

# Cosmetic Surgery

-- A ritual of beauty and pain

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**Abstract:** Cosmetic surgery, as a medical surgery involving body modification and reshaping, inevitably entails bloodshed and pain. However, in the prevailing global trend of excessive emphasis on appearance, many individuals still gravitate towards cosmetic surgery despite the inherent risks involved. Nowadays, cosmetic surgery serves not only as a means to enhance one's physical appearance, but also as a method for reconstructing postoperative identity order for those who undergo it. Similar to certain rites of passage observed in primitive tribes, recipients of rituals must endure the physical imprints left by pain in order to complete the transformative process of social identity. This paper perceives cosmetic surgery as a rite of passage related to beauty and pain, exploring how individuals undergoing such procedures achieve identity transformation and restore order after crossing the threshold through Victor Turner's theory of liminality. Furthermore, it analyzes the cultural significance and social implications of pain within this transformative journey.

**Keywords:** Cosmetic Surgery, Pain, Ritual, Liminality.

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## 1. Rites of Passage filled with Pain

Before the advent of modern cosmetic surgery, numerous primitive tribes possessed cultures that utilized physical tattoos as symbols of identity. They would deliberately etch certain lifelong marks onto their bodies, and even in present times, some tribes and regions continue to uphold customs such as facial tattoos, circumcision, lip plates and other customs [1, 2]. These practices of body modification often serve as indispensable rituals for the rites of passage. By imprinting specific marks on the body, they signify the abstract transformation of one's identity after a rite of passage, symbolizing the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Enduring pain becomes both the responsibility and obligation of the recipient, with their attitude towards pain determining whether or not the ritual can be successfully completed, that is, whether or not it can achieve its intended meaning of transforming one's identity. Throughout these rituals, they must courageously embrace the pain and perceive the pain and bloodshed as a mature signifier. If the recipient avoids or reacts negatively to pain out of fear, then there is a possibility that the ritual may fail. Thus, they will be deemed unfit to become a qualified adult. Simultaneously, these marks also function as emblems of beauty and maturity; they represent the irreversible changes in their bodies and ultimately aim to facilitate their full entry into another stage of life. Such marks and scars serve as powerful symbols of resilience and maturation, signifying the physical growth and development. These meticulously crafted scars and body adornments function as a form of identification, denoting the individual's tribe, clan, gender, as well as age and social status [3].

Unlike these exaggerated body marks, modern individuals have a wider range of safer and more diverse methods to express their personality and identity through their appearance. In addition, advances in medicine science have made the standardization of physical possible, thereby transforming concerns about appearance-related anxiety caused by social issues into medical matters. For individuals dissatisfied with their physical appearance, cosmetic surgery

is an opportunity to alter their looks. Moreover, patients invest in cosmetic surgery with the expectation of enhancing their quality of life and reshaping their destinies. They aspire to alleviate personal struggles through this transformative process, imbuing cosmetic surgery with a sense of sacred ritualism. However, despite advancements in modern cosmetic techniques, procedures still involve the incisions, tissue removal such as skin, nerves, muscles, and fat, as well as bone restructuring. Pain remains an inevitable aspect of cosmetic surgeries. Patients first need to endure the pain from anesthetic injections before the operation and potential sudden pains during the procedure itself. Following the conclusion of surgery and subsequent fading effects of anesthesia, patients must endure pain during wound recovery. In addition, some patients may encounter postoperative complications such as disfigurement and facial paralysis, as well as permanent chronic pain after cosmetic surgery. Even in contemporary times when medical technology and pain management methods are more advanced than ever before, pain continues to permeate every stage of cosmetic surgeries [4, 5].

The perception of pain among individuals undergoing cosmetic surgery serves as a crucial indicator to assess whether their decision to enhance their appearance through cosmetic procedures is primarily driven by personal desire or societal expectations. Similar to adolescents participating in a rite of passage, who endure pain while bearing the expectation of attaining adulthood and upholding cultural and social norms, many patients perceive the procedure as an opportunity to redefine their identity and embark on a transformative journey, akin to children eagerly anticipating independence and freedom after transitioning into adulthood. We should regard these pains neither using purely psychoanalytic method, nor in isolation, in order to understand the pains of individuals, and consider their culture backgrounds and social context, rather than merely focus on their physical feelings [6]. The pain experienced in cosmetic surgery serves as an essential rite of passage, lending credibility to the discomfort endured. It requires individuals to perceive their suffering not as a disagreeable sensation, but

as an indispensable ritual process. Cosmetic surgery patients bear the duty and responsibility to undergo this journey in order to sculpt their bodies, thereby embarking on a transformative quest towards attaining societal significance. Comprehending the role of pain within cosmetic surgery offers valuable insights into the social and cultural influences compelling individuals to opt for this potentially hazardous method of enhancing their appearance according to external aesthetic standards, while simultaneously infusing cosmetic surgery with profound symbolism.

