Scars and Screens
Nip/Tuck

1. "Make me..."

Already through its title sequence, the television series *Nip/Tuck* (Ryan Murphy, 2003–2010) presents its central concerns in a remarkable aesthetic density. The first shot of the title sequence shows a white hand that is drawing a dashed red line against a white background. This marking continues in the next shot in order to separate the image into two halves: on both sides, two artificial bodies can now be seen. The series logo appears and, with it, a change occurs. If at first the images evoked the impression of an aesthetic symmetry with their assembly of identical bodies, a slight variation now becomes apparent: for a brief moment, the hand of the right body twitches, distinguishing it in this brief moment from the motionless body on the left. Following this, the red line is seen again, marking the lower thoracic region as the area to be operated on. The next shot shows a view of uniform mannequins in half-opened cardboard boxes. Not only the mannequins but their packages as well are identified as serial products: a stack of additional boxes with the same labels and markings can be seen behind the first row. This is followed by a close-up of a mannequin's face, which suddenly opens its eyes. At the same time this movement occurs, another transformation takes place. The background switches from a flat, gray tinge to an outdoor scene: a blue sky with white clouds, and a row of buildings with palm trees become discernible. In the foreground, the mannequin can be seen again, and it too moves its eyes, even if hardly noticeable, by briefly changing its line of vision from left to right. The last shot ultimately brings back the red line: it moves up along the neck on a mannequin. Here, too, a transformation takes place: the white of the face becomes a soft pink skin tone, and the lips turn red. As a final piece

of information, the credit "Created by / Ryan Murphy" is superimposed on the image.

In only 45 seconds, the title sequence develops a complex network of relations. Along with the level of the visual, the level of acoustics also contributes to the elaboration of basic aesthetic elements. The title song, "A Perfect Lie" by Engine Room, consists of synthetically produced arrangements that are accompanied by a female voice singing the lines: "Make me / beautiful / Make me / a perfect soul / a perfect mind / a perfect face / a perfect lie". The lyrics' part "Make me," emphasized through repetition, presents a core statement, pointing to the processuality of transformation. It does not focus on what is finished but what is still left to finish; not the result of, but the process of transformation becomes the point of interest. Moreover, the relation to the unfinished is shown in the reference to fragments. Not a single shot shows the body as a whole; it is exclusively presented in partial views. This applies to, on the one hand, the choice of framing, but on the other hand, it also concerns the fragmentation of the body itself. The shot of the warehouse, for example, reveals that the mannequins in the cardboard boxes are missing their limbs: only heads and torsos are sticking out of the packages; arms and legs are severed.

In addition, the red line indicates that the idea of a closed whole can always only be provisional. Already split up itself (namely by being a dashed line), it spreads across the body and the image in order to generate and display separations. This aesthetic element also characterizes the text overlays in the title sequence, where the splitting up is continually demonstrated by a slash mark. Even the title of the series, *Nip/Tuck*, itself contains this dividing slash; furthermore, it appears in the opening credits, a slash separating each actor's first and last name. As a striking symbol throughout, the slash points to a type of cutting and fragmentation that not only characterizes the theme of the series but also its medium: television itself has no concept of an enclosed whole, as it only ever presents sections and segments. John Ellis refers to the segment as the basic element of television, as its essential medial component. Everything that television shows is created and sustained by segmentation. This principle is nowhere more evident than in the series, which, precisely for this reason, is a unique reflexive form of the televisual: "The seg-

ment as the basic unit according to a short burst of attention is matched by the serial and series form."[1]

The opening credits of *Nip/Tuck* present not only the result but also the procedure of segmentation. The slash mark posits a type of cutting that reflects both surgical and visual operations. Notably, however, this process is not fully executed but only hinted at. Instead of the clarity of the conclusion, the inexactitude of the in-between begins to emerge. Here, too, the specificity of television as a medium comes into play. Lorenz Engell notes: "There is no cutting in television; television works with permanent transitioning."[2] Unlike film, whose procedures of editing work to mark clear-cut beginnings and endings, television is not dealing with clear separations, but with blurrings and transitions. This applies to both its programmatic form, characterized by the flow of television programs into one another, and its aesthetic form, which, in turn, is capable of stylistically marking the flow of images[3]. This can clearly be seen in the title sequence of *Nip/Tuck*. There is no cutting from image to image, but rather constant cross-fading. Flowing, continuous transitions are shown rather than stable forms distinguishable from one another. The image appears not as a composition of individual parts but as an amalgamation based on a mixing ratio. Thus, what this intro at first evokes as the act of separating is immediately translated into the mode of connection: a shift from cutting to overlapping.

The process of overlapping and overlaying continues to emerge in close correspondence to the body, whose visualization and staging is the focal point of *Nip/Tuck*. Central to the representation of the body is the relationship between 'artificial and natural', which the series presents as unbalanced from the very beginning. Already the first shot of the title sequence points to a layering of materials that demonstrates the close connection between physical and synthetic substances. The hand drawing the line does not show its organic

1 John Ellis, "Broadcast TV as cultural form," in *Visible Fictions: Cinema – Television – Video*, (New York: Routledge, 1992), 116.

