

2

The Beauty Dilemma: Gendered Bodies and Aesthetic Judgement

[N]o woman escapes 'beauty'. Unavoidably, from her earliest years, beauty will be either attributed or denied to her. If she does not have it, she may hope to gain it; if she possesses it, she will certainly lose it. But what exactly is 'beauty'?

(Pacteau, 1994)

When Pacteau above asks: 'what exactly is *beauty*' the answer is elusive. The question of beauty has entertained philosophers since the time of Socrates and Plato. Freud, too, considered beauty elusive, beyond explanation:

The science of aesthetics investigates the conditions under which things are felt as beautiful, but it has been unable to find any explanation of the nature and origin of beauty, and as usually happens, lack of success is concealed beneath a flood of resounding and empty words.

(1953, p. 83)

In describing beauty or what has developed as a theory of aesthetics, arguments hinge on key organising principles, such as – attributes, value, function, form, perception, psychical distance, disinterest or objectivity. However, as Dickie (1997, p. 167) points out, what began as an objective theory of beauty (whereby beauty was held to exist independently of human beings) was gradually replaced by more subjective notions of beauty, or, specifically, taste, as a characteristic of human subjects. Deleuze's (1994) notion of 'intensity' offers an interesting path to explore when trying to consider aesthetics as different from, or a

complement to, previous accounts that relied on form to convey taste, beauty, and pleasure.

For Deleuze, the aim of art is to produce a 'sensation', a sign which is an 'encounter' rather than a 'meaning'. This Deleuzian sense of 'an encounter' offers significant opportunities for thinking of the encounter readers/viewers have with a range of children's texts across novels, picture books, films, and other aesthetic products. For Deleuze these 'encounters' become 'events' as well as representations. To demonstrate this point, I refer back to Tom Feelings's illustrated text *The Middle Passage*, discussed briefly in the Introduction. As I mentioned, this book offers a tableau of represented images of the body in pain and torture. This is one way of reading and understanding the figures in relation to their representation. A Deleuzian interpretation would consider what is painted in the tableau 'is the body, not insofar as it is represented as "object" but in so far as it is lived as experiencing sensation' (Deleuze quoted by Polan, 1994, p. 239). Misson and Morgan also consider aesthetics as 'a kind of intensity' (2006, p. 32). For these writers, aesthetic objects (or texts) have an intensity that moves the reader/viewer/player to want to become involved with those objects because they display this quality. This kind of intensity emerges in cultural products produced and marketed for children – their visual, auditory, and tactile sensations operate as an intense 'force'. My example later in the discussion of the Bratz dolls demonstrates how the marketing aesthetic attracts children's attention by creating attitudes and desires that orient them towards wanting to possess these dolls and to purchase a range of accessories. Other texts similarly work to position readers into seeing and valuing in particular ways by engaging them affectively through their aesthetic discourses.

In many ways, youth and beauty have become the holy grail of modern consumer societies. Imagery of youth depicted as a sensuous, celebratory form of masculine or feminine ideality has long been part of the Western aesthetic. Such imagery is abundant in popular cultural texts (fiction, film, magazines, toys, games, and websites) targeting children and young people. There is a double irony at play, however, as the young desire to be older, the ageing desire to be younger. Western culture's obsession with youth and 'cuteness' is noted by James R. Kincaid as amounting to 'cultural arrested development' (1998, p. 105), a situation which is played out to its logical yet improbable extreme in Mary Rodgers's children's novel, *Freaky Friday* (1972). The story documents the experiences of a mother and her daughter when on one 'freaky Friday' they find that they have switched personalities and bodies,

and subsequently experience (and ultimately come to appreciate) each other's subjectivities.¹

As this chapter's focus is on 'the beauty dilemma', my interest lies in considering how texts variously engage readers/viewers in the contradictory discourses of beauty as desirable and dangerous. These contradictory discourses are of course evident in the 'real' world and the function of narrative often depends on 'showing us particular discourses in action, often clashing with each other, certainly supplementing each other to give a sense of the breadth of the world being depicted' (Misson & Morgan, 2006, p. 51). I therefore consider practices of subjection that attempt to position girls and women as vulnerable or imperfect, as well as a productive aesthetics that offers more optimistic outcomes, sensations, and affects. Masculinity is also caught up with aesthetics, but arguably the female body is subjected to a more prevalent form of censure and surveillance. In exploring how fictional texts written for children and young adults engage with matters of beauty and the beauty ideal, I consider how these texts draw our attention to the significances and effects of different aesthetic discourses, and the kinds of sensations or intensities that the aesthetic experience offers.

In considering youth's location and investment in the beauty scene, this chapter also considers the other side of beauty by exploring examples of texts that celebrate an *aesthetics of disgust*. By engaging with discourses of beauty and ugliness (refinement and disgust), my aim is to investigate how these extremes are used in texts to disrupt or confirm dominant gender norms. An aesthetics of disgust is not something new, as the aesthetic has always engendered varied and complex pleasures. As mentioned above, pleasure encompasses our intense engagement with texts by fulfilling some of our many faceted desires for beauty, harmony, and joy, as well as for revulsion, despair, pain, and horror (Misson & Morgan, 2006). As its designation of 'disgust' implies, this form of aesthetics is always in relation to traditional aesthetics, but, more significantly, the term heralds a return to theories of the aesthetic in the aftermath of postmodernism, postcolonialism, and Second Wave Feminism. By utilising post-feminism and other 'post' theories we can complicate the problematic representation of women and men by offering pleasurable and desirous experiences which are outside frameworks of objectification, image, and representation alone.

As the above account foreshadows, my discussion covers a broad range of texts across age and genre and uses diverse but complementary theoretical perspectives. Some of the texts discussed in this chapter

provide counternarratives to the beauty ideal in different ways: by exposing the negative practices of subjectification that frame youth identity in late-capitalist societies. and attending to the micropolitics of post-feminism by providing examples of how everyday women and girls gain subjectivity (or a sense of 'becoming') through aesthetic encounters and events.

Promises, promises: The fantasy of the beauty ideal

The body is 'the fantastic *mise-en-scène* of our desires' (Bronfen, 2000, p. 111). For Bronfen, the body is the interface between physical materiality and its visual or narrative representation. Located at this interface is the body, which is the subject of both aesthetic and scientific discourses. These discourses attempt to distinguish between beauty and monstrosity, between masculinity and femininity, between nature and culture, and between the living and the dead (Bronfen, 2000, p. 112). The body as the object of representation of our fantasies and desires is something that has long interested artists, novelists, poets, and songwriters who have tried to capture the quintessential qualities of beauty and desire in their works. While beauty is an attribute of an object or a person, it has the capacity to seize both the heart and mind of the beholder; indeed, the narcissistic self is also the fascinated beholder of its own beauty. Perhaps, Plato² was right when he said that beauty is the object of love; whether this is a love for the self or another seems immaterial. One can become seduced, captivated, excited by the sight of beauty. Beauty can take our breath away, cause us to go weak at the knees, stammer, become speechless, fix our eyes. We can be gripped by desire to possess it, or it can offer a quiet space for contemplation. That a beautiful person or object would have such varied sensory and physiological effects on an observer seems incomprehensible, but the paradox of beauty is that it is both a possibility and an impossibility. Part of this impossibility lies in the never-fulfilled desire for beauty. When Leonard Cohen wrote the song lyric, 'I came so far for beauty', he captured in a few words the elusive quest to possess someone, a beauty, for whom one would leave all others behind. While a Lacanian view would see Cohen's song as a searching for beauty as based on lack, loss or absence, a Deleuzian application would see his lyrics and music creating sensations of sound and image that resonate with each other, with a force that has productive and creative energies (he wrote a successful song after all).