## 2. Cosmetic Surgery as a Ritual

Emile Durkheim proposes a dualistic framework that distinguishes between the sacred and secular realms [7]. The distinctiveness of sacred entities from secular existence resides in their profound disparity, which is further reinforced through ritual. Arnold Van Gennep also posits that each rite of passage linked to changes in geographical location, circumstances, social standing, and age encompasses three distinct phases: separation, transition (margin) and aggregation, that is preliminal, liminal and postliminal [8]. Prior to entering the preliminal, individuals or groups must detach themselves from their previous societal framework. Throughout the liminal phases, the participants of the ritual do not possess their former status. Upon traversing the threshold, they regain a relatively stable state.

Victor Turner developed the theory of ritual based on Arnold Van Gennep's work. In his book *Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*, he introduced concepts such as *communitas*, liminality and anti-structure [9]. Diverging from a focus solely on transitional processes, Turner emphasized the liminality characterized by unstructured disorder, which he aptly referred to as the cracks in established structures. Liminality represents an in-between and between time-space that exists between two stable social frameworks; during this liminal phase, recipients enter a sacred ritual space where they encounter a profound sense of unity bridging the divine and secular realms through *communitas*. The amalgamation of liminality and *communitas* gives rise to an anti-structure. "Within this state of anti-structure in liminality, individuals undergoing rituals detach themselves from their pre-existing social hierarchies, thereby resolving conflicts and tensions within these structures" [10]. This transformation of identity and position partially eliminates the contradictions and conflicts in social structures, so as to serve the purpose of upholding the existing framework. Similar to the changes of recipients in ritual, individuals seeking cosmetic surgery aim to standardize their appearance and physique, alleviating anxieties stemming from mainstream aesthetic while reconciling conflicts between self-perception and societal beauty standards. Therefore, cosmetic surgery has the features of ritual transformation and anti-structure. As a manifestation of ritualized practice, individuals undergoing cosmetic surgery progress through three stages: preliminal, liminal and postliminal.

### 2.1. Preliminal

#### 2.1.1. The Vulnerable Groups Coerced by Aesthetic Standards

Nowadays, consumerism and omnipresence of mass media have shaped the human body as an object of scrutiny and commodification. The concept of appearance has evolved from a neutral state to a dichotomy of beauty and ugliness, as constructed through discourse. "The body is occupying the

center of our vision as never before. It is no longer a vessel of the soul or a symbol of original sin, but a symbol of some kind of idol or capital" [11]. The development of modern medicine has shifted the focus towards achieving beauty through medical corrections while treating ugliness as the object that requires intervention. However, it is important to recognize that societal influences shape the standards for defining what is considered beauty and ugliness, these standards are not inherent to human nature. The ubiquitous mass media permeates every aspect of our lives and molds our bodies accordingly. Especially during childhood, many children would suffer psychological trauma, on account of lacking self-awareness and independent thinking, when they being exposed to notions that they are ugly or unattractive. "The face that the mass media have provided is a sort of commodity and weapon" [12].

Due to the shrinking of physical space caused by technological advancements, the fragmented and diverse social environment has led to an increasing emphasis on appearance in daily life. Physical appearance has gradually become intertwined with one's ability, intelligence, mental state and morality. The level of refinement in one's appearance is also attributed to qualities such as self-discipline and obedience. However, some individuals who do not meet societal standards and beauty often have their unique characteristics stripped away and are reduced to objects that can be condemned and ridiculed, resulting in their disadvantaged position in life. In this context, cosmetic surgery undoubtedly provides a means for those trapped in such predicaments to escape their troubles. Cosmetic surgery approaches these challenges from a medical standpoint by addressing the dissatisfaction caused by social issues and discrimination as medical problems. For those who undergo cosmetic surgery, it is perceived as a remedy for their lives [13]. They often say express optimism when stating things like "I will undergo double eyelid surgery after my college entrance examination" or "Once I save enough money, I can undergo a specific cosmetic procedure". Many individuals considering cosmetic surgery view it as an aspiration and hope to regain control over their lives through cosmetic surgery—an opportunity for them to make new choices [14].

