

Before and After: Cosmetic Surgery and Social Media  
A.E. Benenson

I.

Pop-psychology tells us that people who obsessively seek cosmetic surgery will never be happy with the results because they are addressing the symptoms and not the cause of their unhappiness. Their *real* problem isn't a sagging midsection or a crooked nose, so the argument goes, it's a *body-image* problem. It argues that body-image problems are first and foremost media problems; it's what happens when we hold ourselves up to the impossible standards sold to us through pictures in magazines, on TV, and film. All this is true, but not in the way we suspect.

There *is* an obscene relationship between photographic images and cosmetic surgery, but it has very little to do with the content of the images and everything to do with their form. The body-image problem that drives us to cosmetic surgery is not a problem with a specific image that we envision for our bodies, rather it is the problem of our desire to turn our bodies into images. When we feel envious, lustful, or inferior in front of a photograph of a beautiful person, we imagine it has something to do with person depicted— their small waist, their sleek face, etc.—but really we are envious of the features of the photograph itself. For while we know that if we met the person *in person* we would find all sorts of physical flaws, not to mention those beneath the surface, we still cannot help falling in love here, with their uncanny image— a perfected surface, frozen at just the right moment, forever.

Or the reverse-shot: we show a favorite photo of ourselves to a friend and they innocently exclaim, "wow, is that really you? That looks nothing like you!" And we are forced to confront that hidden part of us that already knows this, that likes the photo for exactly this reason. Here again, the frustrated dream is not quite the same thing as wanting to be photogenic (i.e. the desire to appear attractively in photos); instead, it's something like the desire to appear as an attractive photo in person— an impossible longing born out of the mistaken belief that the photographs we see represent reality and nothing more. How easily we look past a photograph's improbable formal conceits—that time could be stopped, for example, or that singular beauty could be endlessly reproduced—and imagine instead what we see is a reality out there for the taking. These are not people we are chasing, they are photographs.

The industry of cosmetic surgery grew to service this fantasy. Cosmetic surgery promised to suck out our insides, crush and flatten our bones, erase our unique marks; in short, it promised remake us into the photograph, beautiful in its total devotion to surface, in its generic conformity, and its refusal to obey the passage of time. Today cosmetic clinics are also sophisticated digital photography studios, where technicians airbrush our photos and then promise to *reproduce* that perfect surface upon ours. But even before the digital revolution,

plastic surgeons were canny photographers. They would capture patients in a series of photos, first drawing on those images and then copying those lines on the body itself, eliding the two into a single surface. And even before the advent of Botox, which, as if with the click of the shutter, literally paralyzes the face in a single expression (snap shot), faces-lifts and tummy-tucks grasped at the photographic illusion of timelessness.

The constant apology of cosmetic surgery patients is that they only "want to their outside to match how they feel inside". In other words, they suffer from the impossible pressure to make everything visible on the surface. This is the logic of the photograph not of humanity; it's the depthless photograph that has to speak its truth to everyone, all at once, and from its surface. And so this, the image's great historical limitation—it's lack of interiority—became revered in the 20th century as a direct mode of social communication: the complicated social demands of bodily "presence" were replaced with the simpler goal of *exposure*. *Flatter*, the verb and the adjective merge: to compliment, but also a compliment. If other types of images vaguely professed these rules, it was photography, above all else, that controlled our body-image in this way. No other medium produced images that seemed at once so perfect and yet so believable.

## II.

If turning oneself into a photograph was once an aspiration, in the era of social media it has become a necessity. Marshall McLuhan established that every new medium always has an older one as its contents, and so it is with social media whose formal conditions urge us to be converted into a compatible constellation of images, photographs most of all. Within these networks photographs of a person serve as the most basic, integral unit of their existence. They are our new social firmament. This represents a fundamental change in how photographs work. For most of the 20th century, photographs of people, even of those in our larger social groups—friends, neighbors, colleagues—were mnemonic images; they would recall us to the memories (and prospects) of physical interactions with bodies. Now, upon social media networks photographs are constitutive images: a photograph is often all that we have seen and will ever see of a given acquaintance. On Facebook, Twitter, etc. portrait photographs do not represent people they *are* people.

In other words: when our lives still involved physical interactions with things and people, photographs were understood as immaterial, second-order, traces of that physical reality. Today, in the increasing absence of the physical world, photographs have become the first-order of reality to which we tether evermore abstract, computational forms of living.

In this way the half-promises of cosmetic surgery have been technologically fulfilled in the era of social media: selfhood is finally and totally compressed onto the pristine surface of an image-bearing screen, whereupon our body-images are controlled at every angle and primed for endless reproduction and distribution.

"Facebook, Plastic Surgery Go Hand In Hand: People Go Under The Knife To Fix Bad Online Picture" reads one headline. But isn't it obvious that just the

opposite is true? Insofar as social media completes the photographic project of cosmetic surgery, it also renders the industry obsolete. Not only are we now fully photographic, our bodies are no longer the preferred social device for distributing those images. Why would we go through the physical pain and expense of making our photographs upon a real body that no one is going to see anyway? If before we wanted to transform our visible bodies into a photographic surface it was not because we disdained them, but because we (over)valued their importance in self-presentation. We wanted to become photographs but still relied on our bodies as surfaces for their development. Today, our physical bodies are subordinated in social relevance to their images, and their technological prostheses, the computer and its networks. The difficulty of rendering a photograph upon our bodies (cosmetic surgery) has been replaced with the relative ease of allowing a photograph to act in place of our bodies (social media).

At the same time, digital photography has allowed for the virtualized adaptation of the actual techniques of cosmetic surgery. Popular outcries over the increasingly egregious digital manipulations of bodies in popular media tend to focus our attention on the ethical "problem" with such distortions while overlooking this practical consequence: digital photography has severed any of the remaining links between a body and its image, while at the same time it has made the procedures for transforming one's body-image cheap and easily available to everyone. We are fast approaching a time when anyone will be able to digitally coax improbable aesthetic perfection coaxed out of the image of any-body-whatsoever.

The Google search, "Facebook Photoshop fails" brings up thousands of amateur attempts at digital corrective surgery, they are absurd but they are also telling: we have entered a new era of self-administered cosmetic surgery where our images not our bodies are the subject.

These digital versions of the surgeon's tools are not only widely available (e.g. Photoshop), now they are beginning to be freely integrated into our social media applications. The purpose of the filters on Instagram, for example, is not so much to evoke nostalgia as to give you as many options as possible to guarantee your photograph looks attractive. A former executive for the photo sharing site Flickr recently admitted that their company's largest mistake was building a network for showcasing beautiful photos rather than one for creating them.

The technological culture of the 21st century has so far been defined by the populist upheaval of formerly elitist, centralized systems of aesthetic production-- fine art, music, movies, publishing. Cosmetic surgery will be added to this list, but with reluctance. We have convinced ourselves that the digital revolution has been a story of progress, self-actualization and empowerment, but to include cosmetic surgery is to admit that this has also been a story about the viral expansion of the age-old neuroses of vanity, body-anxiety, and self-loathing. Contemporary visual culture has produced an ironic pair of before-and-after images: it is cosmetic surgery that no longer resembles its former self, while we still look all too familiar.