

BODIES-IN-CRISIS: BEAUTY, NARRATIVE, AND THE MANAGEMENT OF DISPERSAL

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This paper investigates how multiple crises facing Greek society are prompting individuals to intensely focus on their bodies, as bodies become perceived as the only palpable object on which humans can have direct control. It argues that crises generate a kind of personal and existential hyper-awareness, making people penetratingly aware of how much their depressed, anxious, ageing and otherwise 'decaying' bodies might signify a more general sense of degradation. In their effort to maintain a sense of control and prevent dispersal, as it were, these bodies, ('bodies-in-crisis') become a physical location where affective negotiations for agency, transformation and survivance occur. By engaging with the concept of survivance, feminist and postfeminist scholarship on gender and cosmetic surgery, and the anthropological literature on Greece as well as the work on 'crisis' and precarity, this paper seeks to reposition the Greek woman who desires cosmetic beautification. By offering rich ethnographic material from Athens, it argues that socioeconomic upheavals may push individuals to focus more intensely and 'selfishly' on their own selves and bodies, rather than mobilize in order to act in an unselfish manner for the public good. Such self-indulgence in turbulent times should not be dismissed as unserious or unworthy of anthropological study, however, for the practice might equally expose the core of what it's like to live inside profound uncertainty.

Keywords: Greece, cosmetic surgery, crisis, feminism

Introduction

What stories do we tell ourselves in order to stay afloat?
—Hua Hsu, New Yorker

In September 2022, I presented a paper at the 8th Congress of the Portuguese Anthropological Association, with the title 'Beauty in uncertain times.' The paper examined

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the rise and popularity of cosmetic pharmaceuticals (such as Botox and anti-ageing ‘fillers’) and a variety of other cosmetic treatments in Greece during the period of financial collapse which began in 2008. The premise guiding my presentation was that within an environment of austerity and under the weight of consecutive crises, cosmetic interventions get associated with positive feelings of taking control. According to the reasoning of the women I have interviewed, fascination with cosmetic medicine provides a motive to exercise self-care on a body that is in danger of dispersal, and they consider their ‘feeling good’ as arising from their active ‘doing *something*’, instead of letting the body decay. The body is thus perceived as the only accessible, palpable object on which these women can have a certain amount of control.

The paper sparked an intense conversation. During this a fellow anthropologist asked me: ‘Why don’t these women mobilize in a different manner?’. Her question reveals a major challenge (not just within anthropology) in positioning the cosmetic medical patient. Davis (1995) has infamously labelled this the ‘feminist dilemma’, whereby the cosmetic patient can be seen as either vulnerable and manipulated by the beauty system (Davis 1995: 4; see also Ortner 2006; Wolf 2002) or, oppositely, ‘empowered’ in their choice (Pitts-Taylor 2009; Bordo 2003; Negrin 2002; 2008) to seek cosmetic transformation. Striking a balance between these two opposing views can be a difficult exercise for the ethnographer, who also needs to acknowledge the grip aesthetic medicine (like all medicine) has on society, as a form of biopower (Jarrin 2017).

The feminist debates which place great importance on the question of agency have formed the theoretical bedrock on which I stand. However, as I moved from being a young scholar to becoming an early career researcher, these theories also progressively became restrictive in approaching and allowing me to comprehend my interlocutors in the field. The dichotomy that guides the agency debate does not allow the ethnographer to fully approach interlocutors such as my own, who seemed, both in their use of words but also through their actions, to consider themselves as part of a world which greatly affected and shaped their own decisions and their self-image, yet that didn’t impede their capacity to choose or act as free agents. Fully accepting that their selves were webbed in relationships with others, and that they were affected by images, movements, fashion trends and other dynamics (such as the biopower exercised on them by science and medicine), they nevertheless felt and experienced concerns about their bodies as deeply personal, profoundly significant, and unique. Their anxieties about the body were also enmeshed with other personal anxieties about problems and challenges regarding personal relationships, employment problems and perceived failures, but also major negative changes in society and their immediate social environment, as this paper will show. Moreover, much of the feminist literature on the matter disregards the extent to which ‘fitting in’ (rather than ‘standing out’) provides, for the majority of individuals, a source of the comfort and calm that was actively sought after by my own interlocutors in Greece.