2 Lorenz Engell, "Fernsehen mit Gilles Deleuze," in *Der Film bei Deleuze. Le cinéma selon Deleuze*, ed. Oliver Fahle and Lorenz Engell (Weimar/Paris: Verlag der Bauhaus-Universität/Presses de la Sorbonne nouvelle, 1999), 478.

3 Raymond Williams emphasizes: "In all developed broadcasting systems the characteristic organisation, and therefore the characteristic experience, is one of sequence or flow. This phenomenon of planned flow, is then perhaps the defining characteristic of broadcasting, simultaneously as a technology and as a cultural form." Cf. Raymond Williams, *Television. Technology and Cultural Form*, (London: Routledge, 2004), 80.

surface but conceals it under the tight-fitting latex of a surgical glove: cover upon cover, layer upon layer. In addition, the artificial mannequins stand out, which increasingly seem to be alive. Here, too, a surface is covered with another but, this time, in a reverse layering. While at first, a colored hand disappears under a white glove, a white mannequin head is then overlaid with a skin-colored hue. Animate and inanimate, mobile and immobile appear to confront one another in a constant process of exchange and approach ambiguity: authenticity and artificiality do not exclude one another, they imply one another.

The various forms of transgressing lines that *Nip/Tuck* negotiates are concentrated and condensed into its opening credits. These manifest in an aesthetic cluster that reveals the core theme to be a medium-specific form of reflection. With this, it becomes clear that the question of transformation does not solely apply to the intradiegetic universe of the series (in actuality, neither the characters involved nor their relationships to one another are shown in the intro) but also, and above all, to television itself. The series therefore does not only follow the conditions of the medium that constitute it but makes them explicit and recognizable.

2. Revising/Outdoing

"Tell me what you don't like about yourself." This is the sentence that the two plastic surgeons, Sean McNamara and Christian Troy, address to each patient considering an operation at their practice. The structural principle of *Nip/Tuck* involves a succession of case stories: each episode is named after the patient whose treatment it is built around. Additionally, the question asked by the two surgeons at the beginning of each medical consultation points to a space of negotiation that transcends the boundaries of their practice. As a narrative starting point, the series chooses a situation that confronts both doctors with interventions that go beyond the scope of individual medical treatment. Both their private lives and their practice end up in a crisis, and both need to be revised and optimized. In the process, the demand for the best possible design becomes a comprehensive challenge directed less toward an actually attainable goal and more toward constant revisions. Even where there is no obvious defect, what is already there must be reworked and improved.

Thus, for example, Sean's wife, Julia, explains during a morning conversation in the bathroom that she wishes she could undergo a breast augmen-

tation, although her husband points out that her body is in top condition. Parallel to this, the first episode of the series shows Christian's encounter with Kimber, a model and eventual porn star, whose desire for physical optimization shapes their relationship from the very beginning. After spending the first night together, Kimber tells Christian about a bouncer who described her as a "perfect ten." Christian, both her lover and her surgeon, replies to this implication of perfection by saying, "Of course, it takes a lot of discipline and work to get there, to be perfect. If you fix the flaws, you could absolutely be a ten." Surprised that she has not yet reached the highest level of perfection, Kimber asks what she is now, at the moment—to which Christian answers, "You're an eight." But the following declaration, "Even so, you're a very pretty girl, Kimber," is not enough to satisfy her: "I don't want to be pretty. I want to be better. I want to be perfect."

As the episode demonstrates, her current value on the beauty scale can be surpassed; her prospect of attaining the highest point value can be achieved. Christian explains what it would require during a thorough examination and mark-up of the body she wishes to make more beautiful: "Beauty is symmetry. Your right eye is half a millimeter higher than your left. We could properly fix that with a malar augmentation. It's a cheekbone enhancement. I give you botox here and here. That should provide a good lift. You're Irish? That explains the slightly flat boxer nose. We could shave the cartilage, give you the Christy Turlington thing. And the breast could go one size bigger, a low C. And you could finish off with some abdominal lipo." Along with his explanations of the measures needed to improve her beauty, Christian marks the respective areas on Kimber's body with red lipstick. Here, the dividing line of the opening credits appears again, its red dotted marking announcing a transformation to be carried out. Furthermore, the static posture of Kimber's body is reminiscent of the immobile mannequins[4]—under Christians' hands, Kim-

4 This motif of doll-likeness is intensified later on in the series. The episode entitled "Kimber Henry" shows a thematic transition from the suggestion of a doll to its actual fabrication. It depicts the construction of a so-called "real doll,' a sex toy made out of silicone to Kimber's measurements and sold on the mass market over the course of her career as a porn star. This perfectly designed body is so attractive that Sean not only observes it with admiration but also has sexual intercourse with it (cf. *Nip/Tuck* 2:10). The indistinguishability of the individual physique and artificial synthetics is not only addressed in this episode. In another, "Lola Wlodowski," a married couple visits the McNamara/Troy office in order to get their bodies remodeled based on their greatest idols: the plastic dolls, Barbie and Ken (cf. *Nip/Tuck*, 6:08).

ber's body is subjected to an intervention that it, as a static object, is unable to resist with any movements of its own.