While much of the imaginary and symbolic figurations of the beautiful subject suggest that the body is the cause of desire, in *Gender*

Trouble (Butler, 1990a), Butler claims that the body is not the cause, but the effect of desire (p. 71). For Butler, the body is constructed by discourse and the law, and is not 'merely matter', although in *Bodies That Matter* (1993) she concedes that there is such a thing as a 'physical body'. Given this privileging of the body and accompanying debates that move between its corporeal reality and its imaginative representations, between cultural construction and independent existence, how do texts for young people and the critical discourses that surround that writing actively participate in these debates? This question underpins the discussions that follow particularly as notions of agency and subjectivity are caught up in the dilemma that sees the body as a site of cultural commodification or objectification, and as a site for agency and an expressive subjectivity. These two positions underpin the dilemmas of post-feminist and post-structuralist thinking as they continue to repeat binary debates.

In her discussion of feminism and beauty, Janet Wolff (2006, p. 144) states that 'feminists have had good reason to distrust the discourse of beauty'. While discussions of the objectification of female (and male) bodies and the universalising assumptions about aesthetic value and beauty have become familiar, Wolff argues that nevertheless there is 'a place for beauty – a return to beauty – in post-critical aesthetics' (p. 148). Beauty sells – the bikini girl draped across the Porsche is still good for business – but consumers are perhaps both aware and unaware of how such blatant promotion reproduces the politics of gender. The contradictions and unstable features that constitute post-feminism centre on the body. Gill (2007, p. 149) posits some of these contradictions with respect to: objectification and subjectification; self-surveillance; individualism, choice and empowerment; dominance of the makeover paradigm; and the sexualisation of culture. Furthermore, as Gill points out, these gendered themes coexist with often silenced discourses about race, ethnicity, class, age, sexuality and disability.

As the opening epigraph attests, beauty is a problem. If you have it you are bound to lose it, and if you don't have it, you want it. This point is given explicit confirmation in the picture book *Willy's Mum* (Tulloch, 2008). As the title makes clear, the subject of the story is the unnamed woman known only for her status as mother of Willy. The main focaliser is Willy's dad. With his digital camera in hand, Willy's dad documents the woman's daily moves, foibles, and physical short-fallings. But the third person narration shifts between different points of view from the three characters – Dad, Willy, and Mum. Such shifting points of view through a multiple focalisation process offer counterpoints of

perception and different 'truths'. For example, at one point, the narration focalised through Willy openly states that some of Dad's accusations are false: 'Willy suspects that some of these things are not true'. This picture book illustrates Arthurs's point that 'the maternal body in particular is the grotesque body par excellence' (1999, p. 142). It also illustrates Eagleton's point that 'aesthetics is born as a discourse of the body' (1990, p. 13).

In Willy's Mum, the focalised account offered by Dad and his video camera 'evidence' of Mum looking tired, angry, relaxed, and dribbling when snoozing, expose the female body's failure to meet the demands of the beauty ideal. This focalised account from the adult male character's point of view uses light irony and sarcasm to undercut competing perceptions about Willy's mum to contrast her perception of how she looks and behaves with the 'real' perception of the male other. The illustrations serve as counterpoints to the words. However, the visual gives a 'truth value' that is arguably more persuasive than the words, and denies the woman's claims (repeated on her behalf by the narrator) that: 'Willy's mum would also like to add: she is 100% wrinkle-free, her tummy does not stick out, and her bottom is actually tiny'. The veracity of these statements is undermined by the illustrations (see Figure 2.1).

As noted in the previous chapter, our notion of reality is informed by what we see, and the visibility of empirical data offers access to a truth that we may fail to question. Other 'truths' or 'empirical data' about the mother are that she is a shopaholic who suffers from a severe case of shoe fetishism, 'gets up early every morning to shave all over', was bought by her partner at a 'Mum-Shop where Mums come in three different flavours; chocolate, strawberry or hokey pokey', and is 'nearly 100 years old'. And as a further reminder of society's fetishising of the youthful body, Dad produces a photo album showing what 'Mum' looked like when she was 20. But rather than see her as a youthful beauty, Dad interprets baby Willy's curiosity over the photographs as 'wondering who the crazy one really was'.

These visual accounts of the female body as I have discussed to this point are firmly placed in old structuralist and psychoanalytic terms which are caught up in discourses of phallogentrism. For example, the gender binary is reinforced through humour and comment conveyed through word and illustration. The humour shows up the childish behaviour of Willy's dad who feels that he is hard done by because of the attention Mum gives to their baby, Willy. This Oedipal take on desire for the Other places both baby and father in competition for the mother's attention. The father desires what his son desires but feels that

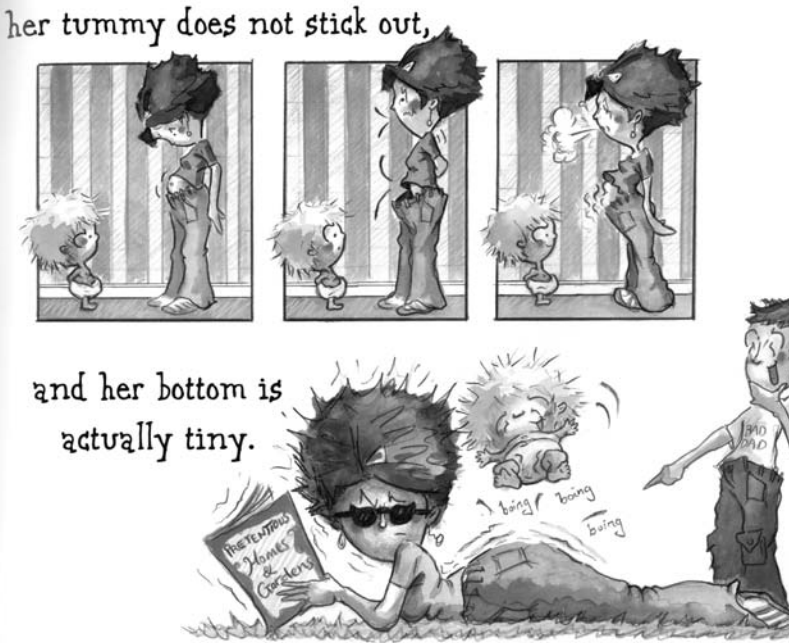


Figure 2.1 From *Willy's Mum* by Scott Tulloch, reproduced by permission of HarperCollins Publishers

she belongs to Willy (which can be seen as an unfortunate name or a fitting linguistic pun given the context). These forms of humour and the contradictions between words and illustration provide complex processes of interpellation, since readers are being addressed indirectly by a number of focalisers who are all potentially unreliable. The text offers no discourse of revenge for the female character or retribution for the male's insensitivity and cruel words. The result is that 'Mum' remains the object of the readers' scrutiny and while Dad is clearly a prat and wears a T-shirt that states that he is 'BAD DAD', the woman remains fixed in a stable set of gender relations. Her body and performative acts (as perfect mother, compulsive shopper, undisciplined consumer) play on and offer implicit support for common gendered assumptions about women.

