



# The Cosmetic Gaze: Body Modification and the Construction of Beauty

*Bernadette Wegenstein*

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If the gaze can be understood to mark the disjuncture between how we see ourselves and how we want to be seen by others, the *cosmetic gaze*--in Bernadette Wegenstein's groundbreaking formulation--is one through which the act of looking at our bodies and those of others is already informed by the techniques, expectations, and strategies (often surgical) of bodily modification. It is, Wegenstein says, also a moralizing gaze, a way of looking at bodies as awaiting both physical and spiritual improvement. In *The Cosmetic Gaze*, Wegenstein charts this synthesis of outer and inner transformation. Wegenstein shows how the cosmetic gaze underlies the "rebirth" celebrated in today's makeover culture and how it builds upon a body concept that has collapsed into its mediality. In today's beauty discourse--on reality TV and Web sites that collect "bad plastic surgery"--we yearn to experience a bettered self that has been reborn from its own flesh and is now itself, like a digitally remastered character in a classic Hollywood movie, immortal. Wegenstein traces the cosmetic gaze from eighteenth-century ideas about physiognomy through television makeover shows and facial-recognition software to cinema--which, like our other screens, never ceases to show us our bodies as they could be, drawing life from the very cosmetic gaze it transmits.

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