My response to the questioner at the conference was that to demand that the women in my study mobilize in a way that we as academics or as feminists approve of, would be to adopt an ethical and judgmental stance, which I didn’t feel comfortable taking towards my interlocutors. From what I understood quite early on, ‘mobilization’ for my interlocutors meant an intense focus on their bodies as the only vehicle, object, or realm on which they

could exercise any amount of control. For them, beauty and bodily improvement were not separated from the experience of uncertainty and crisis, but were in fact interlinked, and this intimate relationship between beauty and crisis generated what I call the *body-in-crisis*.

This body-in-crisis is in a state of constant awareness and hypervigilance. It experiences anxiety over the volatility that comes with the unknown. And the 'unknown' in question isn't simply an unknown state but is actually a projection of a negative experience of the present onto a looming, threatening canvas that is the future. As Eriksen (2001: 3) asserts, us 'high moderns' live with our gaze firmly fixed towards the immediate future, and we are taught to think and imagine or *speculate* about what is coming (Kompouzos-Athanasίου 2022: 13), thus we constantly navigate the world by relying on our speculative powers to tackle uncertainty. Nevertheless, by occupying a 'crisis state', our speculative capacity is affected to the extent that we project our ominous presents onto the near future, which seems at best dark and unpromising and, at worst, anticipates the total annihilation of humanity and other living beings. And within such a climate of uncertainty and great pessimism about the future, individuals whom I studied directed their anxieties towards their own bodies in the present. To them, mobilizing beyond one's own personal space often seemed futile in the face of global catastrophes. Their bodies, in turn, were perceived as the only 'thing that matters', in an otherwise senseless and uncontrollable world. We can find echoes of these processes in Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011: 4), in which the author argues that a sustained focus on the present isn't invariably shallow presentism, or a kind of narcissism, but rather a process of 'managing incoherent narratives' and messages coming in from the world around us. The body-in-crisis may exhibit self-indulgent behaviour in its fight for *inclusion versus exclusion* (Banet-Weiser et al 2020: 6). And as recent interrogations within the postfeminist movement have illustrated, 'female' practices such as beautification, bodily grooming and cosmetic transformations may envelop several struggles: gender, class, racial, or a combination of the above.

This study is a result of field research undertaken in Athens from 2014 to 2019, primarily in cosmetic clinics, where I conducted participant observation, after securing the informed consent of participants. A second method of data collection was in-depth, semi-structured interviews with several participants. These interviews were repeated several times, offering me, with every encounter, a deeper understanding of the affective processes surrounding these treatments, the world of cosmetic beauty and how one feels upon entering it. Moreover, it tried to tackle the 'cosmetic question' in the longer-term, by the consecutive revisiting and the retelling of patient accounts, so that a fuller picture would emerge regarding the ways cosmetic medicine appeals to women.

This method also allowed for greater reflexivity for me, the ethnographer. In the early stages of research, I assumed that the women I would encounter would be affluent and oblivious to the dangers and the precarity faced by other, less affluent women, or that – at least – they would enjoy a certain amount of financial security.

Yet the women whom I met formed a varied mix of social, cultural, and financial backgrounds, with some facing quite serious challenges, financially or otherwise, in their day-to-day lives. For example, I met a migrant Albanian woman who cleaned houses to make a living, and who often compared herself to her (Greek) employer in a way that seemed to say

'I, too, can do these treatments', thus claiming a space for herself in a world that is usually occupied by Greek women, and as a way to transgress and challenge her minority status and her invisibility as a migrant worker (Hollibaugh and Weiss 2015).