#### 2.1.2. Prior to the Ritual Begins

The ritual constitutes a self-contained system and structure in the manifestation of temporal and spatial dimensions. For this reason, patients undergo a preliminal phase where they consciously disengage from various aspects of their daily lives, thus transitioning into the liminal phases of cosmetic surgery. During this period, they detach themselves temporally, spatially, and emotionally from their everyday existence, attaining a state of detachment from both past and present as well as constraints and freedom.

##### 1) Separation of time

The ritual is different from daily life in terms of timing. Through the interviews, it was discovered that the majority of cosmetic surgery patients choose to undergo the procedure during long holidays. On the one hand, they have spare time to engage in various preparations, such as conducting thorough research and consulting different hospitals. On the other hand, they can take advantage of the extended holiday period for post-operative recovery, avoiding swollen and bleeding faces in public settings. Based on their daily schedules and hospital arrangements, these individuals carefully select a specific day for the surgery. From the moment they commence preparing for cosmetic surgery by

investing time and financial resources, there is a gradual detachment from their daily life. Many patients dedicate a significant amount of time searching online for information and materials, thoroughly evaluating multiple hospitals and doctors through visits or seeking advice from others, as well as making deposits. During this process of gradually disengaging from daily life, these individuals transition both mentally and physically into a state of readiness; all these preparations are aimed at achieving optimal results in this transformative ceremonial experience.

## 2) Separation of space

In addition to establishing a clear distinction between time and daily life, rituals often utilize space to reinforce the sanctity and demarcate the boundary between the sacred and secular realms. Cosmetic surgery hospitals themselves are deliberately segregated from people's everyday living spaces, they transcend ordinary locales. Simultaneously, cosmetic surgeries take place within enclosed, sterilized operating rooms that isolate them from anyone other than doctors and patients. Moreover, these hospitals feature standardized and meticulously designed aesthetics aimed at showcasing their professionalism and legitimacy, such as a predominantly white color scheme, precisely delineated functional areas, as well as prominently displayed cases and advertisements. These design elements effectively create a distinct spatial experience for customers, further segregating cosmetic surgery hospitals from routine daily life. All these factors collectively contribute to constructing an aura of sacredness detached from customary routines.

In addition, people tend to prefer choosing medical cosmetic hospitals in first-tier cities due to their stronger recognition and trustworthiness towards these hospitals. Given the opportunity, they would willingly endure long-distance travel via various modes of transportation in order to access hospitals situated in major urban areas. Apart from the objective of seeking more advanced technology and professional doctors, large-scale cosmetic surgery hospitals within first-tier cities possess a greater sense of sacredness among those pursuing cosmetic surgery compared to ordinary cosmetic hospitals. This is primarily attributed to the association of these expansive facilities with elevated expectations for transformative beauty enhancements owing to their cutting-edge and specialized nature.

## 2.2. Liminal Phases

The liminality, as a vague, transitional or temporal intermediate zone, can be perceived as a realm of relative freedom, detached from the constraints imposed by social structures. Prior to liminality, individuals are confined within the boundaries set by societal institutions, power dynamics, and hierarchical identities. For example, those seeking cosmetic surgery may encounter disadvantages based on their physical appearance and even face discrimination or mockery. However, the liminality introduces a disruptive force to established social frameworks. Within its confines, individuals are granted liberation from these liminality and enter into an anti-structure state. Just like in cosmetic surgery procedures where patients lying on the operating room momentarily escape mainstream aesthetic judgments and external demands. To plastic surgeons, they become mere bodies in need of transformation without consideration for notions of beauty or ugliness. In this momentary respite from daily life's troubles caused by their appearance, they can instead focus solely on their own physical sensations while

awaiting the completion of the surgical procedure.

Cosmetic surgery is a transformative process that transcends temporal and physical boundaries, creating a realm devoid of societal constraints. During the liminal phase of cosmetic surgery, patients liberate themselves from the confines imposed by aesthetic hegemony, reclaiming their autonomy to choose their own facial features. They perceive this procedure as an opportunity to exercise freedom in shaping their appearance without succumbing to feelings of inferiority stemming from innate attributes. Cosmetic surgery enables them to rectify the inequities caused by natural looks, at this stage, they are neither defined by their past selves requiring correction, nor have they fully attained their envisioned beautiful selves. Their appearance exists beyond secular standards, with surgical scars serving as tangible evidence of this liminal phase. Besides, some patients also employ cosmetic surgery as a means to challenge prevailing aesthetics within social structures, defying gender stereotypes and resisting patriarchal beauty standards. Throughout the surgical procedures, they experience a tumultuous amalgamation of emotions and perceptions, including apprehension towards the unknown, nervousness, ennui, pain, anticipation, and excitement.

