Book Review

Edmonds, Alexander

Pretty Modern: Beauty, Sex, and Plastic Surgery in Brazil
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Edmonds’ ethnography ‘Pretty Modern’ deals with the often-underestimated issue of cosmetic surgery in Brazil. In it, Edmonds attempts to situate plastic surgery against larger changes in female sexuality and reproduction. The central theme focuses on the relationship of beauty to social conflicts in modernity. He analyses how beauty becomes a paradoxical “problem” in modernity, i.e. how women become ‘subjects asserting sexual rights and control over reproduction’, at the same time that the female body is also ‘turned into an object of a new sexual culture’, becoming eroticized, visualized and commodified (p.33).

The book has two lines of enquiry. The first asks how Brazil can shed light on the significance of beauty as a domain of modern experience. The second involves using beauty as a lens to focus on some of the wider tensions in modernizing Brazil, including: deep market inequalities and a thriving consumer culture, a modern identity based on racial and cultural mixture and a newer assertion of identity politics, and a reputation for natural sensuality but high rates of interventionist medicine on the female body. The book comprises three parts (and the conclusion), each one dealing with a major domain of modern experience: medicine and psychology, race and nation, gender and sexuality.

Edmonds situates plastic surgery in relation to the economic, medical and psychic landscape of late capitalism, by focusing on issues such as the rise of mass media, the search for authentic national identity, and the importation of medical technologies. His analysis suggests how class identifications can be redefined and reshuffled in the culture of beauty. Drawing on the work of Biehl, J. (e.g. 2007), Edmonds demonstrates how new notions of ‘rights’ coexist with extreme market stratification, and how medical practices become part of the fetishization of the body and modern technology.

Edmonds then examines the place of beauty within the changing significance of colour in the post dictatorship period in Brazil, highlighting how a celebrity and media-focused consumer culture becomes a central domain of identification. He describes how a new black movement has called for a reconceptualization of race in Brazil as one of multiculturalism instead of the previous mestiçagem, or ‘racial democracy’, which diminished the ability to denounce racial inequality.

The use of the beauty culture as a lens to examine the issue of race in Brazil demonstrates the significance of the aesthetic dimension of modern subjectivities. As the colour hierarchy made appearance a central marker of social status, Edmonds shows how it is not surprising
that the current black movement should be framed in the same aesthetic idiom, i.e. as an affirmation of black beauty and of the rights of the black consumer (p.174).

The final section and conclusion bring together the central themes, analysing how gender and sexuality shape the medical practices, market dynamics and modes of self-governance that are discussed earlier in the book. Situating plastic surgery in relation to a larger political economy of female reproduction, Edmonds shows how it is becoming a normalized aspect of female health. Beauty cultures reflect larger changes in female sexuality and reproduction as they are defined within consumer culture, medicine, and psychology.

One of the clear advantages of Pretty Modern is the great depth of analysis that we are offered. Anecdotes and detailed descriptions provide the backdrop for theoretical discussions, fleshing out the arguments and providing the reader with a more rounded view of the issues. Edmonds conducted extensive fieldwork and so includes interviews with a wide range of informants: from famous pop stars and socialites, to maids who aspire to acquire plastic surgery, to favela residents who dream of fashion modelling, to single mothers who embrace plastic surgery as a means of erotic body sculpting.

Edmonds turns conventional arguments around plastic surgery in the social sciences on their head, as his aim is ‘to constitute beauty as a social domain that has its own internal logic that cannot be reduced to an operation of other forms of power’. Rather than view it only as a social construction he works from the assumption that physical attractiveness is an objective form of value, if not “possessed” by individuals, then observable within certain social relationships and moments’ (p.20).

Drawing on Agamben (1998), Edmonds argues that the proliferation of plastic surgery in Brazil reflects a biological framing of sexuality that breaks from the symbolic and ceremonial dimensions of erotic experience (p.240). This focus on the ‘biologization’ of sexuality and selves, leads Edmonds suggests that perhaps plastic surgery in Brazil thrives not off alienation from the body, ‘but rather an ethos even better suited to the expansion of the beauty industry: compulsory love of the body’ (p.237).

The emphasis on beauty as a domain of national or cultural identification, that also reflects and shapes ‘a particular kind of modern subject with diverse aspirations for self-transformation, social mobility, and sexual pleasure and power” (p.30), is illuminating and important. However in emphasising the argument Edmonds sometimes seems to simplify feminist theoretical approaches to beauty practices as being only about patriarchal domination.

Furthermore, Edmonds mentions Fukuyama and enhancement technologies, but he does not engage with the literature in depth. He only points out the tendency to isolate such technologies from their social and class contexts (p.73). Further engagement with the literature on plastic surgery in other cultures would also be helpful, e.g. Holliday, Cairnie (2007).

The slight disadvantage to such an ‘all-encompassing’ writing style is that the point may sometimes become a bit unclear in the thick description. Interestingly, however, Edmonds does discuss how the ‘delight in impurity and inauthentic hybridity’ that is part of ‘the ethos of Brazilian life’ have made their way into this presentation of his research (p.24). However this is not a major drawback, as overall, Pretty Modern is a very enjoyable, provocative and stimulating read.
REFERENCES:

