechanisms for sorting, taxonomizing, measuring, managing and controlling populations, which both fosters conformity and generates modes of individuality, and which is at the centre of an alternative picture of our history as embodied subjects (16)

In a neoliberal consumer society, individuals are constantly presented with many choices, particularly within the open market. This bombardment reinforces the notion that we are individually free from control and free to be the stewards of our own destinies. Because individuals in a neoliberal society are immersed in a culture which values the

idea of individual choice, the power dynamics at play in these societies operate in an elusive way. The discursive construction of available choices and their relative value in a particular society privileges particular choices over others, and thus participates in the regulation of those who make choices.

On *The Swan*, cosmetic surgery is presented as a viable and accessible normalizing technology. Through *The Swan* and the regimen it entails, cosmetic surgery takes part in generating modes of individuality by attempting to foster self-esteem and a sense of self-determination and empowerment through which women are to stand out, be noticed and pursue their personal goals. At the same time, *The Swan* also fosters conformity by providing women with the ability to adhere to normalized standards of self-esteem, premised on adherence to normalized contemporary ideals of feminine beauty, very particular ideals that are agreed upon by the show and its many players: the dentist who constantly recreates the same teeth, the surgeons who constantly recreate the same breasts, and so on. All of the women on the show end up looking eerily similar to each other and, yet, ironically, the intention of the whole process, according to the experts, is the women's empowerment, apparently exercised through achieving extraordinary modes of individuality. Paradoxically, the process of creating these individuals requires conformity.

More simply put, much as *The Swan* creates a definition of empowerment that is based on giving in to governance, it also participates in creating individuality by fostering conformity – the latter of which is the process of normalization – creating individual identities and independence through the process of making everyone look the same.

### **Normalized Bodies: *The Swan* Plan**

Perhaps the best analysis of normalization in *The Swan* comes from examining the plans set out by the experts for each woman's transformation. In my analysis of each episode, I found clear trends, not only in the way that each woman was discussed by the experts, but in the specific procedures planned for their physical (and emotional) transformations. The plans for transformation were assigned in an almost scientific manner. The women were broken down into parts: face, body (surgical approaches), dental and fitness categories. I divided my data in this manner in order to make my analysis easier. In Appendix A of this document I provide tables which illustrate the variety of procedures prescribed by the experts (in their words) and the number of women in each episode whom the procedures were prescribed to.

While each woman was given an individualized plan based on her body, problem areas and insecurities, there were a number of procedures that were portrayed as being almost universally beneficial. For instance, in the first season of the show, all sixteen participants were given a "brow lift." Thirteen of the sixteen women on the second season were also assigned this procedure. Ironically, brows were barely, if ever mentioned by the women as being a source of complaint. Fourteen of the sixteen women on the first season also received liposuction or fat removal from some area on the face, compared to half of the women on the second season. Nose jobs were assigned to twelve women and eleven women on seasons one and two, respectively. The repetition of these procedures throughout the entire series plays significantly into the overall discursive construction of feminine beauty that the show participates in. Namely, brow lifts, liposuction and nose jobs appear to be fairly normal or "necessary" procedures for most

women on the quest for beauty and self-esteem that the show claims to provide to its participants. The implication of this message is the idea that most women, in general, and not just on the show, require these procedures in order to be beautiful and successful.

Procedures focused on bodily transformation (from the chin downward) also showed similar trends. Eleven women in each season were given breast augmentation surgery (with only three women in total from both seasons receiving breast *reduction* surgeries). Thirteen women in the first season and all sixteen women in the second season were assigned liposuction. Perhaps unsurprisingly, specific trends also appeared in the particular areas of the body which were assigned liposuction, with the most popular areas being the thighs, stomach, hips and knees. It is interesting to note that work on these areas, known to be areas where women *naturally* carry more fat (so-called “problem areas”), were discursively constructed, by the experts, as being done in an effort to make the women look more feminine. Over half of the women in total from both seasons also received a procedure called a tummy tuck. The majority, if not all of these women were mothers and received the procedure in an effort to “correct” the damages done to their abdominal areas by pregnancy. Once again, the repetition of these procedures plays a normalizing function in constructing feminine beauty on the show. The fact that the tummy-tuck was deemed necessary to *correct* the perils of pregnancy carries significant weight in the construction of feminine beauty. While “doing it for the kids, so they could have a happier mommy” was an oft-heard motif in the reasons given by the women contestants for being on the show and enduring a three month long sequestered makeover, the need to erase the physical evidence of maternity from the bodies of women was constructed as a necessary step to improving their self-esteem and physical beauty.

## **Motherhood and Normalization**

There were several moments throughout the series when both the women and the experts made the point that, despite being away from their children often for the first time, and for such a long period, undergoing the drastic transformations entailed in the program would make those women with children better mothers. The following examples display this sentiment. A contestant named Cindy said, “[i]t is so hard to be away from my kids, but I know *The Swan* will make me a better person” (S01E03). Similarly, experts expressed that, after her transformation, Beth would be “going home an improved wife, mother and a very empowered young woman” (S01E04). When first selected for *The Swan*, Andrea indicated that she feared her insecurities would affect her son as well as herself, and that she wanted to have a makeover to ensure that her son did not grow up struggling with the same insecurities that she had (S01E05). In the same episode, Belinda also cited her son as a major motivator for coming on the show. She stated that her son is who she lives for and that he was the reason she was on the show. She mentioned that she was getting homesick and said, “I want to be the best mother out there, but if I can’t love myself and my life, I won’t be able to give that love fully to someone else” (S01E05). Christina also stated that one of her motivations for wanting to be on *The Swan* was that she wanted to teach her daughter “good” self-esteem but didn’t know how at that point in her life (before her transformation) (S02E04). Widow and police officer Patty indicated that she too wanted to be on *The Swan* for her children’s sake. She stated, “[i]f I feel better about myself, my kids will feel better about me” (S02E06). After her transformation she said, “Oh, I know I can teach my kids lessons about life now. My kids just want the best for their mother. They want to live again and they deserve it” (S02E06).

Interestingly, Patty blatantly expressed an inability to teach her children life lessons before her surgical transformation and projected her lack of self-esteem and sense of invisibility onto her children when she said that it is *they* who wanted and deserved to *live again*. Finally, one contestant, Dawn, expressed that she no longer wanted to push her kids aside, and indicated that being on *The Swan* actually made her a better mother. Dawn expressed her belief that by neglecting herself and her physical appearance, she had also been neglecting her children. Cosmetic surgery, in this instance, is supposed to be a remedy for emotionally void parenting. In the reunion with her family, Dawn's sons actually made the point that an improvement in their mother's physical appearance would benefit the family. "I think it's going to be important for my mom to finally feel pretty" (S01E07). Lorrie's sons made a similar point when, after seeing their mother, they said "I know this will change our lives. I feel really good. She doesn't even look like my mom anymore" (S02E03). During the first pageant, this same sentiment, that being involved in *The Swan* would have a positive effect on their parenting ability and overall family life, was brought up again and again. In fact, the first question asked of the contestants in the pageant had to do with the decision to be away from their families for such a lengthy period of time, and whether or not it was worthwhile. Cindy responded by stating that, it had "been difficult, yes, but it has been worth it. I am happier and will be a happier mom and a happier wife" (S01E9).

Perhaps this conflation of successful womanhood/motherhood with standardized ideals of feminine beauty and youth is compounded by the contemporary media attention paid to celebrity mothers. Whenever a Hollywood starlet has a baby, magazine stands are covered with images and headlines about how they love being mothers, and are able to

get back into a size two and be out dancing a mere five or six weeks post-partum. They do not talk about sleepless nights, sore nipples, stretch marks, exhaustion and haemorrhoids. They do not talk about personal trainers, dieticians, chefs or nannies, either. What we see in the media are stereotypically beautiful, youthful women who are able to have a baby one week and wear a bikini in public the next. Ashley Simpson, Nicole Ritchie, Tori Spelling, Madonna, Sandra Bullock, Katie Holmes and Gwen Stefani all make it look so simple to be “yummy mummies” and MILFs (Mom’s ‘I’d Like to Fornicate’). So why can’t we all have that? Well, with cosmetic surgery, we can (or at least we think we can). Don’t we owe it to ourselves? This is the idea of neoliberal motherhood that is constructed on *The Swan*.

Overall, the idea that participating in the drastic transformations entailed in *The Swan* would have a positive effect on women’s abilities to mother and be positive role models for their children was extensively presented. This, of course, sets up a discursive construction of motherhood and, more importantly, legitimate and valuable motherhood, as being premised on the tenants of feminine beauty constructed on *The Swan*. Since normalization, in Foucault’s conception, deals not only with what is acceptable, but with what, by default, is also unacceptable, a clear construction of failed motherhood is created for those women who do not fit the series’ construction of femininity, including those who refuse or reject those constructed standards of beauty.

This is not the only place where the discursive construction of motherhood and the family serve as a normalizing apparatus on *The Swan*. As mentioned above, motherhood, and moreover the experience of pregnancy, is seen to have a negative impact on women’s bodies because of the scars, literal and figurative, which it leaves

behind. In many instances, pregnancy is represented as one of the crucial turning points in the downfall of the contestants' bodies. Mothers who were participants on *The Swan* spoke of their "disgusting, stretch-marked stomachs and sagging post-breastfeeding breasts" as sources of grief and distaste for themselves and their bodies. Belinda stated, "[w]hen I look in the mirror, I see a big fat cow. Getting pregnant changed my whole body type. It changed everything" (S01E05). Merline mentioned that, after having three kids, her breasts got smaller and that it really bothered her. While working on her body, the plastic surgeon, discussing her breasts and subsequent implants, stated that "here we see the *ravages* of nursing and pregnancy. These poor breasts just poop out and give up" (S01E08). The *ravages* of motherhood were implicated again as a precursor to the need for surgical intervention in the body when, working on Lorraine, the plastic surgeon stated, "this is a classic example of wearing the ravages of motherhood" (S02E07). Typically the term "ravage" is reserved for the destruction and devastation caused by wars or natural disasters. Here it is used by a plastic surgeon in reference to pregnancy and motherhood, which constructs its effects on the body (stretch marks, sagging skin and breasts) as detrimental to a woman's overall value and well-being. These discursive constructions of pregnancy and maternity suggest that women are passive recipients in a conflicting relationship to pregnancy and motherhood, in a battle that they almost always, at least in an embodied sense, lose. The idea that women can be *ravaged* by motherhood, for me, also reads that intervention is required to *save* them.

The plastic surgeons also describe how motherhood, and in one case the quest for motherhood, has *taken its toll* on the women's bodies. "Motherhood has really taken a toll on Amy's body" (S02E09). "Fertility drugs have really taken a toll on Dore's body"

(S02E09) Much like *ravages, taking a toll* also constructs motherhood as taking away or subtracting from women in terms of their physical appearance and emotional well-being and as something that almost universally, or at least in the case of women on the show, requires surgical intervention to rectify. Ultimately, the idea that pregnancy has a negative impact on a woman's body, one which requires surgical intervention, also serves a normalizing function in constructing post-pregnancy bodies as unattractive and damaged, and positions all women who have had a child as good candidates for tummy tucks, breast implants and liposuction.

### **Dentistry**

Perhaps the most distinctive trends on *The Swan* appeared in the dental area of transformation. While a small number of women received specific plans catered to their dental health and needs, such as root canals, tooth reconstruction, bridges, crowns and extractions, twenty-eight of the thirty-two women on both seasons received zoom bleaching to make their teeth whiter, twenty-seven received porcelain veneers (fake teeth glued on top of their own teeth) and twenty-six received deep cleaning. In fact, in many cases where the women did not appear to have particular problems with their teeth, these three procedures were almost universally assigned as a generic plan to brighten and improve their smiles, also, apparently, making their faces look more *feminine*. The discursive construction of "good teeth" on *The Swan*, universally applied to all of the women, has very specific class connotations. Dental work is expensive (much like cosmetic surgery), and in most societies is a characteristically distinguishing feature of class. The image of sparkling white, straight and large teeth, achievable almost exclusively through expensive dental work, is constructed on *The Swan* as the only option

for a happy, healthy smile. This is, in turn, lauded through the discourses on the show as having a positive effect on the women's self-esteem.