Of particular note here is the transition from makeup to makeover. While lipstick is usually used to beautify the skin, here it presents itself as a surgical marker that announces the tearing of the skin. Converted in this way, the lipstick appears simultaneously as a medium of beautification and disfigurement: "Using a cosmetic usually meant to enhance surface glamour, to make a woman appear more beautiful, his [Christian's] artwork literally turns the female body into a grotesque spectacle."[5] The lipstick's red changes from seductive to demanding, in the sense that its line marks the body as deficient, as a material to be mended. The body now seems less like a figure in its own right and more like a cutting template. Kimber's reaction upon seeing herself in the mirror is pure horror: "Am I really this ugly?" But Christian knows how to reassure her: "Don't be upset. Let your shortcomings and flaws fuel you. Let them push you further than you ever thought you could go. When you stop striving for perfection, you might as well be dead."

In *Nip/Tuck*, the desire for perfection is not presented as a dangerous obsession, but as an ideal worth striving for, as a driving force capable of advancing the individual in a desirable, even covetable way. In this context, the assigning of numbers suggests a type of scaling that makes beauty appear both measurable and feasible along definable units. The prerequisite for this is a change of perspective from what has not yet been attained to the attainable. This view is propagated not only by both surgeons but also by two other experts working in their office. Along with McNamara and Troy, the psychologists Santiago and Pendleton advise and take care of patients wanting to undergo surgery. In doing so, they take "basically the same position: a wholehearted devotion to change. A certain notion of change and movement is equated with progress—so the insecure individual is promised future insurance for his or her actions, and the quick and resolute decision to make a supposedly radical innovation is rewarded. Change thus becomes a value in itself."[6]

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5 Kim Akass and Janet McCabe, "A Perfect Lie: Visual (Dis)Pleasures and Policing Femininity in *Nip/Tuck*," in *Makeover Television: Realities Remodelled*, ed. Dana Heller (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007), 120.

6 Michael Cuntz, "Tell me what you don't like about yourself: Hypernormalisierung und Destabilisierung der Normalität in der US-Fernsehserie *Nip/Tuck*," *KultuRRevolution: Zeitschrift für angewandte Diskurstheorie* 53 (2008), 72.

The possibility of transformation is associated with the idea of the new as an aesthetic innovation. In this sense, the program of self-revising renovation seems to have no limits. Although it comes with health risks, surgical intervention proves to be an effective means of self-optimization: it does not appear as a threat to physical integrity but as a catalyst for its perfection. However, such surgical operations are not geared toward the overcoming of a temporary crisis; rather, they set in motion a potentially endless progression of plastic surgery procedures. The point is not that the body becomes beautiful, but that it can always become more beautiful. The program of self-regulation does not focus on a conclusion; it demands perpetual continuation. It is therefore itself already serial since it proceeds sequentially: every intervention implies a follow-up intervention, every step in the direction of perfection demands another one. Precisely because the idea of beauty is not stable but variable, precisely because beauty is not constituted as a constant but as a performance, it can be staged in the mode of constant postponement—as an ideal whose attainability is always already called into question by the possibility of being outdone. In this respect, the realization of the perfect version is the perfect lie that the series' opening credits announce at the beginning of each episode: beauty is a promise that can only ever be broken. The precondition for this is that "the orientation to the measure of the middle is substituted by the orientation toward a boundless ideal of one-upping oneself."[7] No average value is chosen as the starting point of self-regulation but, rather, a flexible zone of attractiveness that is always capable of being augmented. Accordingly, the aim is not to achieve a definable goal, but to fuel the desire to overshoot the mark: the stimulant of optimization is not integral beauty but perpetual beautification.