Deleuzian ideas offer us other ways for engaging with this text; ways that might disorientate the discourses of phallogentrism and traditional aesthetics outside psychoanalytic and (Second Wave) feminist theories and their notions of agency and subjectivity. In doing this, we can ask if there is another beauty at work in this text – one that relies on

aesthetic resonances of colour, movement, and energies. In doing so, I do not wish to negate or justify the immature, disturbing, misogynistic elements which are part of the narrative and focalising structure. These elements may very well be intended to show their negativity, rather than offer an endorsement. Deleuze suggests that we should open up beyond seeing our 'selves' as subjectivities, as identities trapped within the stratifying structures of a capitalist, phallogocentric world (Kennedy, 2000, p. 75). To do this relies on connecting with the text to create new 'assemblages' that are productive in themselves and not necessarily attempts to impose order or logic. Visually, *Willy's Mum* offers a domestic *mise-en-scène*, which vibrates and resonates in a variety of contrasting rhythms. The pace of the narrative is rapid as words are broken into fragments and illustrations appear in a varied sequence of vignettes, close-ups, changing perspective and size. This playful engagement with the book's spatial framework sets up a resonance with the body and mind of the reader. Sequences of domestic harmony and chaos are created through an array of visual perspectives, movements, and use of colour. Colours are bright and intense, conveying a sense of familial and domestic joyfulness, not cruelty, coldness, or hostility. The multiple focalisation that conveys different points-of-view through words also carries points-of-view through the visuals, as I mentioned above. Thus, we can witness the effects of this changing focalisation and other 'truths' or, more correctly in a Deleuzian frame, 'sensations'. For instance, we are given visual vignettes of Mum and Willy in loving embraces and sharing pleasurable activities together (reading a storybook). We also see Mum enjoying a pleasurable solitude (reading, eating her favourite lollies, snoozing). These images of the body at play, at rest, alone and in company, invite a seeing of the female body not as represented object, but as lived and experiencing sensation. In this way, the picture book as an 'event' of experience connects with the reader through its visual narrative that is both delightful and disturbing.

Consequently, how this text is understood will depend on a number of social and aesthetic attitudes, experiences, and knowledge with respect to: gender norms, family dynamics, subversive forms of humour, and the interplay between words and visuals in picture books. Texts cannot force readers to accept their propositions or to be fully aware of the authors' intentions. Readers, especially young children, may find pleasure in reading picture books, such as *Willy's Mum*, by attending to the many elements that attract them. For others, perverse pleasures come from the misogynistic discourse or from resisting this discourse. Also, other more Deleuzian pleasures might be derived from the readers'

encounters with an aesthetics of sensation. As this example illustrates, the site at which the images of beauty or its lack, its sensations, occurs is the body. The body gives material shape and lived sensation to concepts such as beauty, perfection, or ugliness. The aesthetics of the female body that this picture book offers articulates both its materiality and its cultural and sensory value. Like other examples that follow, Willy's mother's body is not a 'real' body; all are represented bodies that stand in for paradigmatic exemplars of perfection or deviations from those paradigms.

What price beauty?

As the previous example demonstrated, the aesthetic is not necessarily tied to beauty, although beauty is often called into service as a way of justifying or proving the aesthetic value of something. Hence, the adage *Beauty is in the eye of the beholder* suggests both truth and complacency: a diplomatic impasse where debate is foreclosed. This section continues to enquire into the fantasy that constructs the desire for beauty. But rather than consider fantasy from a psychoanalytic perspective, I consider fantasy in terms of the kinds of wish-fulfilment that come when our desires are mobilised in ways that make us want or crave something or someone. Thus, 'beauty' in this discussion is not something to do with 'taste' or judgement of taste, but an intensity or a force that is part of a process which takes precedence over form. My heading suggests that there is a price to pay for beauty. Indeed, my argument is a simple one: fantasy often comes with an economic value. Apart from our own imagination and play with others, we often must pay to be able to enjoy the fantasies that others construct for us through aesthetic products.

Human physical beauty not only sits on the surface of the skin but permeates the epidermal layers reaching into all parts of the human body/mind, affecting capacity to be successful in a world where superficiality appears more important than substance. Beauty is therefore not simply something to behold or to admire from a distance. Rather, it is something to acquire, because it brings its own rewards (or so we are told) – friends, popularity, success, wealth, and – most importantly in the words of the sponsor – 'a new improved you'. All this is possible if we treat ourselves to the right cosmetics, clothes, cosmetic procedures or surgery, and gym membership. However, the commodification of beauty is not an historically recent phenomenon as Paula Black notes in her book, *The Beauty Industry* (2004). As Black explains, beauty therapy is part of a vast and profitable multinational industry and, while its

roots can be traced to the mid-Victorian period (or possibly before), it was only after the Second World War that the industry began to consolidate (p. 20). Black sees this development as coinciding in the 1950s with the culture of femininity whereby cosmetic and beauty product use was seen no longer as the province of Hollywood and the theatre, but something that the average woman could now purchase to ensure that 'natural femininity' was assured. As Black says, 'artificiality is sold under the guise of a natural, already-present femininity' (p. 35). However, the hard sell today targets a growing demographic comprising children and youth. The messages that companies and websites use to promote beauty products extol a number of positive aspects – the empowering, playful and social benefits – which we could see as the influence of post-feminism and postmodern individualism.

A case in point is the marketing success story of the Bratz dolls. These dolls have a similar currency to that once enjoyed by their predecessor, Barbie.³ However, they differ from earlier items because online marketing has facilitated a wider network of consumption through websites, blogs, and online shopping services. Bratz products have swept many children and their mothers into a buying frenzy. These 10 inch (25 cm), sexy party dolls with 'a passion for fashion' have enormous amounts of hair, pouty lips, made-up eyes, oversized heads, and street chic outfits. Given the targeted age of consumers for Bratz (from 4–8 years) it is surprising that the profiling of the Bratz girls includes adult tastes (e.g. Yasmin's fave food: Mediterranean food; fave movies: romantic comedies; fave books: chick lit with happy endings; and fave music: Black Eyed Peas).

There is undoubtedly a social networking aspect to the Bratz site as girls can email registered friends (and strict protocols about online behaviour are outlined), but in terms of our interest here, these cultural artifacts unashamedly attempt to 'sell' forms of agential subjectivity for girls. For example, one of the dolls, Jade, is described on the Bratz site in the following way: 'Jade's unique sense of style and attitude makes her the girl everyone admires!' Such glowing endorsement is in itself an enticement to purchase her and in a sense *become* her. The marketing of agency is located in a new social and economic order that previously had been the reserve of boys. Commodity culture articulates a complex of fiction and fantasy, of regulation and persuasion, which reinforce a gender binary and a kind of second wave victimisation brand of femininity. Valerie Walkerdine sees these kinds of relentless calls to make over oneself into an ideal femininity run the risk of young girls and women 'consuming themselves into being' (2003, p. 247). In

short, they position girls in varying ways in relation to the rise of neo-liberalism with its often schizophrenic forces which on the one hand promote a self-determining, do-it-yourself identity, and on the other reinforce the risk of failing to secure this idealised go-girl femininity.