### **Diet and Fitness**

The most common approach to fitness and dieting was a 1200 calorie per day diet<sup>10</sup> (twenty-one of the thirty-two women in total on both seasons) and two hours per day in the gym spent on cardiovascular exercise and weight training (seventeen women in total). Some of the women were put on branded diets, with *Jenny Craig* being featured in the first season and *Nutrisystem* in the second season. Only one woman was assigned a diet plan to help her gain weight. Regardless of their "needs," each woman had a diet that controlled her food intake and the life coach on the show made sure to enforce these plans.

Dieting was perhaps one of the most contentious issues on the show, particularly when the life coach was involved. Foucault argues that, in order for normalization to work, all disciplinary punishment must serve a corrective function, it must be an exercise for the subject to endure (1977: 179). In *The Swan*, contestants are frequently shown struggling in the gym, as well as the kitchen, in order to lose weight. They are coached in a manner that is regimented in order to correct the damage that the contestants have done to their bodies through poor dietary choices and lack of physical exercise. Their caloric intake is only half of what is recommended for the average woman. According to Foucault disciplinary punishment does not succeed if it is not corrective. Thus, a slap on the wrists, for example, will not serve to normalize "proper" nutrition and diet. The

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<sup>10</sup> Keep in mind that as mentioned earlier, according to the Canada Food Guide, the average adult female (between the ages of 19-30, who do moderate exercise for one hour per day) requires approximately 2350 calories/day <[www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/food-guide-ailment/basics-base/1\\_1\\_1-eng.php](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/food-guide-ailment/basics-base/1_1_1-eng.php)>

punishment (reduced caloric intake) employed on *The Swan* for being overweight is corrective in that it addresses the basis upon which the normalizing action occurs – normalization of ideal body weight

In the first episode of season one, Kelly had trouble sticking to her diet and, later, the reason she did not make it to the pageant revolved around that problem. After the winner of that episode was chosen, one of the experts remarked that they were “a little disappointed in Kelly” and that they were “not sure she took it to the level she could have taken it.” Her inability to follow their strict diet led to her being presented as an inferior competitor and less of an ideal woman.

In the following episode, Christina also struggled with her diet. When, after her surgeries were complete, she had not shown any progress in her weight loss, the life coach made a special visit to her room to go through her fridge and reprimanded her for her food choices. She arrived with a typed up list of foods which Christina had ordered and should not have been eating, mainly ice cream and full fat yogurt. She confronted Christina and told her how disappointed she was “you are the only participant who has actually gained weight.” She warned that Christina would not “make it to the pageant with a weight higher than she came in with” (S01E02). The life coach also made a point of infantilizing Christina by exclaiming, “full fat yogurt, I mean, come on!” Throughout this encounter, Christina was in tears and expressed feeling horrible about herself, but the life coach reiterated that if Christina wanted to make it to the pageant, she needed “a reality check” (S01E02). This point was once again driven home when the experts reflected back on the women’s experiences in the program and stated that “Christina had a little trouble with her diet along the way, losing some weight, and that would be the

only thing keeping her from the pageant” (S01E02) Ultimately, Christina made it to the pageant because she managed to make a change and achieved the weight-loss prescribed to her by the experts by following their plan

In S01E04, another contestant, Kathy, had a similar encounter with the life coach She was confronted about her weight, told that she had a tendency to make excuses, and that her weight had to come off if she were to make it to the pageant This confrontation repeated itself again in S01E07 when Dawn was confronted The life coach said, “I couldn’t believe the foods she was ordering She needs a wake up call No more hotdogs, pork chops or cream cheese The party’s over It looks like I’m going to have to hold her hand and make her work ” Finally, in the second season, Kym was also confronted and told to change her attitude in order to lose the weight Kym was the only African American woman to appear in the entire series and was presented as being the most defiant and resistant of all the contestants <sup>11</sup>

Taken as a whole, the way in which the women’s diet plans were closely monitored and controlled, and the way in which resistance to those plans was dealt with, played a significant normalizing function in the overall discursive construction of feminine bodily ideals Strict control and adherence to expert guidelines was presented as being absolutely necessary in the quest for self-esteem and beauty, and the ultimate goal of the show making it to the beauty pageant Essentially, the disciplinary practices put forth by the experts on the show served to correct the previous actions that the women had taken and thus managed to participate in normalizing the notion that diet and exercise as prescribed by the experts would yield the desired result of the ideal female body

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<sup>11</sup> While this is clearly an interesting fact to note, at this point in the thesis, there is a lack of space to adequately expand upon the issue of “race” and resistance

Overall, the repetition of the procedures done and the formula that seemed to be applied to all women who participated in *The Swan*, served a normalizing function in the sense that the experts were able to construct a hierarchy of beauty and of specific body parts. Those procedures and prescriptions most often applied were constructed as “typical” of the average woman (through mere repetition), and thus the “problem” being addressed and transformed by each procedure was constructed as criteria upon which to base normalizing judgement. For instance, if twenty-nine of the thirty-two women on the show received liposuction and twenty-two received breast implants, then as a viewer I understood that body fat and breast size were major criteria for assessment of the women after their transformations.

### **Techniques of Control**

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault discussed what he deemed to be the three primary techniques of control of bodies in disciplinary societies such as those found in a neoliberal context: hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment, and the examination (1977: 170). Each of these techniques are illustrated in *The Swan*, and discussed below.