The loss of mediocrity as an instance of orientation can especially be seen in those characters who elevate being above average to their very principle of existence. As eccentrics, they are concerned with a continuous pushing of boundaries, with a type of outdoing themselves that makes the abandonment of norms and normality the driving force of their own self-perception. The first season presents the character of Mrs. Grubman, whose addiction to plastic surgery makes her into the perfect serial patient. Both the doctors treating her and she herself are aware of her dependency, which cannot and shall not be stopped. Rather, the principle of continuation is carried on from episode to episode and from body part to body part in order to exhibit it as an

7 Ibid., 69.

unfinishable project. Of particular importance here is a movement that conceives of the relationship between "inside" and "outside" not as an immutable congruency but, rather, as a variable benchmark: "Body and identity are no longer an organic wholeness but an ensemble of multiple parts, all of them potentially alterable and modifiable."[8] Here, the disentanglement of "inner core" and "outer shell" is not seen as a destabilizing disintegration. Instead, it appears as a fundamental condition for the possibility of a self-optimizing intervention:

> Fragmentation and objectification of the body is often perceived […] as a disturbing and humbling expression that denies the human qualities possessed by individuals. But, on the other hand, the fragmented and objectified condition of the subject provides a wide frame of agency: the modification of the parts implies the whole transformation of the self, so the superficial, the epidermal, the external, the supplementary becomes meaningful.[9]

Extensions and additions, supplementation and dissolution of boundaries determine the eccentric self as a malleable being: it does not require treatment as if overcoming of a disorder, it requires the surgical procedure as a constituent of its self-construction. In this context, subjectivity appears not as a coherent entity but as a continuous process of production. The practices and procedures that the individual needs for his or her own fabrication can be viewed as an ensemble of various types of processes that gradually generate the self. Michel Foucault speaks of "technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality."[10]

The patient, Mrs. Grubman, knows better than the doctors treating her that the goal is not to reach an endpoint but to constantly postpone it. When Sean McNamara and Christian Troy try to end the series of plastic surgeries

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8 Isabel Clua Gines: "To Live and Die in Front of a Mirror: From Dandyism to Aesthetic Surgery," in Nip/Tuck: *Television that Gets under Your Skin*, ed. Roz Kaveney and Jennifer Stoy (London: Tauris, 2011), 100.

9 Ibid.

10 Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 18.

by bringing up ethical concerns, Mrs. Grubman blackmails the surgeons and thereby forces them to continue her optimizing measures. Her success is consequentially linked to the very process that underlies the act of transforming oneself. A surgical instrument that has been left inside the patient's body becomes evidence of malpractice, and the threat of litigation, complete with a demand for compensation for personal suffering in the tens of millions, forces the doctors to give in to Mrs. Grubman's demands and perform every subsequent operation that she wants without objection or restriction. In a surprising flip of the patient-doctor relationship, the surgeons now appear not as sovereign control bodies but, rather, as executive organs of a demand for increased self-optimization that they themselves can no longer regulate.

Mrs. Grubman's pursuit of physical perfection reveals a view according to which the exterior is not a shell under which the essential lies hidden. Instead, she regards the exterior itself as essential. Even into death and beyond it, working on herself, for Mrs. Grubman, is working on her outer appearance. Shortly before her passing, she tasks Christian with her last major work of façade makeover. Her funeral should be a massive social event, centered around her stage appearance as the "best-looking corpse." Even the staging of the mortal remains is related to the body to be worked on. Here, too, the self is subject to the demand for malleability as an ongoing process of transformation. This includes "choices of existence, […] the way to regulate one's behavior, to attach oneself to ends and means"[11]—beyond a stable sense of attainability. As a spiral-shaped dynamizing movement, the transformation of oneself drives the outdoing of oneself. It is not concerned with setting up boundaries but with transgressing them. In the pursuit of self-design, every step in the direction of a perpetually shifting goal can only ever be provisional.

3. Self/Image

The malleability of the body, its ability to be shaped and modeled, situates the individual as an assessable being. Thus the individual is never completely master of his own appearance. Gernot Böhme notes "that beauty as an atmosphere can never be the possession of a person because it plays between

11 Michel Foucault, "Subjectivity and Truth," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth. The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954–1984*, vol. 1, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 1997), 89.

persons. The other, the viewer, is a part of the event of beauty."[12] The eventfulness of beauty, its performative character, points to the question of which perception-specific conditions form the basis of the staging of the beautiful. The formation of the self does not develop in a vacuum; it cannot be thought independently of those variables that produce and stabilize the idea of the self. Paula-Irene Villa emphasizes "that 'working on oneself' is by no means a purely subjective, individual 'private affair' of sovereign, rational, free, and self-confident people […]. Rather, decisions about one's body, as decisions about the self, are highly normative."[13] The orientation toward norms and normality determines both self-perception and being perceived by others. Wherever the dream of the unbound ego, of unconditional individualism, confronts an exterior, it confronts its own limit. The inquiring gaze decides what is socially compatible and acceptable: as beings who are taken in by the visual, we constantly move within an identificatory system based on inspection. Accordingly, a life outside of the society that surrounds the individual can be nothing more than a phantasm: the personal is also always public.

