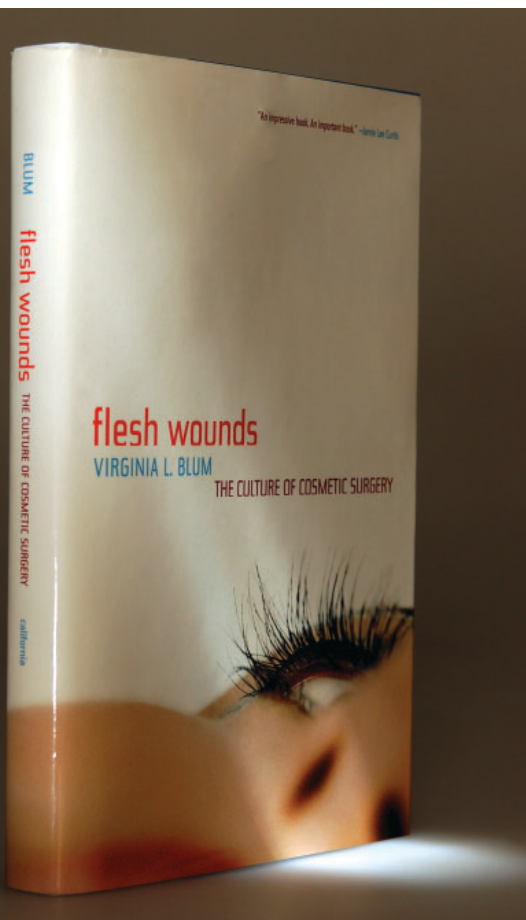


Cutting Culture

Flesh Wounds: The Culture of Cosmetic Surgery
by Virginia L. Blum
University of California Press



“Extreme Makeover,” “The Swan” and “I Want a Famous Face” are a few of reality TV’s offerings to satiate America’s obsession with the perfect “after” photo. Virginia Blum, a UK associate professor of English and author of *Flesh Wounds*, says the popularity of such shows bolsters her premise: Hollywood celebrity culture in TV, movies and magazines has contributed to the booming cosmetic surgery culture.

“All of the programs that have come out since the publication of my book, I think, just validate my point that cosmetic surgery is about ‘becoming’ a celebrity—it’s about identifying with celebrity images.”

Blum talks about an interview she read recently with actor Kate Winslet, who was horri-

fied that a woman on MTV’s “I Want a Famous Face” had her body surgically tailored to look like an airbrushed image of Winslet. “It was clear from her commentary that Winslet feels if more celebrities show what their bodies really look like, as Jamie Lee Curtis has [Curtis appeared without makeup, hair styling or designer duds in *More* magazine in 2002], that would help. But I don’t think so,” Blum says.

“People aren’t identifying with the flesh-and-blood actor; they’re identifying with the technology. They know photos are retouched, but they truly want to look like the digitally altered pictures. One of the reasons image-based icons are so compelling is precisely because they’re in the two-dimensional arena.”

Blum says by harnessing the “scandal”—the extremeness of cosmetic surgery—these TV shows are actually turning it into a normalized, middle-class practice. They feed the idea that normal people will want to have surgery to feel better about themselves.

And Blum speaks from experience: At age 18, she learned her mother thought it was her duty to have her daughter’s nose “fixed.” “I was the reticent one in the face of my mother’s insistence,” Blum writes. At the doctor’s office, the allure of a model’s photo and the doctor’s promise that Virginia, too, could be a “10” swayed her to agree to surgery. One botched nose job, and a subsequent “rescue” operation, gave her an intimate knowledge of the expectation versus reward of plastic surgery.

Her personal story sets up an academic crossover book that combines diverse viewpoints, from surgery patients and feminist cultural critics (like Blum’s UK colleague Susan Bordo, a respected body-image scholar), to explore the realities and fantasies that have made risking death to get a new face a cultural norm.

In interviewing 39 board-certified plastic surgeons and 11 patients, Blum chose to wear a “humanist” hat. “I think a lot of social scientists expected me to make claims premised on data to prove a certain point, but I did the interviews because I was interested in peoples’ stories. My goal from the beginning was to collect the ‘fictions’—the combination of cultural stories that allow us to feel like cosmetic surgery is normal and good.

“My point is that surgery doesn’t make people feel good—both because it often doesn’t fulfill patient expectations and it’s structurally addictive.”

She did not set out to castigate plastic surgeons or those who choose to have surgery, but Blum ends the book with a warning: “It is a circuit that takes you from one doctor to the next, from one procedure to the next; for a while you are exhilarated, as you wait for the beautified part to emerge from the swelling, and then you are back to the mirror, the drawing board of your desire.”

—Alicia P. Gregory