#### ***Hierarchical Observation***

According to Foucault, hierarchical observation allows for coercion of subjects and their actions through the simple act of observing them. He argues that the “perfect disciplinary apparatus would make it possible for a single gaze to see everything constantly, perfect eye that nothing would escape and a centre towards which all gazes would be turned” (1977: 173). With the presence of video cameras taping and assessing their every move, it is not difficult to relate this Foucauldian concept of surveillance to the practices of those participating in *The Swan*. While the gaze doing the assessing is far

from singular, as it is made up of multiple cameras and assessing eyes, it is centralized through the expert team. The female contestants are under constant scrutiny from the experts on the show who judge their actions and adherence to the program, ultimately determine their “success,” whether or not they make it to the pageant, and run interference in the instances where women do not conform to the regimen set out for them (i.e. diet, exercise plans). While there is no direct force applied, the effects of power are still induced due to the combination of the women’s lower position in the series’ hierarchy in relation to the experts, and the presence of a constant assessing gaze. While it is always possible for participants to back out and resist or reject the regimen, this is not presented as a viable option on the show, those who do so do not make it on to the show or suffer the consequence of not making it to the pageant.

### ***Normalizing Judgement***

Foucault’s concept of normalizing judgment is also a relevant mechanism of disciplinary control for an analysis of *The Swan*. Normalizing judgment, or the process of normalization, functions by constructing a dichotomous understanding of good and bad behavior. According to Foucault, within this nexus of control, what does not adhere to the rules of what is defined as “normal” is necessarily in departure from it, and is constructed as abnormal or bad. When subjects are judged based on their actions, a hierarchy of ranks (of normalcy) is created, instituting rewards and punishments for those on either end of the spectrum. Foucault argues that, “by assessing acts with precision, discipline judges individuals ‘in truth’, the penalty that it implements is integrated into the cycle of knowledge of individuals” (181). Thus, normalization plays a role in defining reality and what is considered to be “true” within a system (in the case of my research, *The Swan*),

and participates in the regulation and control of those being watched by influencing what seem to be real or “true” about their experiences (both pre- and post-operatively) In the case of *The Swan*, the distinction of some people as experts highlights their ability to define the “truth ” The type of disciplinary control that Foucault is talking about depends on the individual feeling and acting as though all of their decisions are completely voluntary So, while the experts on the show merely suggest procedures for the women’s transformations, they also provide judgment about what is normal, what is scientifically *true* of beauty, and play an almost educative role in informing the women about what they need to know about their bodies in order to achieve the transformations they are looking for They also pass judgements on the women’s attitudes and desires through their reactions to the women who do not want to have a certain procedure done or do a particular diet or exercise Such normalizing judgments of resistance aim to create homogeneity and conformity– in the sense of forcing people to conform to their rules or their vision, and at the same time, order subjects hierarchically

### ***The Examination***

Foucault’s final mechanism of disciplinary control relevant to the power dynamics at play on *The Swan* is the examination, and it is here that the reality television element of *The Swan* is most pertinent The examination is a representation of the techniques of both hierarchical observation and normalizing judgment The examination, according to Foucault, is a gaze which makes it possible to qualify, classify, and punish subjects Within the examination, individual subjects become “cases” to be analyzed and described, constituting them as both an object and effect of power According to Poster (2007), “*The Swan* presents a puritanical code to the contestants, they are being judged

on how well they conform to the regimen imposed by the experts” (156), and this judgment is made possible by the relentless documentation of their every move, in the gym, in the kitchen and even in their recovery beds “A rigorous regime is imposed on the subject, covering all aspects of her mind and body The contestant becomes a case in Foucault’s sense, open to the medical gaze, scrutinized for signs of improvement or slippage”(170) There were many instances in *The Swan* when contestants faced interventions from the experts, primarily the life coach, when they were not measuring up to the plan set out for them Incidents of defiance or disobedience were highlighted in a manner that presented the participants as giving up an opportunity for help or sabotaging their own success However, these are only minor examples compared to the official examination that contestants undergo at the end of each episode, when one woman is selected to move on to the beauty pageant and the other is sent home

In each episode, the host of the show repeats and reinforces that the contestants are being judged on “their beauty, poise, and overall transformation ” After a quick look back at their journey, typically represented by drastic before and after pictures and a host-read narrative relating their emotionally damaged selves before their experience on *The Swan*, the women were brought together for the dramatic announcement of who would move on to participate in the beauty pageant, the proverbial carrot on the stick throughout the episode After the winner was announced, the experts-turned-judges gave their reasons for selecting one woman over the other In some cases, reasons were given for both women, and in other cases, only the woman selected to move on was legitimated by expert commentary

The main explanations for success in season one centered on how fully a woman

adhered to the program, how many obstacles she overcame throughout her transformation, and, sometimes blatantly, her post-*Swan* physical beauty. The most often heard explanation was based on women's commitment to the program. For example, in the very first episode the judges stated that, "Rachel won because she surrendered to the transformation in the most incredible way" and that Kelly did not make it because the judges were "not sure Kelly took it to the level she could have taken it" (S01E01). Kelly, however, was lauded for her adherence to the expert exercise and diet plan after her time on the show. In a special wild card episode in the first season, two contestants who did not make it through to the pageant at first were given a second chance. Kelly was chosen because, according to the experts/judges, she "kept working and never lost her drive" even after the filming had stopped (S01E09).

Adherence to the regime or commitment to the program was also used to justify why people did not make it through. In one episode, one of the experts said "I'm sad that Christina didn't make it to the pageant, but the truth is, she didn't fully surrender to her transformation. She did not completely focus on herself" (S02E04). On *The Swan*, being able to ignore life at home was presented as a positive attribute of self-care. Being able to focus on oneself, however, was dependent on the women's ability to focus on experts' opinions about themselves. "Focus on the self," as constructed on *The Swan*, implicated the contestants in complex relations of power.

While overcoming obstacles was seen as a legitimate justification for some women's success, it was not as popular a discourse to hear from the experts as the expression of physical beauty and overall physical transformation as criteria for selection. Altogether, in at least six of the episodes, physical beauty and physical transformation

were cited as justifications for supporting the choice of one woman over another

Kristy didn't make it to the pageant because she had less of a physical transformation than Christina (S01E02)

When I saw Marsha walk through the door, I was breathless I think she's one of the most drastic physical transformations we've had on the program (S2E8)

Taking the notion of the examination one step further, the final contestant in the second season to make it to the pageant elicited a unique explanation for her success The judges/experts said that "Amy made it to the pageant because she really deserves to be in front of a crowd of people and feel confident and comfortable for the first time"

(S02E09) The gaze, in this case, was completely acknowledged and the examination of her new, modified, corrected and normalized body, in front of a crowd, was presented as a prize in and of itself, a reward to Amy for the work she had put into conforming to normalized beauty standards, and the regimen of self care prescribed by the show's experts

### **Resistance**

On *The Swan*, the issue of resistance was dealt with as a learning opportunity to teach women who were straying from the path set out by the experts how to get back on track, or, conversely, to demonstrate the consequences if they did not give in One specific incident, in S01E03, provides a clear example of this The surgeons were

"disappointed" by the fact that Tawnya did not want to have a face lift or a nose job

When she was first introduced to them, they said that "she is the oldest Swan we have but she does not want a face lift, which will make her facial rejuvenation a difficult process"

(S01E03) Tawnya was very clear about her reasons for not wanting to have,

particularly, the nose job done. She stated that, “both of my girls have the same bump on their noses that I have so I’m leaving it alone. If I looked in the mirror, after all I have been through, and didn’t see some resemblance of the person I was, I would freak out.” Before entering the operating room to begin her surgical procedures, the life coach came to try to put her back on the right track, telling Tawnya of her concern with her backing out of important surgeries, and asking her if she thought she would regret her decision. It was made clear to Tawnya that all of the experts involved were disappointed in her decision, despite her reasoning, as though they saw it as the wrong decision to make.

Her resistance to the regimen set out for her was judged by those in power as being resistant and a cause for concern and coaching, as though her suitability for the program was in question and as though perhaps she was undeserving of being there since she was unable to see that what the experts wanted to do for her was the “right” thing to do. Ultimately, the punishment for her lack of adherence to the norm (in this case, the norm being following the doctors’ plans), was that Tawnya did not move on to the pageant, which was presented to the contestants as the epitome of success. In fact, this ranking system, getting into the pageant vs. not, was used to reinforce “normal” behaviour and bodily outcomes. It was exercised in every episode of the show where one woman was sent to the beauty pageant and the other was sent home, as departures from Foucault would say, creating gaps and hierarchies among the women who participated. While each of the women who participated appears to have bought into this ranking system (by virtue of their participation in a show whose goal is a beauty pageant), they were ranked based on the narratives they presented and how completely they adhered to the standards of beauty and discourses of expert knowledge on the show. It was on this

basis that they were hierarchically ordered

Kym was another contestant who, as mentioned earlier, was presented as being resistant to the program. The majority of the footage of Kym's transformation focused on her difficulties with adhering to the program. According to the host, Kym started off the program on the wrong foot with a "bad attitude" about her diet. She also came out of surgery in a panic attack, and struggled to overcome pain in a part of her transformation that she was responsible for (her recovery). *The Swan's* life coach had to intervene and confront Kym about defensive issues in therapy and footage is shown of Kym refusing to discuss an unidentified topic with the therapist of the show. Nelly confronted Kym about the fact that she had been complaining during her work-outs in the gym and footage was shown to support this claim as well. *The Swan* dealt with Kym's resistance by finally intervening with a surprise guest, Cindy, a contestant who had also struggled with the regimen in S01E03 but went on to place 2<sup>nd</sup> in the pageant, was brought back to speak to Kym and remind her that eventually giving in and surrendering to the plan set out by the experts pays off. After that intervention, Kym is presented as being totally on board with the plan and the Host stated that "Kym was sidetracked by her quick temper, and is now in a race to catch up" (S02E02). *The Swan* clearly implies that resistance to expert knowledge is a major obstacle to success.

Perhaps the most contentious contestant of all, Marnie, was featured in the first season. Throughout her time on the show, she was shown not adhering to the program and having a somewhat negative outlook and attitude. In almost every other instance where this was the case, the woman showing defiance or lack of commitment or conformity was not put through to the pageant. However, Marnie, based on my subjective

opinion, was one of the most stereotypically attractive women to begin with. After her surgeries, she was still, arguably, one of, if not the most conventionally attractive participant. She was selected over her competitor to move on to the pageant, according to the experts, “for obvious reasons. She looked beautiful and her emotional transformation was dramatic” (S01E07). This struck me, as a viewer, because, aside from her pleasure in seeing her new reflection for the first time, we were never shown how she had emotionally transformed, and were left to wonder if she really made it to the pageant because she was just that much more physically attractive (according to the standards of the experts/judges) than her competitor. So while a variety of reasons were used to justify the hierarchical ordering of the subjects and their success upon examination on *The Swan*, physical beauty played a superseding role. Discourses of self-care were emphasized and used by the experts in this text, concealing their implication in normalization.

### **The Clinical Gaze**

Aside from the power to decide the fate of contestants after they have undergone the program of transformation, what is it about the experts on *The Swan* that gives them power, in a disciplinary, normalizing sense, over the contestants? According to Foucault, the clinical gaze gives power to medical professionals (and in this case, psychologists, dentists, physical trainers and life coaches) through the observation of patients (subjects, contestants) and the development of practical wisdom that can not be found in a book, but can only be discovered or understood through the practice of examination. Clinical knowledge is considered indisputable knowledge and wisdom, based upon which experts diagnose problems and design solutions, all considered to be hard “truth” or facts. According to Foucault (1973), “[t]he clinical gaze is not that of an intellectual eye that is

able to perceive the unalterable purity of essences beneath phenomena. It is a gaze of the concrete sensibility, a gaze that travels from body to body, and whose trajectory is situated in the space of sensible manifestation. For the clinic, all truth is sensible truth” (120). It is through this gaze that doctors or experts acquire access to knowledge about women’s bodies and see an underlying supposed reality of physical defect. Thus, it is through this power that the experts are able to justify, not only their judgments, but also their plans and motivations for encouraging particular procedures for specific women’s bodily “problems.”