The series *Nip/Tuck* demonstrates that the creation of one's identity is not pure voluntarism but is always orienting itself toward guidelines and demands that are brought to the individual's attention. This becomes especially evident in a society that connects the promise of social participation with the demand for cultural assimilation. An episode from season 3, for example, shows just how closely the body's malleability is tied to the question of an ethnic ideal image. The episode "Madison Berg" involves a Jewish mother who wants to give her teenage daughter a special gift for her sixteenth birthday: her Jewish appearance is to be corrected with a rhinoplasty to optimize her chances of a future marriage. While at first the girl hardly seems to be sold on the idea and explains that starting a family is not high on her list of priorities at the moment, Christian is quickly able to convince her. According to his explanations, it is normal to undergo a rhinoplasty—in fact, his practice can boast of its extensive experiences in this area, since it specializes in such operations: "It's true that we have done a lot of rhinoplasties on Jewish girls. And the trend is definitely towards a more refined profile" (*Nip/*

12 Gernot Böhme, *Leibsein als Aufgabe: Leibphilosophie in pragmatischer Hinsicht* (Kusterdingen: Die Graue Edition, 2003), 207.

13 Paula-Irena Villa, "Einleitung: Wider die Rede vom Äußerlichen," in *Schön normal: Manipulationen am Körper als Technologien des Selbst*, ed. Paula-Irene Villa (Bielefeld: transcript, 2008), 8.

Tuck, 3:10). Christian even makes a special offer: the "Sweet Sixteen Package," an all-inclusive carefree package complete with a 20% discount for postoperative recovery at a luxury spa. It is upon viewing aesthetically stimulating images that ultimately leads Madison to change her mind. In a folder containing photographs of successfully operated female rhinoplasty patients, the girl discovers the picture of an attractive female classmate. "Have you seen her 'before' picture?" Christian asks. Astonished by the visual evidence of a Jewish identity whose glaring presence was surgically revised, Madison consents to her physical transformation.

Rhinoplasty as a correction of ethnic characteristics hearkens back to a long tradition of assimilating self-construction. In his comprehensive cultural history of plastic surgery, Sander L. Gilman explains that the demand for surgical correction of the Jewish nose in the United States steadily increased throughout the twentieth century and, in particular, among female patients. In doing so, he stresses an understanding of identity and self as based on visibility: "These young women gave no sign of wishing to abandon their Jewish identity, only their Jewish visibility."[14] As a procedure of self-optimization, adaptation to a socially determined ideal standard appears less as denial than as self-empowerment, as Kim Akass and Janet McCabe argue in reference to *Nip/Tuck*: "Effacement of ethnic difference is time and again less about the denial of culture and racial self-hatred than a pleasure of, and desire for, assimilation into the cultural ideal. Passing here is about being seen as 'natural' by the normalizing gaze, about an (in)visibility predicated on a culturally sanctioned denial of any ethnic or racial difference contravening the norm."[15]

The removal of difference, here the clearing away of what is described as excess cartilage in rhinoplasty, refers to a socially promoted striving for conformity with cultural ideal images. The concurrence of conformity, image, and visuality experienced an enormous thrust through the spread of modern mass media. According to Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, the multiplication of images, their mass production and consumption, does not lead

14 Sander L. Gilman, *Making the Body Beautiful: A Cultural History of Aesthetic Surgery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 193. On the history of plastic surgeries on the Jewish nose, see also Virginia L. Blum, *Flesh Wounds: The Culture of Cosmetic Surgery* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) as well as Meredith Jones, *Skintight: An Anatomy of Cosmetic Surgery* (Oxford: Berg, 2008).

15 Akass and McCabe, 123–124

to diversification and differentiation but results in normalization and standardization. In the mid-1940s, the two highlight this tendency toward assimilation as a central characteristic of the culture industry, based on approximation and adaptation: "Culture today is infecting everything with sameness."[16] Here, television takes on a special role. As a medium of repetition and serialization, it is capable of immensely augmenting and impelling the processes of schematization. Furthermore, in coming to the viewer in his or her own home, it creates a nearness through which images produced by the medium superimpose every other way that the world and reality manifest. The more television becomes a part of man's surroundings, the more efficiently the culture industry can mold the consumer. Whoever consumes a mass product in mass quantities himself becomes a mass entity: "The culture industry grins: become what you are."[17] The idea of the individual that can alter itself as an individual is replaced by the production of mass conformity, into which the system has always already incorporated the consumer: "Each single manifestation of the culture industry inescapably reproduces human beings as what the whole has made them."[18]

What Critical Theory conceives of as the position of culture-industrial adaptation, post-structuralism has continued as a model of medium-induced simulation. The permeation of society by electronic media and the increase in channels and screens have been accompanied by a type of development that not only exposes man to a flood of images but makes him himself like an image. This, too, notes Jean Baudrillard, involves a process of adaptation, the "endless approximation of man with himself, because he is dissolved into his basic elements: multiplied on all sides, present on every screen."[19] In the age of the screen, there is no longer a media-independent mode of existence. Existence has become existence-as-image: "Today, we live in the imaginary of the screen, of the interface and proliferation, of commutation and networking. All our machines are screens, we ourselves have become screens, and

16 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 94.

17 Theodor W. Adorno, "Prologue to Television," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 55.

18 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 100.