I also encountered a Roma woman who, at a dermatology outpatient clinic, pulled out a handful of cash to give the cashier at the clinic's checkout, and dashed out as quickly and quietly as possible, holding the layered, multi-coloured skirt to her knees as she descended the stairs, then vanishing around the corner of the building. I met wealthy, or at least well-off, young and middle-aged women, and a few medical tourists, who came from Northern or Western Europe to combine summer leisure with a series of cosmetic treatments that would cost double or triple the price back home. Through such and many other encounters, I discovered that the cosmetic clinics were simply a microcosm of the life outside them, and that cosmetic beauty was as ubiquitous as, say, going to the gym, and perceived as a vital form of self-management and self-care, rather than a luxury. It also brought me face-to-face with my own assumptions, untangling a whole web of ideas I held around 'vanity' and 'beautification', as a Western-trained academic.

Survivance: a useful framework for studying uncertainty?

Gerald Vizenor's concept of survivance is based on Native American stories of defiance and survival against genocidal practices, widespread institutional oppression, and systemic violence. It is defined quite ambiguously, as 'an active sense of presence over absence' (Vizenor 2008: 1) and as 'narrative resistance to [...] victimry' (Vizenor 2009: 1). It is perhaps deliberately left open to interpretation. Some scholars see in these words resistance; others see endurance. I believe Kroeber (2008: 25) has more succinctly distilled the meaning of the word in the Vizenorian sense, by seeing in survivance a subtle reduction of the power of the destroyer, and the marginal flight from annihilation.

'What does survivance have in common with cosmetic medical applications?', readers may ask. How could a concept used to describe the struggle of a persecuted group to the point of genocide be compared to Greek women who consume aesthetic treatments? It may come across as sacrilege to hint at any such comparison, however distant. My intention is not to compare the two, however, or to question which is more severe. What I wish to propose instead is a theoretical model to examine the consumption of aesthetic treatments in Greece, through the key ideas put forward by Vizenor and his theory of survivance and focus on one aspect of survivance in particular: narrativization.

Greek women may not be living under the threat of persecution as is the case of Vizenor's Native American subjects. However, there is an intense and pervasive feeling among my Greek interlocutors that precarity, uncertainty, economic collapse, widespread unemployment, political unrest, wars and epidemics, the climate crisis, and the ripple effects brought on by these realities to personal and collective existences form a kind of everyday violence. The threat may not be death or persecution, but the feeling of being exposed to grave and potentially life-threatening – or at least life-altering – challenges has been palpable in the past decade. Moreover, ruptures in the linkages between the past, present and future,

new models of personhood vis-à-vis public life, as well as the constant creation of fragmented social categories create an enhanced sense of bewilderment (Weiss 2004: 1).

The present may feel disorganized and precarious, sometimes violently so, under sociopolitical and economic structures that are built on creating desires based on a set of ever-elusive promises which remain just that: promises, and under a system which increasingly widens the gap between those who not only *have* and *have not*, but those who *can* and those who *cannot*. The good life is sought after, but can people truly attain it, and if so, at what cost? And does it ever satisfy? Most are left with an 'overwhelming ordinary' (Berlant 2011:8) which is cruel because it fails to deliver the satisfaction or happiness it had promised (Ahmed 2010), and because it seems to keep people in a constant state of precarity (Berlant 2011: 192).

The literature on uncertainty has pushed ethnographers to be more attuned to their subjects' felt indeterminacies of being (Calkins 2016: 46). Such felt indeterminacies, which immediately impact embodied experience, are at the core of my work. In writing about cosmetic pharmaceuticals and related technologies in Greece during the height (or the depth) of austerity, I was urged to look at the everyday life of the women I spoke with, and noticed how the theme of pain resurfaced, time and again, in the narratives they used to describe their lives.

Sacrifices

Panayiota's face was *skammeno* (dug out or scuffed) as they say in Greek – an agricultural metaphor. Very tan and durable, it did in fact remind me of the earth's surface. She had creases running across her cheeks and around her eyes. She gave the impression of a hardened personality as well, which had been toughened by life. Her hair was cut very short, with thick grey and white streaks revealing themselves at the roots. Her clothes were of a pair of denim trousers, a long-sleeve top and her shoes a sturdy, army-style pair of boots with chunky soles. I asked her some basic questions to start the interview, like what she did for a living.

'If I tell you... you won't believe me', Panayiota retorted, and her eyes looked away. She seemed nervous. She then added: 'I was a hairdresser for many years'.