### **Docile Bodies?**

Overall, Foucault’s ideas about normalization and the mechanisms of discipline and control contained therein can be applied to the case of CS-RTV represented by *The Swan*. In a culture where beauty is increasingly medicalized and such experts are given celebrity status through the commercialization and normalization of the cosmetic surgery industry in mainstream popular culture, the clinical gaze gives power to cosmetic surgeons. If a woman walks into a doctor’s office looking for a breast augmentation, for example, and is instructed to undress so that the doctor can examine and diagnose her “problem” and suggest surgical solutions, it is arguable that the power of the clinical gaze, and of the doctor as an all-seeing expert, would give him/her power to define the course of action for the woman involved. In this way *The Swan*, and cosmetic surgery as a practice, directly participates in the regulation of women and their bodies.

Is it possible that the televisual experience of RTV pushes this element of power or domination over contestants to limits beyond what would be experienced in the average event of cosmetic surgery? According to Foucault, our behavior changes when

we are constantly being watched, and we become more susceptible to coercion from those in power over us. Thus, the mere presence of cameras and the knowledge that the documentation of their actions will be used to judge them by both experts and public viewers may be enough to make the participants more susceptible to coercive forces, and more likely to surrender and conform to the norms set forth within the context they have found themselves in.

There was only one case of resistance that was presented on the show where the woman held her ground and finished the program, despite refusing elements of the expert plan. In every other case, the women eventually surrendered, except for one woman who had been caught with a mirror in her belongings and subsequently opted not to finish the program at all. However, because RTV shows are edited, with the goal of boosting ratings and garnering advertising dollars, it is difficult, if not impossible, to know all that occurred on the other side of the cameras. In the case of Beth, a contestant from the first season, it was clear how being observed and monitored had an effect on her level of commitment to the expert knowledge. Beth came to the reunion show a year after her experience on *The Swan*, after the pageant was over and she had gone home to regain a semblance of her previously private life. Beth confessed to having gained weight. She admitted that being away from the motivation provided by the program had allowed her to slip back into some of her old habits. Back on camera at the time of her confession, however, Beth reaffirmed her commitment to the program and made a pledge to get the weight back off. While it can not be argued that contestants are forced to do things against their will or better judgment, Andrejevic puts it best when he argues that RTV “results in submission to comprehensive forms of monitoring as a form of empowerment

and self-expression” (2004: 10). Committing to the regime of the *The Swan* was constructed as “good” for the women, in their best interest and their opportunity to become empowered, self-assured individuals.

Contestants on the show, thus, participated in their own self-constitution as subjects via the normalizing gaze of others. They made choices, but not without the input and intervention by those constructed as having access to a higher truth. Thus, they came to resemble “docile bodies” subjected, used, transformed and improved through the actions of discipline with an emphasis on self-control and obedience to rules. While a level of agency not acknowledged by Foucault in his conceptualization of “docile bodies” is evident in the women on the show, they do, nonetheless, look much like the description he gives. If, according to Foucault, regulating time and space effects how people think and act, then the control, rigidity and discipline invoked by *The Swan* can undeniably play a contributing role in the regulation of the participants on the show, and the discursive construction of regimes such as those displayed on the show as positive and self-serving in a neoliberal society.

## Chapter 7: Conclusions

In this thesis, I have argued that *The Swan* participates in the moral regulation of women and their bodies by reinforcing a very specific ideal of feminine corporeality, as well as through its discursive construction of cosmetic surgery as empowering, liberating, and as a requisite for self-care in a neoliberal context. I have supported this claim through a discourse analysis of *The Swan* series, in its entirety, paying particular attention to the show's construction of femininity premised on physical appearance, the construction of empowerment, liberation, choice and self-esteem, and by applying feminist reconceptualizations of Foucault's ideas about normalization, docile bodies, and resistance to specific moments on the show.

The central defining debate within the feminist discourses on cosmetic surgery, the discord between the concepts of "free choice" and "false consciousness," has been discussed at great length here. I have already argued that feminists and other body theorists ought to take a less dualistic approach and allow for the possibility of individual agency in what might be an otherwise oppressive or disempowering experience, in other words, to allow for the possibility of women actually experiencing their cosmetic surgery as liberating or empowering, even while that experience or act (of cosmetic surgery) exists within a socio-cultural nexus of power, inequality and objectification of "women." As other theorists have described it, a both/and logic, as opposed to either/or dichotomy is most appropriate to feminist poststructuralist research into cosmetic surgery. What I found in my research is synchronous to this perspective.

Through my analysis of discourses of the self and the construction of feminine subjectivities, I found that the discursively constructed options offered to women for

selfhood were limited in *The Swan* through the use of hegemonic postfeminist and neoliberal discourses of the self and mainstream conceptions of the idealized feminine body. The verb “feminization” was used frequently throughout the series, particularly by the “experts” on the show. Their discursive construction of what that meant within the context of *The Swan* was clearly tied to very particular physical characteristics of the women’s bodies they created. According to *The Swan*, to “feminize” a woman is to give her a slender body with large breasts, taut buttocks, a small waist, slender legs, a small nose, a prominent jaw, large eyes, full lips, large, straight, white teeth and large, voluptuous hair. Voila! The epitome of femininity has been achieved. All other variations of female embodiment and bodily aesthetics, according to experts and contestants on *The Swan*, are less than feminine.