For gender to be achieved it 'requires constant performance and reiteration for its existence' (Butler, 1990a, p. 85). The never-ending aesthetic labours involved in performing femininity too are always unfinished and incomplete. This connection between performativity and the material body highlights how aesthetic labours occur at the 'site' (body) that is already discursively constituted. Accompanying the labour is knowledge: knowing how to make the best of yourself, knowing how to use cosmetic products to achieve maximum benefit, knowing what colours, style, shape of clothing suits your body type (which is itself another form of knowledge), knowing what foods to eat or to avoid, knowing how to pluck, wax, shave, style, and dye. As Adkins (1995, p. 181) notes, 'in the very process of growing up female, a woman will learn how to police the boundaries of her own looking and being a woman'; for girls, the aesthetic process is about *becoming* women. And when the products don't work, there is always cosmetic surgery.

Increasingly, teenagers from all parts of the world are undergoing cosmetic procedures (skin peels, collagen implants, botox injections) as well cosmetic surgery (nose reshaping, breast augmentation, tummy tucks, double eyelids, gastric banding).⁴ Despite the documented increase in elective cosmetic surgery for young people, there is limited research available about serious side effects and long-term risks (Zuckerman, 2005). Cosmetic surgery, however, is not a straightforward topic. It too raises dilemmas. From Kathy Davis's (1995) perspective, cosmetic surgery is a means whereby a woman can bring the physicality of her body into line with her image of it. In this sense, cosmetic surgery is a liberating act. However, Negrin (2002) contends that Davis's liberating take on cosmetic surgery underplays the structural constraints on women which lead to the dissatisfaction with their bodies in the first instance. This point becomes a critical issue in the YA novel *Sara's Face* (Burgess, 2006) discussed later in this chapter.

The embodied physical subject is inevitably yoked to identity. Furthermore, the issue of appearances is tied to an individual's sense of well-being and 'looking good'. An earnest interest in the body in an everyday sense began to emerge in the 1980s with the proliferation of aerobics, gyms, health clubs, and personal trainers offering (potential) clients a range of services to achieve the ideal body: slim, taut, toned,

with a sculptured musculature. This new pursuit of the 'body beautiful' was, and continues to be, linked to economics. Bordo (1993), in particular, has explored the ways in which dieting, exercise, and cosmetic surgery are the means (or 'technologies') by which bodies are reshaped to 'fit' with cultural norms of beauty and acceptability. However, while middle-class women are arguably the targeted focus of advertisements offering 'a new improved body', men, too, are encouraged to lose weight, work out, and undergo electrolysis to remove unwanted ('unsightly') body hair. The implicit and often explicit message is that slim, good-looking people are more successful, sexier, and more popular than fat, ugly people. Words such as 'fat' and 'ugly' are always inscribed negatively and reach beyond mere corporeality. Fat is something to be dealt with by being excised or eliminated from the body. Roald Dahl set the standard for ways of dealing with obese children with his creation of Augustus Gloop, the gluttonous child in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1973). The Oompa Lumpas' song leaves no doubt how loathsome this boy is:

Augustus Gloop! Augustus Gloop!
 The great big greedy nincompoop!
 How long could we allow this beast
 To gorge and guzzle, feed and feast
 On everything he wanted to?

(p. 84)

Augustus's gluttony is dealt with in an extreme way as he literally gets his just desserts after he is turned into 'a luscious bit of fudge' (p. 86).

Fat busters are everywhere in society, flushing out their quivering victims, ready to point the finger of shame. While obesity does bring certain health problems, fat young bodies are the new target for exercise and pedagogical campaigns and products. In 2007, Bindi Irwin, the then 8-year-old daughter of the late Steve 'Crikey' Irwin and Terri Irwin, owners of the phenomenally successful Australia Zoo, starred in her own exercise video, *Bindi Kidfitness*, which is promoted with fat-busting slogans such as: 'We're fighting fat with fun' and 'We're taking the bite out of obesity. Coming to a store near you. Crikey!' The economic imperative remains interwoven with the health-and-fitness message. In the video, Bindi, backed by the 'Crocmens', dances and sings songs with their exercise message. Bindi's youthfulness is given a certain authority by the presence of the adult male backing group. Interspersed are images of tiny Bindi expanding to a gargantuan size as she warns children of the dangers of overeating. The video is an

example of the kind of contradictory messages that many cultural products carry for children about their bodies. The body is presented as a potential source of power and energy, but it is undisciplined and requires constant monitoring, working out, reshaping, and consumer spending in order to become acceptable and attractive. The media spotlight on women's bodies has widened to capture aberrant children whose fat bodies disrupt our adult fantasies about youth as a time of carefree slimness and natural beauty. In a related way, the concerns over obesity in children have seen education authorities in many developed countries (e.g. USA, Canada, Australia)⁵ developing programmes to encourage 'fat' children to exercise and lose weight. Despite the emphasis on a healthy body, the fat body carries a heavy burden as it is the object of derision and abjection. In a cultural context, imperfect bodies challenge cultural norms, 'eliciting not admiration and desire but disgust' (Brand & Devereaux, 2003, p. xii). In the television series *The Biggest Loser*,⁶ viewers are positioned to experience the whole gamut of emotions from sympathy to disgust, scorn, praise, and admiration. The underlying message is a moral one: fat is bad, slim is good. Aesthetic judgements are invariably entwined with ideological interests and social structures; an arena in which these are made painfully obvious is the beauty parade.

Beauty on parade: Little Miss Bimbos with attitude

A recent website that has caused much blogger and media interest worldwide is the *Miss Bimbo: Virtual Fashion Game* site (<http://www.missbimbo.com/>) (see Figure 2.2). This UK site mimics the original French site *Ma bimbo, jeu virtuel de bimbo* (<http://www.ma-bimbo.com/>). The worldwide interest generated by Miss Bimbo has resulted (at the time of writing) in the website team apologising for a temporary stalling of the game due to the unprecedented number of players entering the site (currently nearing half a million 'registered bimbos'). The team has also yielded to media pressure by removing the option of purchasing diet pills from the game. Two further disclaimers state that any comparison between Miss Bimbo and Paris Hilton is unfortunate and, with a tongue firmly in the cheek, they protest mock indignation that such a comparison 'does a dis-service to the players whom [sic] send their bimbos to university, tea parties or chess tournaments' and 'we would also like to remind players that the Miss Bimbo team assume no



Figure 2.2 From *Miss Bimbo* website, reproduced by permission of Blouzar

responsibility or liability for any fashion faux pas, hair style disasters or boob jobs incurred in real life as a result of playing the *Miss Bimbo* game'. As the screen capture above illustrates, players can shop for their virtual *Miss Bimbo* doll, visit places including the salon for tattoos, piercings, tanning, or the clinic for a facelift, breast surgery, therapy. However, a warning is given for items in the clinic advising players that this is a virtual game and real life surgery or therapy is a different matter. A CNN report, 'Alarm as dolls get breast implants in "Miss Bimbo" game' (28 March 2008), explains the economic exchange factor of the game:

Users are given missions, including securing plastic surgery at the game's clinic to give their dolls bigger breasts, and they have to keep her at her target weight with diet pills, which cost 100 bimbo dollars ... Breast implants sell at 11,500 bimbo dollars and net the buyer 2,000 bimbo attitudes, making her more popular on the site ... And bagging a billionaire boyfriend is the most desirable way to earn the all important 'mula'.

(CNN report, 2008)

The 23-year-old web designer Nicolas Jacquart, who is credited with creating the game, reportedly defends the game:

It is not a bad influence for young children. They learn to take care of their bimbos. The missions and goals are morally sound and teach children about the real world ... The breast operations are just one part of the game and we are not encouraging young girls to have them, just reflecting real life.