'And, what... are you ashamed of that?'

'I'm not ashamed of that. I'm ashamed because... well... a woman who worked in the beauty business should not have let herself end up like I have! I have gained much weight. I've let myself go, very much. Look at my skin! These past few years have not been easy at all. I neglected myself completely.' After a brief pause, she continues by saying: 'It's hard... I've been taking full care of my two grandchildren. One is four, the other seven. A boy and a girl. Their mother – my daughter – abandoned them. She met someone and took off to England. It's been two years already. I have to take the girl to a psychiatrist two times a week... she isn't able to deal with her mother's flight. And I have a husband to take care of. Now, I also have two grandchildren under my care. I'm exhausted.

I barely have time for myself. This is the first time off I've had in two years, to do something *gia mena* (about me)'.

Pain is a central and recurring theme in many ethnographies on Greece, and it fares more notably in the work focusing on women. According to Seremetakis (1998: 151), this is due to the gendered nature of pain in Greece, with suffering seen as being a 'natural' aspect of female life. In Greece, caring responsibilities fall disproportionately on the shoulders of women, who are believed to be biologically – 'naturally' – skilled in caring, and who are raised in a cultural environment that promotes motherhood as the ultimate goal and destination in a woman's life (Paxson 2004). The family is considered a sacred institution and the figure of the mother, portrayed as 'the pillar' of the family, is associated strongly with the image of Panayia (Holy Mary), who personifies the ultimate Mother, who can endure endless sacrifices and pain in her quest to ensure the wellbeing of those in her care. (Fittingly enough, the name 'Panayiota' derives from Panayia). The pressure to live up to this ideal, to be a 'good mother' and be a selfless, self-sacrificing figure, is especially potent in Greece (Tsouroufli 2020). Fiction and folk literature is replete with heroic, self-sacrificing mothers who suffer or offer their own lives to protect their offspring or other close kin, and these enduring themes are echoed in the words of Panayiota. The self-sacrificing role is also extended to the grandmother, who is perceived as being a 'double mother', and whose caring responsibilities accelerate – or get renewed – with the birth of grandchildren. The grandmother is usually tasked with taking over the care of the grandchild, at least partially, while the mother goes back to work. Maternal grandmothers are usually the ones to undertake this task, due to their proximity to the child's mother, who is perceived as the primary and most important caretaker. And in unfortunate cases, such as Panayiota's, the motherly sacrifice extends to the grandchildren: the mother tragically abandons her offspring, and the 'double mother' sacrifices herself in hoping to fill the void left behind by her daughter.

However, we could read Panayiota's statement through another prism, one that is less self-sacrificing. Here, the concept of poetics might prove useful, first utilized by Herzfeld in his descriptions of Cretan male performativity. Herzfeld's famous poetics of manhood (dedicated to the Cretan men in his ethnographic studies) gave inspiration to Dubisch (1991) in applying the term to Greek women, as well, thus offering a more nuanced contouring of aspects of female behaviour in Greece. Poetics is more subtle than performance, and it involves addressing the historical and ideological processes which manifest in women's performativity (Herzfeld 1991:81); it involves the less obvious ways by which women in Greece express, or manipulate, their inferior position in society.

For Herzfeld, poetics of womanhood could include the use of irony to challenge masculine power dynamics, exemplified in the following quote: 'A Greek woman can quite seriously maintain to outsiders that her sex is inferior to the male while internally mocking the men of her kin-group and community for insisting on the exact same claim' (Herzfeld 1991: 80). For Dubisch, less playfully, the poetics of womanhood finds ultimate expression in the narrativizing of a woman's suffering. These narratives usually take the form of a complaint or an extended 'lament' (of the kind I have offered here, conferred in Panayiota's interview above, and Liza's, below) and whose purpose is to a) externalize an internally felt pain or

express anger, and b) to be heard. Suffering is verbalized as a way of emphasizing women's proximity to pain in their everyday life, as Dubisch has noted, and complaints about suffering may serve the role of a continuous reminder (to men, and to the whole of society) of the lengths and troubles women go through both physically and emotionally in order to keep others satisfied. These feats, unless they are voiced, go largely unrecognized. Laments and grievances, therefore, are the 'available cultural material' (Dubisch 1995: 216) from which the poetics of womanhood spring forth. And for Seremetakis (1998: 151), such narrativizations of pain should not be narrowly read as mere complaint, passive fatalism, or idiosyncratic conduct, but rather as an organizing force of communication and presence. This reading of female Greek poetics closely matches Vizenor's concept of 'narrative presence', for it underlines the desire by the complainant to be *heard* and therefore recognized as a presence, rather than a silence or an absence.

