Surgery for breakfast

by HANNAH BRADBY Oct 18, 2013

A friend, recently returned from a city-break in Budapest, reported it wonderful in every respect. The only shock was the hotel breakfast menu: instead of the anticipated eggs benedict, croissants and coffee, she was confronted with dental implants, tear-drop breasts and spiderweb-face-lifts. Being a strong-minded woman, she didn’t allow the descriptions of surgery to affect her appetite.

Travelling for surgical intervention is big business and its various contradictions are well documented. The rise of budget airlines has made foreign markets in surgical intervention accessible to a wider public as it becomes an almost routine self-enhancement. ‘Aesthetic surgery’ is no longer a rejuvenation process for the ageing body, but rather it is a beauty-treatment to which the young, and especially young women, aspire. Celebrities’ surgical enhancements are an endless source of fascination and their increasingly open discussion suggests a process of normalization, at least in the entertainment industry. As models, actors and reality television stars employ surgical intervention to maintain the successful ‘brand’ of their appearance, plastic surgery for the wider public is also normalizing.

In her on-going research in the Midlands, Jacqueline Sanchez Taylor describes how young working class women invest in their bodies as outward signs of successful agency. In a single friendship group of young women, seventeen of them had undertaken breast surgery, between the ages of 18 and 25. Six of these went abroad for the procedure, since breast implants cost less in Belgium than in Birmingham. The women swithered between seeing surgery this way, via Sam72/Shutterstock

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Sanchez Taylor shows how the industry promotes plastic surgery as beauty therapy with marketing information that minimizes the risks of the surgery, emphasizing the procedures as enhancing appearance and confidence. She describes how surgeons collude in emphasizing breast surgery as a consumer choice avoiding discussion of medical issues and not questioning its value for women barely into their 20s. Take Charlene who is claustrophobic and anxious and so back outs of two appointments for breast enlargement. Despite her fears, Charlene persists with her quest for implants and so as to force herself to attend the third appointment, Charlene pays for it up-front, telling the surgeon he can keep the money if she fails to turn up.

For these young women, plastic surgery represents a positive self-evaluation that is a shared value, which manifests itself in buying surgery. In the absence of other forms of status,
Charlene demonstrated her own worth by getting the surgery done at the third attempt. The surgeon's collusion in helping Charlene towards 'beauty surgery', despite her initial reluctance illustrates Sanchez Taylor's remark that 'the bodies of young women ... are opened up for profit, albeit with their consent' (Sanchez Taylor 2012: 651). Charlene got a new bust to illustrate she was 'worth it', but there's also a longer term 'cost' for her. Two years after her surgery Charlene has capsular contraction or hardening of the tissue which she massages and tries not to worry about.

My friend returned from Budapest looking refreshed and stress-free, insisting this was due to a good holiday, rather than having had any 'work' done. But once she's finished her doctoral thesis, she says she'll return to Budapest to sort out her frown-lines.

Plastic surgery rectifies a body damaged by injury, or the insults of the ageing process, thereby restoring its formerly youthful or wholesome appearance: putting back what nature has removed. The uptake of increasingly invasive procedures at younger ages signals a shift in the meaning of plastic surgery. For the young women in the Midlands their surgery should demonstrate its own fakeness, such that its value is on display: new breasts should be notable not natural. These women are canny consumers of medical procedures, shopping around for the right price. Choosing between cheap Belgian or pricier Birmingham implants, between teardrop or round, silicone or saline, does begin to look like scrambled or poached eggs on a breakfast menu.