19 Jean Baudrillard, "Videowelt und fraktales Subjekt," in *Philosophien der neuen Technologie*, ed. Jean Baudrillard, Hannes Böhringer, Vilém Flusser, Heinz von Foerster, Friedrich Kittler, and Peter Weibel (Berlin: Merve, 1989), 113.

the relationship of people to each other has become that of screens."[20] The increase in image production, image distribution, and image consumption makes man into an image-being that orients itself toward images and, itself, takes on the characteristics of an image. There are no longer any definable distinctions between model and replica, between original and copy. Rather, the orientation toward the image is always already bound up in a medium-induced process of multiplication, in the perpetual technical reproduction and proliferation of images.

Surrounded by images, the plastic surgery clients in *Nip/Tuck* yearn for an image-like redesigning of themselves. For example, they often present the surgeons with pictures of television personalities whom they would like to look like. The influence of ideal images, which are disseminated and implemented by the culture industry, reveals a self-understanding that, in turn, takes on the character of an image. The desired image is both the standard and the instrument of standardization. Moreover, it should be noted that the body is repeatedly presented and put on display through various visual techniques: again and again, one sees how it is photographed and filmed, how it appears on monitors, television and computer screens. A particularly striking example of this can be found in the episode "Monica Wilder" from season 4 (*Nip/Tuck*, 4:03). Amazed by how intently his coworkers, Liz and Linda, are staring at a screen, Christian asks the women leaning over a laptop what has caught their interest. The camera perspective then shifts and shows the computer monitor. One can see a sex tape entitled "Naughty Doctor," which shows Christian having intercourse with an anonymous female partner. "This was posted on YouTube yesterday," Liz explains, "it's gone viral in the last 24 hours." While Sean advises his colleague to take legal action due to a wrongful violation of his private sphere, Christian does not act surprised but excited: "I don't give a shit about that. Leaked sex tapes are gold!" The mass distribution, reception, and reproduction of his image apparently does not worry him—only the unfavorable camera position seems to be problematic: "But look at the angle she's got on my tummy. I look like Jabba the Hutt." The video image becomes the medium of measurement and examination of what one wishes to regulate, it becomes the catalyst of self-optimization. Consequently, later on, Christian makes himself into the patient and explains: "I went through the video a few more times and I've identified these as my problem areas." To him, the transition from the zone of problems to the zone of perfection seems as necessary

20 Ibid., 130.

as it is obvious. There is not much left needed for him to become picture-perfect. He must only undergo a simple procedure, as he explains to Sean: "I'd like you to do some lipo on my midsection."

With this model of self-design, it becomes evident that portraying the body and making it visible cannot be conceived of as independent of the visual media and visualization techniques that yield it as something perceptible:

> The more intimately these media of visualization nestle up to everyday life and bodies, the more naturally we become part of these new—social, technological, and libidinal—economic systems and apparatuses. The body ends up in the precarious position of becoming the interface between rationalized systems of exchange and networks of information. Nevertheless, this position seems to be extraordinarily desirable, since it promises an identificatory refuge in the endlessly reflecting images of one's own body.[21]

Images do not only represent bodies; they produce them in the first place. As media processes, they are subject to technical operations, forms of staging, and performance practices, which in turn constitute and condition them. Precisely here, in the process of producing and reproducing, the unfolding of beauty is shown to be a performative principle. When the self is subject to the logic of the image, it then conceives of this pictoriality not as something stiff and inalterable, but flexible and variable. Under the condition and stipulation of visualization, the body itself becomes a medium of the visual.

4. Reference/Reflection

The series continues what the opening credits formulate as a renunciation of the idea of a coherent whole via a complex network of self-referential moments of reflection. It is always referring to what tries to assert itself as a supposedly uncontradictory cohesion, but which is ruptured through reversals and transformations.

An example of this can be found as early as in the second episode of the first season. In the episode "Mandi/Randi," a set of twins visits the McNa-

21 Karin Esders, "Trapped in the Uncanny Valley: Von der unheimlichen Schönheit künstlicher Körper," in *Screening Gender: Geschlechterszenarien in der gegenwärtigen US-amerikanischen Populärkultur*, ed. Heike Paul and Alexandra Ganser (Berlin: LIT, 2007), 104.