Liza was – at the time of initial research – a 21-year-old working as a plastic surgeon's assistant. She was an attractive brunette, sociable and friendly, who had come to Athens from a distant village near the border with Turkey. Her skin at the time still bore the marks of her recent puberty, with little spots and scars visible on her cheeks, which she carefully covered with makeup. She usually wore red lipstick, and a bold, sweet fragrance. By working in a cosmetic clinic and by being exposed to these treatments' day in and day out, she has a characteristic carefree attitude towards cosmetic medicine. She considered it 'as normal as putting on makeup'. For her, a filler injection on the lips is 'just something you do, if you desire to plump your lips'. There is no questioning 'why', because – to her – it would be like asking why someone would wear lipstick.

One warm afternoon, I found her sitting at the cafeteria where we normally held our interviews, and she was extremely sad. She absent-mindedly looked down, at the pavement, where pigeons picked at leftover food and breadcrumbs, while I sat down across from her. Without even looking at me, she said:

'Did you see the news? My whole village has been levelled to the ground...'

Indeed, as I was walking to my field site that same morning, I had read about a powerful earthquake which had hit the easternmost islands of Greece, which also caused widespread damage to towns on the Turkish shoreline. Her village's name, which – until that day – I'd never heard of, had suffered the greatest damage.

At the age of eighteen, Liza left her hometown and came to Athens to become a beauty specialist. She stayed on, because finding work back home would be 'very difficult, if not impossible', as she had told me. In Athens, she occupied a small room at her father's house, a man from whom she had been estranged for twelve years, after he left her mother to pursue a new life in the city. She reconnected with him after a long period of absence, and they made a deal that she would stay at his house until she could afford a place of her own.

'I look at the pictures and I feel like I am looking at scenes from a war. Everything is destroyed. My townspeople have lost their homes; some are dead. And I'm here, away from my family, unable to go back. I'm so shocked, I don't know what to do... I just have to sit here and look at the videos people post on social media and on the news, unable to do anything.' She then took out her phone and showed me pictures posted by a friend on Facebook.

'This is my neighbour's house', she said, pointing to a pile of ruins laying in front of an exposed tiled bathroom. I noticed how the bathroom looked embarrassingly exposed.

'This is the house of Kyria Eleni. My neighbour. She died'.

An earthquake like this, I thought to myself at that moment, is not only tragic, but it becomes a vivid reminder that all that humans build, and especially the edifices that conceal us, can be annihilated in a second. Tragedies strip down privacy, and there no longer exists a demarcation between what is private and what is public. Everything is exposed, like those bathroom tiles.

'What about your own family?', I asked.

'My family, thank God, is fine. But you can't imagine the agony I went through until I spoke to them.'

'Will you go visit?'

'I can't go back because the flight costs four hundred euros...! That's more than my monthly salary... And the boat takes two days to get there and back. And I can only afford to be away on weekends... I can't leave work, so, I can't take the boat.'

Liza has often expressed frustration about her challenging financial situation. It was after this encounter, however, that I truly understood why she 'felt trapped' and 'stuck' in Athens, which may have offered some opportunities, compared to none back in her hometown, but not the kind of opportunities she had imagined before arriving to the city.

Nearing the end of our session at the cafeteria, Liza broke into tears, thinking about her neighbour who died.

I keep thinking about Kyria Eleni... I can't fathom how unbelievably miserable her life had been, and how unfair to her! Her husband beat her... not infrequently. She tried to leave him, twice. She took the kids with her, slept on the street for two days. And no one helped her! The whole village turned a blind eye, as if they had to be loyal to the husband...! So much for village cooperation... Or maybe they just didn't want to get involved with that psychopath. A few days later, he found her. *Tin ekane topi sto xylo* ('he beat the crap out of her'). And the kids...! The boy came to school with a black eye. And... what happened? She never left him in the end... how could she? Where would she go? She had nowhere to go. Then, later, she had cancer, in the

stomach. She would come by our house, and would bring us food. Poor Kyria Eleni... She was so powerless and trapped; she was poor. And what happened in the end? Her own home flattened her. *What a life, huh...!*. She paused briefly, gathering her breath. 'Is life even worth living? This is what I wonder these days', she said despairingly, with a tone of anger simmering beneath her words.

I don't have a life here... I work all day, I go home at night, and sleep at a house which is not even mine... But I work. And I work at a job that I like, which allows me to be around women and we do all this interesting stuff... and I learn so much! And I think that this job, this environment, the clinic, and everything we do there is the only thing that has kept me sane. I feel like I don't have much control over life right now, or generally. This is such a crazy time... But when I'm in the clinic, I feel like at least I can control something, as if something still matters.

Heather Paxson (2004: 2) has noted that many contemporary Athenian women have been raised by parents who grew up in a rural setting, away from the city, where social personhood was established through domestic, blood- and spiritual kin relationships. In the city, life has been secularized and women have joined the workforce in very large numbers, therefore a steady income contributes to their sense of self and self-realization. Liza's case is characteristic of a young Greek woman living with limited family assistance and basic means in austerity-Greece. I calculated that her paid intern salary, after deducting taxes, was around 380 euros a month – an extremely small amount for getting by in the city, for it barely covers rent. Her job is described as her only comfort, replacing the types of emotional and perhaps even financial comfort that would, in a past setting, be provided by matrimony, but it still sounded as if she felt desperate.

Liza's precarity and despair perfectly distil the 'crisis experience'. She seems to talk about it as an unmistakably and eternally female story, as it condenses the perpetual struggle faced by Greek women (Dubisch 1986; 1995). This is especially captured in the narration of her neighbour's story, summarized as a miserable, unworthy life. Liza's life course, in turn, is portrayed as miserable. Her life story, which had been envisioned as a stable and planned upward mobile curve as she was reaching adulthood (leave the village, move to the capital, study, find a job, and then perhaps find a spouse) was being tested, and even defeated, with every passing day. Then, the tragic unravelling caused by the earthquake and the sudden, violent destruction of her home shattered her sense of security: her 'shelter' and foundation, as most Greeks perceive their family home (*patriko spiti*). And, suddenly, her job became a kind of last resort and anchor, the only aspect of her life which entailed some sense of stability and a hope for the future: a prospect for change towards the better, and not for the worse. Her narration also points to the kind of 'sanity' beautification spaces offer women, as self-care rituals enable the body to maintain a sense of wholeness in a climate of weathering and total dispersion. Her account is also dotted with the subtle – or perhaps not so subtle – poetics I mention above: a sense of anger and despair against the unfairness and inequality that women experience not only as Greeks living inside uncertainty and 'crisis' but as women in a precarious and male-dominated society.

A few days after this emotionally charged interaction with Liza, I met two close friends – Thetis and Eva, aged seventy-three – who went to see a cosmetic surgeon together. In their conversation, they started gossiping about another, third friend, who did cosmetic injections secretly from her husband. When I asked them why she keeps it a secret, they responded: ‘Because her husband considers [these things] a waste of money!’. Then, Thetis added: ‘It’s madness, if you think about it! In this day and age...! Is this woman not entitled to some personal time, some dignity?’

We, contemporary anthropologists, are trained to first and foremost look out for overt or, more commonly, covert forms of oppression, guided by a vast, and important, literature that has managed to unpack the many ways via which bodies are monitored, improved, groomed, and managed by states, institutions, and forms of biopower. But within this existence of being monitored, managed, and improved exist immeasurable ‘micro-realities’ that are exceptional, unique, and personal. And within these realities, beautification or self-improvement might acquire different meanings and significance. Although all societies are exposed to forms of biopower, and all individuals are subjugated to disciplinarian and/or oppressive discourses and regimes (to varying degrees), there exist not only subtle differences but vast chasms between the experience of one person to the next. A good example is how the experience of older women in Greece, most of whom were still dependent on some form of male dominance (usually the husband who provided money from a regular salary), differed from that of more independent and younger urban women (employed in their own right). It became apparent quite early on, that to deal with such differences, I would have to become a lot more attuned to the varying and distinct realities of these women.