(quoted in CNN report, 25 March 2008)

Despite the claims of self-empowerment, social responsibility, and friendship networks made by Miss Bimbo, Bratz and other consumer-oriented sites for young girls, the most enduring feature lies in their attention to the body as the site of personal investment – emotional, financial, psychological, and physical. As Debra Gimlin argues in her book *Body Work: Beauty and Self-Image in American Culture* (2002, p. 141) ‘in a society that equates the body with both self and moral worth, cultural meanings are attached to physical differences, so that the body provides a foundation for oppression based on gender, class, ethnicity, and age – all social characteristics that are deeply embodied’. One site in which the consequences of this oppression due to physical differences is made abundantly clear is in realist films about beauty contests.

Films such as *Drop Dead Gorgeous* (1999) and *Beautiful* (2000) disclose the behind-the-scenes drama, plotting, and manipulation of beauty contests. While these films have either teenage girls or adult women as their subjects, *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006) is a film about a children’s beauty contest. What these films have in common is their attempts to expose the process by which females become ‘to be looked at’ by highlighting how the beauty contest is a cultural practice where the aesthetic substance is scrutinised and the commodity value of women and girls is exposed. The visual fetishisation of girls is not restricted to beauty pageant films, as many Disney films, such as *The Little Mermaid* and *Pocahontas*, rely on the seductive appeal of the pre- or post-pubescent female body which is modelled on shapely adult ‘female’ bodies.⁷

Since Mulvey (1975, 1989), the dependence of realist cinema on the female form for visual pleasure has been an acknowledged feature of feminist film study and has prompted feminist filmmakers to make their mark on the aesthetic terrain by providing an alternative way of representing women as subjects in the very medium that traditionally has drawn its pleasure from the female. In her book, *Feminist Auteurs: Reading Women’s Films* (2006), Geetha Ramanathan explores the relationship

between the feminine and visual pleasure by engaging in Teresa de Lauretis's notion of a 'de-aesthetic'. Through her examination of a selection of films, Ramanathan explores 'the myth of the innocence of aesthetics' by drawing attention to the way the films confront the 'trope of woman as commodity in different contexts – the commercial, the familial and the informal' (p. 11). I draw, in part, on Ramanathan's study of aesthetics and the female subject in film to inform my discussion of how *Little Miss Sunshine* attempts to expose the fake aesthetic of the child beauty contest by holding it up for scrutiny and exposing its commodity value. The film was made for mainstream audiences by husband-and-wife directorial team Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris, who have an impressive background in music video and other commercial productions.

The plot of *Little Miss Sunshine* concerns a family (the Hoovers) who embark on a cross-state journey so that the youngest child, seven-year-old Olive, can realise her dream of participating in the Little Miss Sunshine beauty competition. The irony is that Olive is the antithesis of the Little Miss Sunshine ideal: she is chubby (her pot belly is the object of scrutiny at several points and its exaggerated size is probably due to a prosthetic) and short-sighted (attention to this deficit is underscored by an oversized pair of spectacles). Despite her physical 'deficiencies', Olive is determined to participate in and win the beauty contest; this desire to win is one that drives other participants (and their mothers). By jointly constructing Olive in the shape of her name and as a female subject who desires to be visually noticed and aestheticised, the film raises a dilemma inherent to post-feminist sensibility. It is, as Gill observes, that 'Women are not straight-forwardly objectified but are portrayed as active, desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their liberated interests to do so' (2007, p. 151). Olive avidly watches and replays adult beauty contests and rehearses the smile, the stance, the way a kiss is blown to the audience. This televisual instruction in coy beauty practices is complemented by a titillating physical workout by Olive's coke-snorting grandfather who teaches her how to growl, prowl, and claw, simulating the sexual antics of strippers he has observed over the years. While Olive remains an innocent in terms of her own sexuality, her knowledge of how to be sexy exemplifies what Gill sees as a modernisation of femininity that incorporates a new 'technology of sexiness' (Radner, cited by Gill, p. 151).

Little Miss Sunshine also draws a relationship between class and aesthetics. Olive's family is described in promotional sites as being 'one of the most engaging dysfunctional families ever brought to the screen'

(<http://video.barnesandnoble.com/>). The Hoover family can be seen as 'dysfunctional' in that: grandfather (Edwin) swears openly in front of Olive and has a drug habit; brother (Dwayne) has taken a vow of silence and will only communicate by writing notes; father (Richard) is a failed motivational speaker; uncle (Frank) is a suicidal, depressed Proust scholar. The only 'normal' person is the mother (Sheryl), who is concerned about her family and worries how Olive will handle the inevitable disappointment of not winning the title of 'Little Miss Sunshine'. Nevertheless, the family acts as a unit and together they overcome all obstacles along their journey in order to support Olive in her quest. When the family arrives at the beauty contest (a minute before registration closes) they are met with unfriendly, judgemental, middle-class women who attempt to block Olive's participation. The division between 'normal' and 'dysfunctional' is schematised as oppositional class aesthetics. Ramanathan cites Pollock's notion of proletarian and bourgeois bodies. Pollock's *proletariat body* is 'sexual, immoral, bestial, body, diseased, disorderly, unclean, corrupting' (quoted by Ramanathan, 2006, p. 27). This description fits the Hoover family on most accounts (grandfather dies on the journey but they continue, taking the corpse wrapped in a hospital sheet in the back of their station wagon). Pollock's *bourgeois body* is 'asexual/sexually controlled, soul, moral, spiritual, healthy, orderly, clean, purifying' (p. 27). These characteristics generally map onto both the female organisers of the competition and the mothers who groom their daughters as participants. The Hoovers are chaos and the structure that supports the beauty contest is control.

When the young participants go through their various routines they look and act like adult beauty contestants. They are skilled at dancing, singing, gymnastics, but are especially skilled at being beauty contestants. As James Kincaid notes, the children who participate in these kinds of activities 'devote nearly all their short lives to making themselves worthy to be scrutinized' (1998, p. 103). The girls wear sexy outfits and do their best to create an eroticism through their enthusiastic and rehearsed participation in commodity fetishism with their stylised hair, adult-styled costumes, and sexy bodily moves. But it is nevertheless a surreal fantasy and one which lacks any real erotic charge (except maybe for paedophiles). One of the fathers in the audience (a bikie of large proportions) stares with detachment at the passing parade of Lolitas. While the mothers in the audience smile approvingly, Olive's family squirm uncomfortably at the sight of the cosmetically aged children, and their fears – that innocent, overweight Olive will be

laughed at – grow by the second. The audience too is positioned to feel uncomfortable in viewing the fetishisation of the girls as sexual objects, with images of JonBenét Ramsey still stored in our collective memory.⁸ However, when Olive appears dressed in a modest outfit befitting a master of ceremonies – with top hat, buttoned-up white shirt, black vest, black tights – we are unprepared for what follows. Before she begins, Olive asks the compère for the microphone whereupon she announces to the audience: ‘I want to dedicate this to my Granpa who showed me these moves’. The appreciative sighs of the audience are soon erased when Olive strips away the layers of her outfit and begins a raunchy routine with loud heavy metal backing music. While the other girls had played at being sex kittens, Olive embodies the sexual tiger, an enthusiastic predator who prances around the stage engaging in simulated sexual movements and clearly delighting in the performance.