mara/Troy practice. After Sean asks one of the sisters the standard question, "Tell me what you don't like about yourself," she answers with an unexpected inversion: "It's not that I don't like myself." Her feelings of inadequacy are kindled not on her own body but on others' bodies: "I just don't want to look like her anymore." Mandi and Randi Dante long to no longer be confused with one another. Their identity problem results from a perception of others that does not regard them as unique individuals but misconstrues them as mirrored duplications. Thus, the sisters have made the mutual agreement to undergo an operation: Mandi requests a change to her face; Randi desires revisions to her breasts and legs. Sean and Christian agree to perform the operations "in order to establish their own singular identities." In the surgery scene, which shows the simultaneous transformation of the twins, it is not only the visual level, in its symmetrical image construction, that refers to the process of duplication. The audio level, too, indicates duplication in repeating something that has already been formulated before. One can hear the song "Genetic World", an electropop track that both stylistically and thematically recalls the music from the opening credits. This can be heard, for one, in the artificial timbre of the synthesizer's sounds and, also, in the basic construction of the lyrics: "Make your desires reality / it's scientific / it's natural / it's incorrect." Again, the theme of self-improvement is emphasized by the soundtrack, and, again, the series points to the instability of the boundary between artificiality and authenticity. Just as well, the question of feasibility, which starts each process of remodeling one's body, is brought up t again, in order to announce the complications that come with self-transformation in the form of musical foreshadowing. In Mandi's and Randi's case, the demand for perfection is already confronted with its antithesis shortly after the operation. Terrified by the result of the plastic surgery, Mandi breaks down in tears. "She's prettier than me now," she sobs and points to her sister—to which Randi turns to Christian and says, "We just want to go back to the way we were. And we want to be treated the same. Please help us." The dream of a perfect transformation as the solution to all their identity problems turns into the nightmare of an increasingly competitive relationship with one another. Suddenly, Mandi and Randi consider the other side of the coin: self-discovery and loss of self are not far off from one another. Neither is ready to pay the price of individuality, so that the attempt at a transformation ends with its own inversion.

The twin motif, however, is taken up not once, but twice in *Nip/Tuck* and thus presented as a duplication of a duplication. The episode "Rose and Raven Rosenberg" (*Nip/Tuck*, 2:09) again introduces two identical-looking sisters but

brings the situation of duplication to a head: Rose and Raven are conjoined twins who are to be surgically separated. As members of a team of specialists from every discipline, Sean and Christian travel to New York in order to participate in the elaborate operation as experts on plastic surgery. Unlike Mandi and Randi, Rose and Raven do not suffer on account of their physical resemblance but wish to maintain it after the operation and even purposely emphasize it. The answer to the question of a perfect design is thus an inversion of the wish for individual beautification formulated in the earlier episode. Christian wants to know how each would prefer to look after the operation, to which Randi replies, "As much alike as possible."[22] Just like "Mandi/Randi", "Rose and Raven Rosenberg" is also about a reversal: both episodes feature the failure of a transformation and the resulting attempt to undo the operation. After Raven dies during the operation, Rose no longer wants to live. As an incomplete fragment, as a left-over half of a whole that no longer exists, she can no longer recognize her Self and chooses suicide. Death, however, does not appear as the ultimate end but is translated into another stage of variability. In yet another operation, the surgeons bring together what they had initially separated: they sew together the sisters' corpses and thus reintegrate them into the recursive system of transformable bodies.

An uncanny type of mirroring, in which the principle of redesigning meets that of disfigurement, can be seen in the character of the "Carver", a criminal who horrifically distorts the faces of his victims. A serial perpetrator, he attacks particularly attractive women and men, first brutally raping them and then gruesomely disfiguring them. "Beauty is a curse on the world," is his recurring message before cutting up the beautiful faces and slitting both cheeks from the corners of the mouth to the ears. What remains are grisly grinning grimaces as distorted images of modeling inverted into the monstrous. The motifs of the red line and mannequin faces introduced in the opening credits appear here again, only to be rearranged and distorted. In a deforming perversion, the preoperative marks become terrifying drawings that don each

22 The potential for the closest resemblance possible addressed here is reflected in the casting. The fictional conjoined twins Rose and Raven Rosenberg are played by real-life conjoined twins Lori and Dori Schappell. However, there is a slight difference between real life and fictional portrayal. The Schappell twins were initially considered sisters, whereas now they present themselves as siblings. In 2007, one of the twins, who was at that time known as Dori, stated that he identifies as male and changed his name to George.

victim's face with a permanent, doll-like appearance: the "operation" leaves behind a bright red scar as the result of a brutal inscription that causes the smooth, standardized ideal image of a face to break in on itself. A further reflection can be seen in the perpetrator's disguise, which hides his identity behind a doll-like mask. The "Carver" remodels the face in such a way that does not hide the changes but hyper-emphasizes them. The scar, as a permanent symbol of the person's injuries, is not hidden but elaborately produced and presented as an artform of disfigurement. The injury reveals a point of intersection that allows the scar to emerge as a reflexive moment of self-perception: "A scar: a meeting place between inside and outside, a locus of memory, of bodily change. Like skin, a scar mediates between the outside and the inside, but it also materially produces, changes and overwrites its site. If skin renews itself constantly, producing the same in repetition, the scar is the place of the changed script."[23]

The Carver's work on the body matter manifests an inversion that transforms the smoothness of the immaculate surface in its creation of a relief. The scar serves to visualize traces of sensation. Via the mode of visualization, the scar corresponds with image structures and image forms, and even more so: it itself implies the status of the image: "The scar is also an image: it holds strong connotations of social violence, of outsider status, of negativity. And yet, mysteriously, it holds the gaze—the scar incites the look, invites the narrative, fuels the story and anchors it back into (some version of) bodies, time, and space."[24] In the development of scars, one can see a particularly striking reference of the body to itself, to its mutability, malleability and plasticity, its ability to be staged and narrated, its status as an image, which the series *Nip/Tuck* places at the center of its own image processing.