Individuals belonging to the same society will be exposed to similar messages, but they will not all get monitored, managed, improved, and groomed in the same way. We all get ‘groomed for capitalism’, to use O’Donnell’s (2021) phrase, but we do not do so in the same manner. Seeing beyond the unifying gaze of concepts such as capitalism, medical science and biopower, and approaching beauty not only as a neoliberal spreadsheet which requires a constant benchmarking of the self (McRobbie, 2015: 9), but as something we all (and not just women who consume cosmetic treatments) are exposed to and get affected by in various degrees throughout our lives, in many different ways, we can begin to discern how each story, when looked at close enough, can reveal an array of ‘thin’ particularities. For don’t we all ‘style ourselves’ (Ochoa 2014: 2) in dialogue with spectacles and symbols we extract from our environments and the media?

‘Doing something for me’

In *The history of sexuality* Foucault (1994) considers *epimeleia eautou*, the ancient notion of self-care. He demonstrates that in Greece of the pre-Christian period, caring for the self was elevated to an art and a practice (*askesis*) to be perfected. Caring for the self was not considered a sinful or vain practice, but instead abetted the self-realization and overall health of man. ‘To take care of yourself’ was a main principle for individuals in the ancient cities (1988: 19), even though, for us contemporaries, the notion has taken on new and different

meanings. Caring for the self-gained much less significance in Western thought after Christianity took over following antiquity (1988), giving way to the rise of the famous Delphic principle *gnothi sauton* ('know yourself') as the central theme in the pursuit of personal improvement. Western philosophy thus placed an overemphasis on the latter and neglected the former, even though the ancients saw 'know thyself' and 'take care of yourself' as interconnected, complementary practices.

For Socrates, as Foucault (1988: 25) maintains, the care of the self is also an exercise in discovering one's identity. This search on the one hand soothes and appeases the soul, and is on the other hand combined with an 'external', as it were, understanding of the self, as seen by others: 'You have to worry about your soul – that is the principal activity of caring for yourself', Foucault cites from *Alcibiades*; 'the soul cannot know itself except by looking at itself in a similar element, a mirror' (Foucault 1988: 25). If we risked seeing the cosmetic medical spaces and the treatments taking place inside them as a kind of modern-day Stoic exercise in care of the self, and a practice in 'seeing the self through others', we can draw some very interesting parallels between the ancient practice of self-care and the contemporary care of the self via cosmetic means.

Taking care of the self is not a rest cure. There is the care of the body to consider, health regimens, physical exercises without overexertion, the carefully measured satisfaction of needs. [...] Around the care of the self, there developed an entire activity of speaking and writing in which the work of oneself on oneself and communication with others were linked together (Foucault 1984: 51).

In a similar vein, the women I met during my fieldwork often claimed that the cosmetic encounter was their only 'me-time': a space and time carved out specifically for themselves and devoted to improving their physical appearance and emotional wellbeing. They perceived it as a personal ritual, which they only shared, on certain occasions, with a close friend. And beauty rituals, or 'personal rituals', as Barthel (2010: 151) calls them, are meant to provide 'drama to culture', by marking points of transformation from one state to another – day to night, work to leisure, public to private.

And although such rituals are performed in private, they are not separated from social participation but rather act as a 'gateway to sociality' (Barthel 2010: 151). In my interlocutors' understanding, private rituals (as these cosmetic sessions were perceived), were likened to a 'preparation stage' prior to going 'back into the world' – a world that would remind them of the harsh realities they were facing. Their rituals acted very much like Barthel's definition of a frame: 'ritual takes a piece of reality and gives it character and definition; it endows the everyday with special meaning' (Barthel 2010: 152). And for my interlocutors, these 'rituals' formed a kind of momentary, soothing escape from the 'dread' and 'toxicity' (to use my interlocutors' words) outside. It became a therapeutic exercise, not due to its end-result (the beautifying effect, or the sense of improvement) but through the act itself: just by dedicating a special 'window' of time to the self, the cosmetic ritual became significant and imbued with positive feelings, even before it was actually realized.