Under the influence of anesthesia, although the patients are unable to perceive genuine pain or comprehend the specific surgical procedures being performed, they still possess an awareness of bodily changes. The process of reconstructing their identity and social status after surgery is characterized by a multitude of uncertainties and expectations. In the immediate aftermath of the procedure, these patients exist in a state of disarray, neither beautiful nor ugly, but rather in an intermediate phase of facial recovery, similar to adolescents who are isolated during a rite of passage. They are not quite teenagers yet not fully adults, existing betwixt and between identities in a tumultuous state. Interestingly, during this recuperation period, many opt for seclusion or concealment through sunglasses and masks when going outdoors, isolating themselves from daily life and evading exposure in their convalescent state by others. However, once the wounds of cosmetic surgery have healed completely, much like facial tattoos or circumcision rituals, it signifies a tangible reconstruction of their identity. Regardless if substantial transformations have transpired within their lives, the societal significance attached to their physical appearance has been rebuilt, they are no longer identical to who they were before.

## 2.3. Postliminal: Return to Daily Life

In China, the phenomenon of undergoing cosmetic surgery after entrance examinations has garnered significant attention from scholars and media [15]. The essential possessions for college students have shifted from cell phones and computers to cosmetic surgeries. It is worth noting that in the liminality of facial appearance, those who opt for cosmetic surgery often find themselves at the crossroads between being a high school student and a college student, or a student and a person in work [16]. Many of those who choose to undergo cosmetic surgery during this period perceive entering university as an entirely new chapter in terms of time and space. They hope to associate establish fresh interpersonal connections with a better appearance, leaving others with an indelible impression. Moreover, they desire not to be recognized by acquaintances in their new environment; their aim is to sever ties with their former selves. By leveraging alterations in physical attributes, they reconcile conflicts related to identity and seamlessly

integrate into their new life environment. It can be asserted that people who decide on cosmetic surgery before stepping into a new stage of life are positioned at a double liminal phases condition. Not only do they acquire novel identities but also attain a glamorous transformation through cosmetic surgery, becoming popular and appealing individuals. Cosmetic surgery undoubtedly facilitates multiple internal identity transformations for these individuals, rendering this transition more comprehensive.

Postliminal corresponds to the aggregation stage of the rites of passage theory, during this particular stage, the ritual subject ultimately necessitates a return to their daily life. Patients eventually recuperate from their procedures and reintegrate into reality. Pierre Bourdieu once succinctly summarized the body as a form of capital with its own uniqueness and distinction [17]. In most cases, physical capital can be translated into economic capital, historical capital, and social capital [18]. After cosmetic surgery and upon reentering their original social structure, changes in appearance affect their position within that structure. The return to daily life represents a higher level of regression. Moreover, this regression process is often protracted as it entails both physical recovery from surgical wounds and psychological adaptation to one's new appearance. Consequently, individuals gradually update their self-worth and confirm their own identity [19].

### 3. Conclusion

The rewards for individuals undergoing cosmetic surgery are immense, pain for those patients has a similar meaning to the significance of pain in a rite of passage, that is pain is an obligation that they must be undertaken. From the point of view of the patients, the benefits derived from cosmetic surgery far outweigh the cost of the pain to such an extent that it becomes disregarded and forgotten. Furthermore, those who have undergone one procedure often consider subsequent surgeries and without prioritizing concerns about pain and risks. It is not so much that they dismiss pain, but rather they have never truly acknowledged their own suffering. Cosmetic surgery patients resemble warriors courageously navigating through thorns and hardships, perceiving pain as a necessary trial on the path towards achieving their ultimate goal, willingly enduring it for the sake of beauty. Cosmetic surgery represents a painful and arduous yet a hopeful rite of passage, imbued with expectations and social significance beyond mere alteration of appearance. These individuals aspire to discover self-identity and societal approval through cosmetic surgery, with pain being just one essential process within this ritual, they bravely facing it time after time while simultaneously forgetting about it amidst their beautiful aspirations. "The very fact that women ambitiously and self-consciously chose to undergo these surgical operations probably demands from them to deny pain, in an almost voluntaristic and heroic manner".

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