Olive’s dance routine embodies Pollock’s description of the proletariat aesthetics as being sexual and bestial, but more significantly perhaps it raises the dilemma of female self-representation. On the one hand, it can be argued that Olive has no agency in her representation as she was coached by her grandfather who instructed her in the ways of male fantasies of female eroticism. On the other hand, Olive’s performance challenges the hypocritical attitudes of the organisers and the structure that endorses eroticism under the guise of an innocent aesthetics. As the level of disapproval mounts during Olive’s performance, her family decides to show their support by joining her on stage and dancing with a similar joyfulness. At this point, the family presents as a united group and their carnivalesque disruption turns the tables on order and bourgeois aesthetics.

Both *Miss Bimbo* and *Little Miss Sunshine* contribute to the dilemmas about the relationship between aesthetics and the female subject. These texts embody a version of post-feminism through their notions of choice, empowerment, and pleasing oneself (Gill, 2007). *Miss Bimbo* unashamedly exploits the consumerist ethic and leaves any notion of gender politics to the consumer if he/she so desires. The website embodies the pleasure principle which gives the illusion that the ‘registered bimbos’ are autonomous agents who can do (and buy) as they please. Olive too can be read as simply pleasing herself, but *Little Miss Sunshine* provides layers of narrative for exploring female subjectivity in relation to beauty practices and aesthetics. Its conclusion of a happy, united family who accept that they are forever banned from participating in another *Little Miss Sunshine* competition is the kind of win-win situation that appeals to mainstream audiences. But the

film's contribution to gender discussions lies in the ways it opens up for scrutiny socially constructed ideals of beauty and how these come to be taken up by young girls and reinterpreted to serve their own or another's purposes.

An aesthetics of disgust: Looking on the bright side of abjection

In her article on the paintings of oversized fleshy, female nudes (usually self-portraits) by Scottish artist Jenny Saville, Michelle Meagher employs the term 'an aesthetics of disgust' which I discussed at the beginning of this chapter. While Saville states that her paintings are intended to confront and to be 'difficult to look at', Meagher provides an interesting theorising of Saville's work in order to 'propose new modes of thinking about feminine embodiment' and 'the problem of *experiencing oneself as disgusting*' (2003, p. 24, italics in original). Working with Meagher's theorisation and with reference to Kristeva's (1982) notion of the abject, I want to turn now to the film *Real Women Have Curves* (2002) and the picture book *The Flim-Flam Fairies* (2008) to explore how these texts for young adults and children can be seen as deploying an aesthetics of disgust, and the dilemmas they raise with respect to embodiment.

Real Women Have Curves can be regarded as a teen, coming-of-age story that centres on Ana, a young Latina high-school student who, in post-feminist terms, has a 'doubly "wrong" body: she's zaftig [plump] and ethnic' (Holmlund, 2005, p. 118). Ana is played by America Ferrara, who also plays the eponymous character in the *Ugly Betty* American television series, written and directed by Fernando Gaitán based on his Columbian telenovela *Betty la fea*. The unattractive, eponymous Betty is hired as a personal assistant to the fashion magazine *Mode*. This juxtaposition of physical states of ugliness and beauty is one aspect of the competing aesthetics the series engages with. Another aspect concerns how an aesthetic can be manufactured to look real. Ferrara's 'Betty' is manufactured in a way that makes her look 'ugly'; the character is de-aestheticised by false, bushy eyebrows, fake braces on her teeth, an ugly wig, and clothes and make-up. *Real Women Have Curves* also ensures that Ana is not glamourised in any way. She wears baggy overalls, non-descript, shapeless T-shirts, track pants or jeans, and no make-up. Ana's body confronts the gaze of her mother and presumably the viewing audience by refusing to conform to a system of cultural ideals that coerces women and girls to see their bodies as deficient or in need of modification.

Ana makes it clear that she is happy with her own body, despite the constant taunts and enticements from her mother to lose weight: 'If you lost weight you could be good looking', her mother laments on one occasion. Her mother's pet name for Ana is 'butterball', which is hardly conducive to good self-esteem for a young woman growing up in thinness-obsessed Los Angeles. Yet, despite these negative and pejorative comments and nomenclatures, Ana refuses to see herself as disgusting. This refusal to experience herself as disgusting is underscored in two scenes. The first is when she decides to have sex for the first time with her boyfriend. As the foreplay begins, the boy turns out the light. However, Ana turns it back on and stands naked before the mirror and says 'see this is what I look like'. Her statement and viewing of herself in the mirror is not one of embarrassment but an appreciation of the body to which she 'lays claim' as her own (Butler, 2004, p. 21). Consequently, this scene and much of the film privilege Ana's point of view and construct her subjectivity. Ana is not the passive object of the male gaze. At a narrative level, she takes the initiative to have sex and to take off her clothes with the light on. At the level of the image, she offers the boyfriend and the viewer the vision of her body through her own vision as she looks at her nakedness in the mirror. However, this scene is not desexualised; after all, it is about imminent sexual play. More significantly, her bare shoulders and partial exposure of her bare breasts charge the scene with a transformative eroticism. Fat, de-aestheticised Ana is also a beautiful, young, sensual woman. What makes this moment pleasurable for Ana (and possibly the viewer) is that it is without artifice. Ana is not only a consenting subject, but participates with pleasure and self-awareness.

The second instance occurs when Ana strips off to her bra and underpants in an effort to cool down from the oppressive heat of her sister's 'sweatshop' dress-making factory. Her mother is horrified at the sight of Ana's bulging, fleshy body and asks: 'Aren't you ashamed?' Ana encourages the other women to also take off their clothes. The stripping inverts the usual striptease as these women's bodies show Caesarian scars, stretch marks, cellulite, folds of fat, wobbly legs, large breasts, and fatty stomachs. The women are critical of their bodies and give a detailed assessment of their deficiencies as they compare imperfections and bulk. But shame is quickly erased with a sense of reality – this is the way 'I' am – 'the body as it is lived' (Meagher, 2003, p. 34). This 'doing' of their bodies as a material reality that has skin and flesh, that moves, has a shape ('curves'), resists public censure within the enclosed space of the factory. The *mise-en-scène* for this stripping works to undermine the male gaze. As Mulvey has explained, the male gaze can only

function when the female character is objectified and fetishised. This scene undoes that tradition of fetishisation: the women are unadorned, their hair is unstyled, and their underwear is functional not seductive. While the women face the camera, the camera is placed at a respectful distance: a middle long shot disavows the viewer any voyeuristic pleasure from seeing up-close the bodily signs of minor imperfection – the cellulite, the marks, and scars.

Despite the film's attempt to pull back from encouraging viewers to be confronted by the sight of imperfect (real) flesh through camera angle and distance, an aesthetics of disgust is taken up by the women themselves through their words and bodily displays. This aesthetics of disgust is a refusal of disgust, and an overt confrontation with ideals of beauty. In this respect, Deleuze's notion of 'becoming' has significance. (Butler, 1990a, also uses the word 'becomes' with respect to gender, which she sees as an ongoing discursive practice.) To Deleuze and Guattari, 'becoming' is a process of desire which cannot be explained as purely natural or biological: 'neither the imitation of a subject nor the proportionality of a form' (1987, p. 272). In order to rethink bodies outside of binary structures and polarisations of form or beauty, the women in this film are 'real' (as its title attests); real not just in their images of an imperfect female form (if there is a perfect form from which to judge them), but real in their desires to 'become women' who embody an aesthetics premised upon sensation, affect, energy, and intensity. The rapport between them is more convincing in this scene and possibly more effective than in other post-feminist films which celebrate superficial female bonding such as *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (2005). Nevertheless, the scene of the semi-naked, laughing women standing side-by-side facing the camera gives ample time for the viewer to pay attention to the image on the screen. This focus on the 'physicality of disgust' confronts the viewer visually and ideologically. As Meagher says: 'an aesthetics of disgust should alert us to our bodily response, but it should also encourage us to investigate the origins of that bodily response' (2003, p. 31). The women's voluntary participation in the spectacle brings to the forefront the 'political' that has been central to feminism for decades.