And if cosmetic encounters are indeed a form of private ritual, there are some very interesting properties we can choose to focus on to understand the relation between the body and crisis, stability and destabilization, certainty and uncertainty, demarcation and dispersal. Many social scientists see rituals as essential in the process of promoting order; not because rituals are necessarily reproductive of existing orders but precisely because they provide space for *reimagining* orders (Leander 2021: 307). For Victor Turner, coming of age rituals and rites of passage are described as crucial for dealing with the inherent instability in life, its contradictions, and tensions. For Dubisch, ritual seeks to create order and ‘fix social reality’ (Dubisch 1995: 15). These readings are contiguous to the seminal and well-known work by Myerhoff and Moore (1977: 16), in which they declare that ritual becomes a declaration or form against indeterminacy (and thus anticipating Vizenor’s concept of survivance) – a fight for survival, and a declaration of presence instead of absence. We could also see in these processes Ochoa’s ‘logic of the body’ (2014: 156): a way for the body to make sense of its place in the world, in an act of self-determination. Rituals may also form a personal struggle to instil order on an otherwise chaotic world, and an unruly body. Pulling back the cheeks that start to droop, and ‘erasing’ the lines and creases which dot the face are an effort to bring order to the accelerating disorder that ageing affords.

Concluding thoughts

‘One day, I looked at myself in the rear-view mirror in the car, after a long day at work. I was shocked – I didn’t recognize myself. “Who is this old lady?” I thought to myself. I booked a Botox appointment with the doctor right then and there!’
– Olga, aged 43.

Old age can be experienced as self-effacing. Simone de Beauvoir (1965: 671) herself wrote, ‘I loathe my appearance now; the eyebrow slipping down towards the eyes [...] that air of sadness around the mouth that wrinkles always bring.’ And, as she notes in her authoritative *The Coming of Age* (1970), old age in Western societies arouses an instinctive, immediate disgust – or ‘biological repugnance’. Many attempt to push it as far away as possible, refusing to admit that it will ever happen, even though we know we are all destined for it (Kirkpatrick and Kruks, 2022).

Gibson (2006: 53) has aptly described the experience of alienation, or disassociation, felt by people walking by a mirror or other reflective surface on the street, failing to recognize the old man or woman glancing back at them; or the moment of profound insight when they realize they are considered old in other people’s eyes. These moments are, as Ursula K. Le Guin, maintains, part and parcel of the *existential* situation comprising old age. And such feelings of terror have caused the medical and the cosmetic industries to surge and increasingly swell, in their effort to appease the ever-growing unease with which our societies approach the old and decaying body.

My interlocutors repeatedly focused on such widespread themes: the alienation felt by a woman who glanced at her face's reflection on her car's rear-view mirror, feeling shocked that her face looked 'so old, so tired'; or another interlocutor, Thetis, who saw cosmetic interventions as a way to retain one's dignity. And finally, a commonly felt belief that 'crisis' of the embracing and all-encompassing kind Greece and more widely Europe and the West is experiencing at the moment – may have caused even greater anxiety around the decaying body, causing it to be constantly alert and hypervigilant.

And although – in theory at least – beautification, self-enhancement and anti-ageing should not be prioritized in the face of great sociopolitical and financial tremors (and this commonly held belief is what urged the anthropologist at the conference to ask me 'why don't women mobilize differently?'), the research I undertook in Athens demonstrated just how much beauty and 'self-improvement' were considered serious matters, to be found at the core of the crisis experience and tightly connected to ideas of emotional and social survival, and not to be brushed aside as unimportant or superficial. The practice of grooming became central for many, in their quest to plant a seed of order and control inside a wider life experience which is becoming too anarchic and uncertain.

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