In the reflection of mirroring processes, mediality and seriality intertwine. Not only the body but also the image of the body together with its serial organization is subjected to a series of optimization procedures. The dynamic of overbidding not only drives the innerdiegetic ensemble of characters but also allows the series itself to appear as an enterprise that, by mirroring its own aesthetics, reveals an effort to constantly increase. This media process of self-stylization is especially observable in the fifth season, which presents a

23 Petra Kuppers, *The Scar of Visibility: Medical Performances and Contemporary Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 1.

24 Ibid. On the status of skin and scars as images, see also James Elkins, *Pictures of the Body: Pain and Metamorphosis* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

series within the series with the introduction of the fictional television show *Hearts 'n Scalpels*. Sean and Christian appear here as series characters playing series characters, they become actors of their own representation.

It is notable here that the patients' stories in the series *Hearts 'n Scalpels* repeat the case stories of *Nip/Tuck* in a hyper-stylized way: every surgical procedure has been presented before, and every personal drama is already known. The surplus does not consist in making the level of the plot, but the level of televisual representation, into a spectacle. Aesthetic staging and stylized visualization are not simply employed but emphasized as technical processes and production practices. This manifests, for example, in the televisual presentation of the show's setting, which not only features the already familiar props and equipment from a highly polished plastic surgeon's office but also makes visible its numerous media technologies: behind every screen in the operating room, there is a TV monitor; behind every lamp in the operating room, there is a TV spotlight. It becomes apparent "that the work of stylization leads to the visibility and reflection of images."[25] The emphasis on monitors and screens, the arrangement of mirrors and projection surfaces, recalls processes of visualization that rely on the fundamentals of image production.

A further moment of reflection occurs in the reference to reality television, which is shown in *Nip/Tuck* via the recursive integration of a show within a show. After the overwhelming success of the series *Hearts 'n Scalpels*, which has made Sean and Christian into popular television personalities, they receive another offer for a television show: they are to be the stars of the reality show *Plastic Fantastic*, where they will perform surgical procedures on live television. The movement of transformation oriented toward self-optimization could not be made more conspicuous. In reaching beyond its fictional universe, the series turns to Reality TV formats that have long since made surgical alterations to the body into their own broadcast reality.[26] In this way, television itself takes on a powerful claim to transformation:

25 Ralf Adelmann and Markus Stauff, "Ästhetiken der Re-Visualisierung: Zur Selbststilisierung des Fernsehens," in *Philosophie des Fernsehens*, ed. Oliver Fahle and Lorenz Engell (Munich: Fink, 2006), 65.

26 Examples include Reality TV shows that aired concurrently with *Nip/Tuck* such as *Extreme Makeover* (Howard Schultz, 2002–2007), *The Swan* (Nely Galán, 2004–2005), or *I Want a Famous Face* (Pink Sneakers, 2004–2005). Each show presents candidates undergoing plastic surgery to transform and reshape their bodies.

> We can think of Reality TV […] as a televisual mechanism for conducting powers of transformation. Programming has left television, and the whole of reality itself has become programmable. Challenging bodies' limits, interchanging roles and people […] are just a few of the technical procedures deployed in Reality TV's makeovers. Their effects include breaking down the interiorities of subjects, dissolving them into 'dividuals,' and reconnecting capacities with others, in sum, turning subjects into variables, a set of modifiable powers.[27]

One can discern an entanglement of regulating seizures and practices of self-regulation in the coincidence of programming and optimization. Television incorporates its viewers into a complex arrangement of self-guidance and guidance from others; it organizes them as parts of a comprehensive system of adjusting operations. This involves a "specific form of governing technology, which produces effects of power and subjectivization in the coupling of apparatuses, programs, and practices."[28] In emphasizing optimizing procedures created and perpetuated by television, the medium reflects on the requirements and foundations of regulating self-production. It is precisely here where the reflexive achievement of the series *Nip/Tuck* is made manifest: it not only depicts the process of perfection but also considers its claims and contradictions—without excluding itself in the process. In posing the question of optimization, *Nip/Tuck* is always already holding the mirror up to itself.

27 Jack Z. Bratich, "Programming Reality: Control Societies, New Subjects and the Powers of Transformation," in *Makeover Television: Realities Remodelled*, ed. Dana Heller (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007), 20.

28 Markus Stauff, *Das neue Fernsehen: Machtanalyse, Gouvernementalität und digitale Medien* (Münster: LIT, 2005), 225.