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**Media and the Rhetoric of Body Perfection: Cosmetic Surgery,  
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## **Media and the Rhetoric of Body Perfection: Cosmetic Surgery, Weight Loss and Beauty in Popular Culture**

Deborah Harris-Moore

Ashgate, 2014

210 pages

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Deborah Harris-Moore's *Media and the Rhetoric of Body Perfection* is a timely, ambitious and accessible examination of the parallel discourses that underpin both the obesity epidemic and cosmetic surgery. Through an extended analysis of a variety of popular cultural texts and interviews with people who have undergone surgical and body modification procedures the book investigates the centrality of narratives of transformation and competition in representations of bodily change. The dual sources of data are used to ask questions about the role seemingly far removed media rhetoric plays in shaping us, literally.

Harris-Moore pays particular attention to how medical discourses have infiltrated popular cultural texts and offers an interesting and useful take on the shifting boundaries between the 'medical' and the 'cosmetic'. This addresses a noticeable gap in the existing literature which tends to box together medical and health imperatives with 'obesity' and beauty ideals with cosmetic surgery. By drawing the two together Harris-Moore not only challenges the assumption that weight-loss is predominantly about medical health, or cosmetic surgery about beauty, but starts to break down binaries around medical need versus cosmetic want, and agency versus victimhood, to present a more complex understanding of what she terms 'the rhetoric of perfection'.

The most effective illustration of is the account of Harris-Moore's own experiences of weight loss and plastic surgery. Compellingly told and rich in personal detail Harris-Moore's honest reflection beautifully illustrates the contradictory feelings of pain, desire, excitement, control and powerlessness that accompany processes of surgical and non-surgical bodily transformation. This section is a highlight of the book, and in some ways it is a shame it did not play a more central role as a point of autoethnographic reference for the following textual analyses.

The substantive chapters move away from analysing lived experience and offer an in depth reading of popular texts implicated in propagating the 'rhetoric of perfection'. Harris-Moore picks apart a broad range of representations – from Michelle Obama's 'Let's Move' campaign, to Lap-Band advertisements, reality TV shows such as *Dr 90210*, *The Swan* and *The Biggest Loser* and fictional films including *Mrs Doubtfire*, *Shallow Hal* and *The Nutty Professor* – and scrutinises each through the lens of feminist theory with

insights from fat and disability studies. The disparate genres and forms of these texts makes for a novel discussion of their points of convergence. However, at times the differences between them are perhaps too great to form a thorough account of how, for example, individual empowerment is discursively constructed as the outcome of bodily transformation. In particular the chapter on fat suits in Hollywood films said much about the representation and stigmatisation of fat people, not to mention the co-construction of size, age and gender, but only implicitly contributed to the elaboration of Harris-Moore's central concept of body 'perfection'.

Far more illuminating was the analysis of the ten interviews with people who had undergone cosmetic or plastic surgery procedures, weight-loss surgery or body modification. Using the interviews to, 'counter the popular representations that plastic surgery patients do not like themselves' (p110) was successful in that it allowed for exactly the kind of 'open and complex' reading Harris-Moore was aiming for. She draws attention to the heterogeneous pressures, influences and desires in the narratives of the participants in which the media becomes a haunting presence/absence – rarely spoken of directly, but generalised as 'social pressure' and reiterated via local influences of friends and family. The interview data provided a fascinating insight into how discourses of empowerment, choice and perfection are reworked by individuals in ways that are by turn creative and mundane but always ambiguous in their relationship to agency.

Harris-Moore's final examination is of resistance to the rhetoric of body perfection, largely that represented in a selection of documentary films. While the recognition of resistance is vital, Harris-Moore's choice to analyse documentary film because it, 'seems most like a medium of representational resistance' (p141) perhaps needed more justification. An unexamined authenticity is afforded the films analysed and more attention to the discursive construction of their narratives was needed. In particular the analysis of *Modify*, a film about body modifications such as tattooing, scarification, piercing and implants, overlooks how normative standards of 'perfection' act as a point of disidentification for the modifiers in the film. Thus, rather than resisting the dominant rhetoric, *Modify* may also play a role in reproducing it. To address this Harris-Moore might have engaged in a fuller exploration of the resistance to both medical models of obesity and cultural standards of beauty offered by fat studies/activism as a source of potentially fruitful, if still imperfect, critiques of perfection.

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