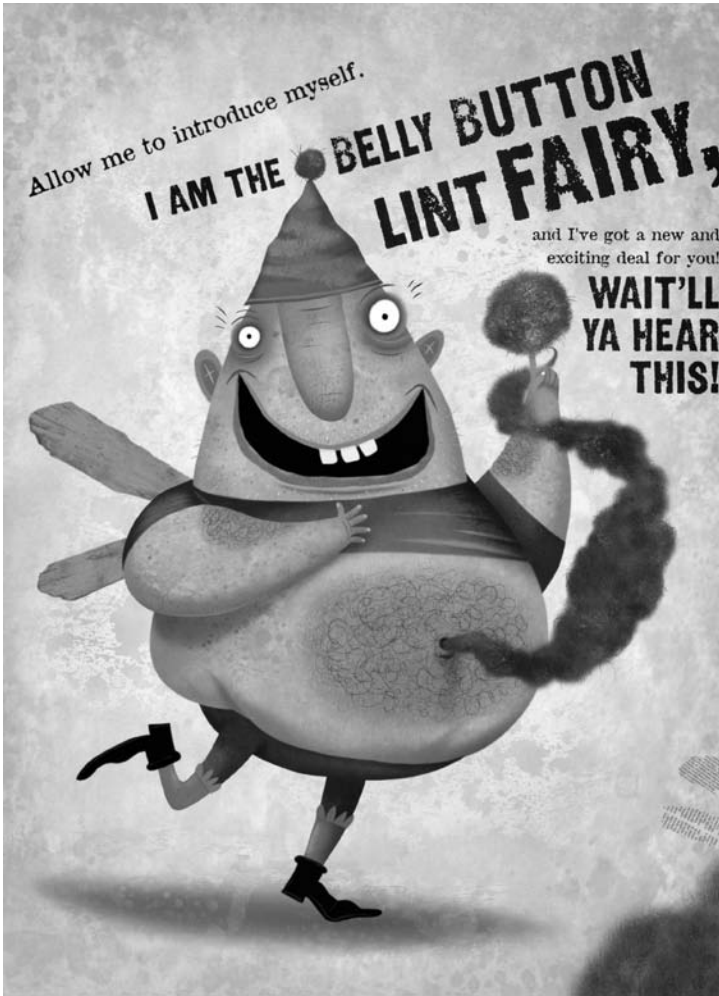
These scenes give expression to Meagher's point regarding the ethical implications of a cultural system 'that regularly establishes boundaries between different types of bodies: rendering some beautiful, some acceptable, and others simply disgusting' (2003, p. 25). The stripping off in the factory scene reinforces the film's politics that attempt to reclaim the female body from a hegemonic construction of feminine ideality as petite, slim, taut, and decorative. (The small-size dresses the

factory makes are a constant reminder of the large-size women's failure to measure up to society's ideal.) Ana's mother refuses to remove her clothes, remains disgusted by the spectacle of the semi-naked women and defiantly leaves the factory. By exiting, the mother attempts to keep herself at a distance from the women and therefore is unable to connect with this 'event' and the aesthetic space they have claimed for themselves. The film resists a common post-feminist theme of the makeover as a necessary step before the heroine can emerge ready to 'kick ass'. But it can be seen as engaging with a post-feminist transformation that comes with a sense of renewal and self-control.

The aesthetics of disgust plumbs new depths in the picture book *The Flim-Flam Fairies* (2008) by Alan Katz and illustrated by Michael Slack. This book is part of an age-old tradition in children's literature that attempts to delight children with gross forms of humour that are intended to make adults cringe. One of the early picture books to delight in the disgusting was Raymond Briggs's *Fungus the Bogeyman* (1979). While Fungus and his world of slime, dirt, and smelly odours offers a world which is the inverse of our obsessively sanitised Western world, the illustrations and text invite readers to view a world that is intended to both fascinate and repulse. In a similar way, Shrek's bathing in swamp mud and killing fish with his flatulence are intended to strike a note of repulsive delight with child viewers (see Chapter 1). In *The Flim-Flam Fairies*, the affective force of the images of snot, ear wax, clipped toenails, boogers, dirty underwear, and belly button lint is openly defiant of limits that demarcate good taste and vulgarity (see Figure 2.3 below). But in drawing attention to itself, the visual and verbal descriptions of excess signify all that marks the unstable boundaries of the body, when its bodily fluids, substances, and gases are no longer restrained or contained.

These masculine flim-flam fairies differ significantly from the more familiar iconography of fairies in that they are neither beautiful nor feminine. The flim-flam fairies embody Kristeva's abject as they transgress taboos and violate aesthetics releasing a kind of pure *jouissance* or deep pleasures (1982, p. 9). They muscle in on the tooth fairy's territory, offering readers perverse images which seek to transgress and displace the norm/al, the polite, and the conventional. From the opening page, the narrative sets up the opposition to the wholesome tooth fairy with a mocking distaste for her sweetness:

Each time, the tooth fairy comes, takes the tooth, and leaves a small gift – like a quarter or a book. How sweet. How kind. HOW LOVING. HOW SickeNiNG!



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Figure 2.3 From *The Flim-Flam Fairies* by Alan Katz, illustrated by Michael Slack, reproduced by permission of RP/Running Press Kids, a member of Perseus Books Group

Consequently, the depicted male child (and perhaps the implied male reader) are encouraged by the ugly, uncouth, flim-flam fairies to put under their pillow 'lint out of your belly button', 'a gob of earwax', 'dirty underwear', 'clipped toenails', 'something juicy out of your nose', 'fart' and so on. The horrified tooth fairy does her best to stop their

nonsense, but fails. After appealing to the reader to not listen to these 'fake fairies' and their lies, she regains her composure and apologises, exits the page with words that ring of insincere checkout spiel and advertising mantra: 'Have a nice day. And be good to your teeth. Ta-Ta!'