I also found that even something so exclusively female as pregnancy and motherhood, on *The Swan*, was constructed and treated as an obstacle to “feminization.” What I found in my research was a trend toward critiquing and disciplining the *maternal* body. All symbols and signs that a woman had been pregnant, or was a mother, were to be erased. Stretch marks, flaccid breasts and loose abdominal muscles were all discursively constructed as the “ravages of motherhood” on *The Swan*. Thus, on *The Swan*, “feminization” meant making a woman look like what is presumed to be physically and sexually appealing to the average male other (young and virginal), and did not refer to that which makes us, as women, unique.

Feminization, thus, is demonstrated to be achievable only with the help of experienced “feminization” experts: plastic surgeons, personal trainers, dental surgeons, make-up artists and nutritionists. To be “feminine” in the world of *The Swan*, women

must surrender to the wills of these experts, follow their strict orders and regimens and trust that it is through them that women can access success vis-à-vis adoration, admiration, happiness and love. This task of “feminization” takes place amidst discourses of empowerment, liberation, choice and self-esteem. On *The Swan*, these concepts are constructed as being dependent on expert knowledge and privileged access.

*The Swan* contributes significantly to historically specific discursive constructions of “empowerment, liberation, choice and self-esteem.” The discursive constructions of each of these four concepts were analyzed and have strikingly similar findings. Mainly, each was constructed as being intimately connected to physical appearance and physical transformation, and each required intervention and action by experts. Liberation and choice were both also constructed as being necessarily surrendered in order to be achieved. So while *The Swan* made extensive use of discourses of liberation and empowerment, what the show constructed these terms to represent was very different from the construction of the terms in many feminist discourses. On *The Swan*, the body is seen, largely, as a representation of power. To be successful, powerful, and free, according to the discourses on *The Swan*, a woman must look young, and ultra feminine, as defined by expert knowledge. In fact, in my research, I discovered a formula for success, according to the experts on the show: a series of procedures most often prescribed to the contestants. Thus, in the midst of discussions of extraordinary individuality and finding one’s inner “feminine essence,” a series of clones were created, each bearing symbols of feminine success as constructed on the show. The striking similarities in the contestants’ post-operative appearances are eerie, but it is all done, apparently, in the best interest and for the self-care of the contestants.

Through my research, I found that while contestants on *The Swan* were “empowered” and “liberated” through their experiences, they were also required to participate in multiple and complex webs of power. As Heyes (2006) argues is true of commercial weight loss organizations, so too can it be said that *The Swan*’s contestants and experts use the language of self-care to conceal their implication in normalization. While the contestants on the show all end up looking alike, each one eerily similar to the next, all of this “transformation” is done in the name of empowerment and liberation from the confines of a once “ugly” corporeality that was highly particularized as their beauty and universalized. These transformations are constructed, on the show, to be therapeutic, to improve self-esteem, to be empowering and liberating and to erase childhood emotional trauma. In the midst of the celebration of all of these wonderful gifts the contestants receive, the normalization at play is overshadowed and excused (or perhaps, embraced) on the show.

### **The Reality Television Factor**

Participants in CS-RTV’s programs almost always agree to give themselves over to the whims of the regimes of the show, and thus, there is a significant amount of power and agency lost in this transaction. Even in moments of resistance, those featured on CS-RTV shows who are constructed as successful are always willing to follow a prescribed set of rules and strive to meet prescribed standards. While they ultimately have the choice whether or not to have certain procedures done or to follow particular dietary rules, they are bound, indefinitely, to a relationship with “experts” that is hierarchical in nature. What is portrayed in all RTV programs is always carefully edited by producers. This “RTV factor” accentuates and perhaps inflates the elements of coercion, power and

control in the issue of cosmetic surgery for women on CS-RTV shows. It is for this reason that CS-RTV was so worth investigating. Producers and experts, as well as participants, play a very public role in the discursive construction of cosmetic surgery as liberating and empowering for women. Under the pretext of “reality” television, this construction presents itself as a mere reflection of actuality, or a looking glass, so to speak, into the generalized experiences of women with cosmetic surgery and its ability to subvert and eliminate body image and self-esteem problems. In a neoliberal society, where individuals are judged on their ability to take care of themselves, this construction of cosmetic surgery on CS-RTV paints it as not only inviting and promising but, in some cases, a requisite to happiness and success.

In this thesis I set out to answer the following question: How does CS-RTV participate in the regulation of “feminine” bodies within a neoliberal context of self-care? What I found is that *The Swan* participates in the moral regulation of women and their bodies by reinforcing a very specific ideal of feminine corporeality, as well as through its discursive construction of cosmetic surgery as empowering, liberating, and as a virtuous requisite for self-care in a neoliberal context. Essentially, the time is right for CS-RTV to be effective in its regulation of women. The neoliberal context in which it has occurred is one in which individuals are responsible for their own success. When this image of success is painted, for women, as meeting very specific standards of what it looks like to be feminine and those standards are tacitly met through cosmetic surgery, it follows that cosmetic surgery is simply another neoliberal exercise of choice and self-fulfillment.

While it is easy for me as a viewer to understand that certain elements of the shows are edited, programmed, or set-up, the depiction of human emotion is something

that, at least in the moment of the viewing experience, is difficult to look beyond. While I found it easy, when watching *The Swan*, to distinguish the normalizing trends in the surgeries performed, the limited and contrived construction of femininity and the exclusionary definitions of empowerment and liberation, what caught my interest and attention most was the moment of the reveal, when the contestants first saw themselves in the mirrors after their transformations had taken place. As a woman who has often struggled with the pressures of a neoliberal culture focused on physical beauty and thinness, the relief and joy expressed by the contestants in these moments were very powerful advertising tools for cosmetic surgery. Taking into account the sob stories of past insecurities presented on the show, I experienced these moments, as a viewer, as very real. Thus, CS-RTV shows, and *The Swan* in particular, play a powerful role in defining what cosmetic surgery is in our current culture, how it is experienced by “women,” and what it has to offer to any person, man or woman, who feels insecure or inadequate in a neoliberal society.

