

"An impressive book. An important book." —Jamie Lee Curtis

# flesh wounds

VIRGINIA L. BLUM

THE CULTURE OF COSMETIC SURGERY



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# Flesh Wounds

*and to my mother, Fern Walder*

## *The Culture of Cosmetic Surgery*

Virginia L. Blum

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

Berkeley Los Angeles London

FIVE

## As If Beauty

"That's what a star is . . . someone who is always re-creating themselves anew."

*Joan Hyler, Hollywood manager, in "Altered States"*

Brian D'Amato's updated *Frankenstein* novel, *Beauty*, makes clear the narcissistic side effects of celebrity culture. The narrator, Jamie Angelo, transforms aging faces with a combination of Artificial Skin, photography, painting, and, later, computer generations. He calls his craft "beauty technology": "industrial materials designed to imitate or . . . surpass nature" (39). He specializes in celebrities ("celebrity-makeovers," as he calls them) whose faces desperately need to measure up to the camera's intense scrutiny (127).

Jamie creates the template for his girlfriend's new face on the computer. She is not intended to seem quite real; that her beauty is unnatural is essential to its power. Nevertheless, the instant Jamie "releases" her to the public, she becomes a paradigm for others to emulate.<sup>1</sup> As D'Amato suggests, however, modeling oneself on two-dimensional images is inherent in movie-star culture itself. Plastic surgery is insufficient because it's limited by real flesh. Working with Artificial Skin (absolutely smooth, poreless) is like taking an airbrushed image and importing it into the domain of real life. This is plastic surgery's unconscious

fantasy about itself, D'Amato intimates—to elevate the human into the celluloid.

#### “AS IF”

In 1942, the psychoanalyst Helene Deutsch coined the term “as if personality” to describe a particular set of patients unaccounted for by other diagnostic categories. Subsequently considered a subcategory of the borderline personality, the as if personality “forces on the observer the inescapable impression that the individual’s whole relationship to life has something about it which is lacking in genuineness and yet outwardly runs along ‘as if’ it were complete” (75). While in “normal” development, the core sense of self is pretty much fixed by age six or seven, the as if personality never stabilizes. Consequently, this personality is extremely vulnerable to the influences of her or his external environment. As Deutsch puts it: “Any object will do as a bridge for identification” (77). This personality can “happen” only by way of identifications with others, identifications that keep shifting because there is no core personality discriminating and selecting. The identifications, in other words, are whole instead of partial. “The representatives which go to make up the conscience remain in the external world and instead of the development of inner morals there appears a persistent identification with external objects” (81). Instead of introjecting principles derived from parents and other adults and making them part of the permanent fabric of one’s self, the as if personality simply drifts along, identifying with people as they come into her or his orbit, easily exchanging these identifications for others. With each substitution of new for old identifications, the as if personality transforms radically.<sup>2</sup>

Deutsch writes: “It is like the performance of an actor who is technically well trained but who lacks the necessary spark to make his impersonations true to life” (76). Deutsch unwittingly collapses the difference between “true” and “false” impersonations when she makes it clear that identity itself is merely a performance—which the as if’s insufficiency

"I blame mirrors. If it weren't for them we wouldn't need plastic surgeons. In the meantime, anyone tempted to re-shape face, body, or mind by means of knife should first read Blum's intelligent, persuasive, and absorbing book. Both enticed and alarmed, the reader will at least know what she's doing and more importantly why. This is a book that takes you and shakes you by the throat and leaves you the better for it." **FAY WELDON**, author of *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*

"An eye-opening look at the dangers, both physical and emotional, of plastic surgery and of the power of beauty in all of our lives. Blum's book is an impressive interweaving of observation, oral interviews, cultural studies, and historical sources. An absorbing read, this is a scholarly book that general readers can enjoy." **LOIS BANNER**, author of *American Beauty*

"A provocative and thoroughly persuasive argument that we live in a culture of cosmetic surgery where identity is sited on the shifting surfaces of the body. *Flesh Wounds* brilliantly explores the link between the seductions of surgical self-fashioning and the star system, drawing on a stunning array of materials ranging from interviews with plastic surgeons, psychoanalytic theory, and the novel to the visual media of digital photography, film, and television." **KATHLEEN WOODWARD**, author of *Aging and Its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions*

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