So here I am, caught up in the middle of two positions that, before I began this research, seemed to be so incompatible: a critical understanding of the complex relations of power at play in the realm of cosmetic surgery and amplified by CS-RTV versus a sense of longing for the emotional fulfillment that seemed evident in the women who saw themselves in their new bodies and fell to their knees or were reduced to screams and tears of joy, relief and excitement.

In George Orwell's *1984*, the main character lives in a society in which the inner party – the experts, so to speak – constantly define, refine and redefine reality. Civilians are employed in the acts of reconstituting history to create the “truth” of the moment, and

yet, their consciousness of these acts does not matter, because regardless of the past, or the ideals of the characters, the reality is as it is defined in that moment. So too is the reality of cosmetic surgery. By calling Orwell to mind, I do not intend to suggest that *The Swan* participated in torture, mind control or oligarchical dictatorship over women's bodies, but I could not help but see a slight resemblance in the way in which reality is experienced and the relevant empowerment entailed in giving one's power over to expert control. While I can watch *The Swan* from a perspective that sees these surgeries as unnecessary and intrusive and homogenizing, I still want them. I still want to feel what the women on *The Swan* are shown to feel. The reality of cosmetic surgery is that, it creates bodies that are defined and normalized as desirable in this socio-historical context, and although I can find many alternative definitions of femininity and beauty, they are only marginal. The "truth," I have learned, is often simply that which is believed by the masses, of which I am, if even only fragmentally, a part.

I said in my introduction to this thesis that the act of deconstructing the rhetorical discourses used on *The Swan* was itself an emancipatory practice. Perhaps ironically, considering my feminist perspective, what I have been emancipated from through my deconstruction of *The Swan* is the pressure I felt as a feminist scholar to reject all notions that cosmetic surgery could be a positive thing for women or to choose a side of the debate from which to argue. The truth is, I'm more on the fence now than I ever was before I did this research, and have grown quite comfortable in my position there as a permanent space between theory and practice, reason and emotion, "free choice" and "false consciousness." In the space between these dualistic approaches lies my reality of human experience. I am at once both offended by the homogenizing, objectifying reality

that is created through CS-RTV, and tantalized by the emotional fulfillment it appears to offer. If nothing else, I have learned that the power of individual experience and affect – of real, tacit emotions that come from a visceral source, has the ability to render theory and understanding of politics and power almost meaningless to the individual in a neoliberal context. Because, knowing what I have learned throughout the course of this thesis – that femininity is narrowly defined based on one's thinness and lack of presence (aside from in the breast), and that in the context of CS-RTV, to be empowered I must surrender to complex rules and hierarchical normalizing judgement by experts and thus, participate in modes of power which disempower, I still can not help but long to participate. *I love Big Brother*<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> George Orwell's 1984 main character, Winston Smith, despite his inner conflicts and longing for resistance and revolt against the omnipotent and omnipresent "Big Brother," eventually succumbs to torturous "resocialization" to conform. Although he is still conscious of his past and the critiques he once had of Big Brother, he is swept up in the emotional experience of giving in, and experiences life in a more satisfied way after this "transformation." The novel ends by saying of Winston "He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother" (p. 311).

## Appendix A

FACE	Season 1 (/16)	Season 2 (/16)	Total
<b>Brow Lift</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Rhinoplasty (nose job)</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Liposuction</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Lasik Eye Surgery</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Fat Transfer</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Lip Augmentation</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Photofacial</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Mid-Face Lift</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Eye Lift</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Facial implant (cheek, chin, jaw)</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Collagen Injection</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Lip Lift</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Laser Hair Removal</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Dermatologist</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Microdermabrasion</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Mole Removal</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>CO2 Laser</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Chin Refinement</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Botox</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Ear Lobe Reduction</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Chin Lift</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Full Face Lift</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Mastopexy</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Blue Light Treatment</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chemical Peel</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Restelyne Injection</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Cheek Refinement</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>

FITNESS/DIET/ COUNSELLING	Season 1 (/16)	Season 2 (/16)	Total
*Weekly Therapy and Coaching	16	16	32
1200 Cal/day diet	9	12	21
2hrs/day Cardio and Weight Training	6	11	17
120 hrs + in gym	7	0	7
1700 Cal/day diet	2	1	3
Jenny Craig	3	0	3
Gym	2	1	3
Nutrisystem	0	2	2
2x/day gym	1	1	2
1300 Cal/day diet	1	0	1
2300 Cal/day diet	1	0	1
Balanced diet	1	0	1
150 hrs in gym	0	1	1

<b>BODY</b>	<b>Season 1 (/16)</b>	<b>Season 2 (/16)</b>	<b>Total</b>
Liposuction (in general)	13	16	29
• Thighs	11	13	24
• Stomach	7	11	18
• Knees	6	5	11
• Flanks	6	2	8
• Hips	1	7	8
• Buttocks	4	2	6
• Back	2	2	4
• Calves	4	0	4
• Ankles	4	0	4
• Chin/Neck	2	2	4
• Arms	0	4	4
• Body	1	0	1
Breast Augmentation	11	11	22
Tummy tuck	7	10	17
Breast Lift	3	2	5
Nipple Lift	2	1	3
Breast Reduction	1	2	3
Full Body Lift	0	1	1
Hearing Aid*	0	1	1
Laser Hair Removal	1	0	1

<b>DENTAL</b>	<b>Season 1 (/16)</b>	<b>Season 2 (/16)</b>	<b>Total</b>
Zoom Bleaching	14	14	28
Porcelain Veneers	14	13	27
Deep Cleaning	14	12	26
Gum Recontouring	6	8	14
Gum Surgery	4	2	6
Root Canal	4	1	5
Tooth Repair/Reconstruction	2	2	4
Extraction	2	1	3
Bridge	3	0	3
Crown(s)	0	3	3
Orthodontics	2	0	2
Retainer(s)	0	2	2
Periodontal Work	1	0	1
Gum Cleaning	1	0	1
Full Recontouring	0	1	1
Dental Implants	0	1	1
Laser Bone Surgery	0	1	1

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