The visual excess of the book with its contrasting colour scheme, changing font, images of chaos, and verbal and visual clutter is imbricated in the narrative but also goes beyond the narrative to articulate different affects and sensations. At the narrative level, 'beauty' is in play in the text through its absence or its opposite. In this respect, *The Flim Flam Fairies* is a subversive rejoinder to the commodification of cuteness and innocence that abounds in children's books. Every bookshop has its share of 'Fairy' books depicting pretty, pastel fairies with glitter sprinkled liberally over its pages. These books are marketed to appeal to girls and are just one aspect of the lucrative fairy business which ranges from fairy shops to fairy costumes, wands, wings, make-up. *The Flim-Flam Fairies* creates a masculine imaginary that resists the fairy beauty myth by engendering an affect of disgust, repulsion, and distasteful pleasure. However, whether the intended readership is male or female or both, this book in its grossness deliberately disrupts conventional standards of taste and decorum, which have been associated with hegemonic cultural constructions of femininity and feminine virtue, and traditional aestheticism. By revelling in disgust and ugliness, the book opens up for all readers an ambivalent space for the pleasure that comes with an aesthetics of disgust and subversion. Nevertheless, the space is realised at the expense of a feminine imaginary, thereby conforming to a traditional gender binarism and archetype. The image of 'woman as hysteric' is revisited through the tooth fairy, whose escalating hysteria is conveyed in two ways: through typographical emphasis as she screeches – 'STOP THIS IMMEDIATELY!!' and through her own transformation from a benign, smiling fairy to an angry, grotesque figure. To ensure that she does not have the last say and that order will not be restored, the final image shows 'the poop fairy' with his ominous-looking brown bags who asks 'Am I too late?' The stunned tooth fairy in the background appears to faint, thus losing control of her body and her narrative authority (see Figure 2.4).

Real Women Have Curves and *The Flim-Flam Fairies* claim an aesthetics of disgust for different purposes. While the two texts embody disgust in their treatment of the abject, *Real Women Have Curves* is the one that dares to propose a representation of the female body and feminine embodiment which forces us as viewers to confront our own bodily experience and the conditions which shape our understanding of (or reaction to) the abject

and the process of abjection. *The Flim-Flam Fairies* causes disgust by giving explicit attention to the properties of abjection that Kristeva (1982) identifies as emitting from inside the body such as vomit, saliva, and excrement (and by extension, earwax and so forth). In their treatment of disgust and grossness these texts are not alone in children's publishing



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Figure 2.4 From *The Flim-Flam Fairies* by Alan Katz, illustrated by Michael Slack, reproduced by permission of RP/Running Press Kids, a member of Perseus Books Group

(see McGillis, 2003) or in texts produced for young adults. *Real Women Have Curves* encourages viewers to think about their reactions to a female body that deviates from a cultural system that distinguishes between different types of female bodies: 'some beautiful, some acceptable, and others simply disgusting' (Meagher, 2003, p. 25). *The Flim Flam Fairies* carnivalises an aesthetics of disgust by drawing attention to a subversive disruptive intervention against norms of social acceptability. This picture book is clearly a case of boys (with wings) behaving badly and its shock-jock-style humour can be seen as a backlash to the sensitive new male of the '90s and a reclaiming of a boys-will-be-boys bravado that sorts out the sissies from 'the real' men. The male fairies' physical unattractiveness further emphasises their revelling in an aesthetics of disgust. Both texts deal with bodies that are deliberately intended to disturb the sensitivities of some readers/viewers, and in so doing highlight the gender politics which permeate each in different ways. *Real Women Have Curves* parades and questions these disturbing spaces of gender and female bodies through a process of transformation. *The Flim-Flam Fairies* also parades these spaces but prefers to remain confrontational, rather than transformational.

Extreme makeover: *Uglies* and *Sara's Face*

This chapter began by posing the problem of beauty. However, 'the problem of ugliness has troubled psychologists and philosophers for several thousand years' (Hagman, 2005, p. 104). As Hagman points out, ugliness was often considered the painful opposite of beauty, and even more cruelly, the aesthetic equivalent of evil. Fairy tales are replete with examples of the ugly character as evil incarnate – ogres, witches, crones, demons, giants, gnomes, and monsters. So too contemporary stories continue to yoke ugliness to the undesirable, the inhuman, the pitiful, or the ridiculous. Both beauty and ugliness provoke reactions in the perceiver. In the case of beauty, the reaction is often admiration and praise, whereas ugliness often may provoke fear and repulsion. However, as Hagman suggests, 'accompanying these reactions is often, paradoxically, fascination, even attraction' (p. 109). This is most vividly illustrated in the fairy tale *Beauty and the Beast* where Belle, who initially is repulsed by the fearsome-looking Beast, eventually falls in love with him because of his kindness. And her love is rewarded when the Beast is transformed back into a handsome prince. In this instance, ugliness doubly succumbs to beauty. While there are many examples of the negative responses to ugliness, there are also those stories where the ugliness interacts with a character's sense of self. The experience

of ugliness from a subjective perspective involves strong negative emotions about one's body such as disgust, fear, anxiety, terror, and repulsion. Examples of YA fiction that discuss these reactions by both self and other include: body scarification – *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* (Crutchett, 1993); anorexic body – *Killing Aurora* (Barnes, 1999); dwarfism – *The Speed of the Dark* (Shearer, 2003); amputated limb – *Idiot Pride* (Zurbo, 1997); and severe deformity – *Mortal Engines* (Reeve, 2001).

I want to turn my attention to two YA novels: *Uglies* (Westerfeld, 2005) and *Sara's Face* (Burgess, 2006). Both are contemporary cultural allegories that consider the consequences when modern science and technologies are used for extreme purposes to change a perception of ugliness. These books deal with one of the ironies of commodity culture, namely, that difference is both celebrated and condemned. In marketing beauty and a particular beauty ideal, difference is called into play. Those who are not beautiful (and therefore, promoters argue, need the products the most) are clearly 'the other', or 'the Uglies' as they are termed in Scott Westerfeld's novel of the same name. Paradoxically, the beautiful subject is also 'the other' as she or he represents something that the majority are not. The discourse about difference and 'otherness' which was evident in the previous discussion is given a different kind of treatment in *Uglies*. This book offers a counternarrative that works against the consumerist aesthetics of our times which celebrate a particular kind of beauty based on notions of ideality according to body shape, facial symmetry, hair, skin tone, and other physical attributes. Westerfeld's novel exposes the ugly side of beauty by showing the monstrous and manipulative dimension of the beauty myth.

Uglies is the first of a trilogy (including *Pretties*, *Specials*) and introduces readers to a time in the future when children up to the age of 16 are known as 'Uglies'. They live in dorms in a boring and regimented place called Uglyville, but on their sixteenth birthday they are taken to New Pretty Town, a high-tech paradise where cosmetic surgery is performed to turn them into Pretties. Thus, this future world takes an exaggerated view of our present world which categorises people according to their physical attractiveness or perceived lack of beauty. In this future world of the novel, other identity attributes such as class and ethnicity seem to have disappeared. Furthermore, gender is not privileged as both boys and girls become Pretties. It is difficult to know the appeal of this series for young people as its stories are bizarre and absurd. Westerfeld delivers his cautionary tales with a heavy hand, making them didactic and moralising. Despite these

reservations, *Uglies* has won the Best Book for Young Adults from the American Library Association in 2006. I suggest that the popularity of the series lies in its own aesthetic textuality as much as with its subject of aesthetics, beauty, and youth. The novel begins with the following words: 'The early summer sky was the color of cat vomit' (p. 3). Its closing lines resonate with the words of Dirty Harry: "'I'm Tally Youngblood,'" she said. "Make me pretty"' (p. 425). In the first instance, the text disrupts previous romantic notions and descriptions of summer skies and thus sets out its ironic agenda from the outset. The title tells us it is about 'uglies' so ugly is what we get when we open the book and read the first line. The closing line not only provides a segue to the next book in the series, entitled *Pretties*, but offers a challenge that makes sense only when one has travelled with Tally and the others throughout this first story. Another significant aspect of the textual aesthetic is the incorporation of familiar descriptions of rich, pretty young people that one reads in *Who* magazine or on blogs about celebrities and models. The incorporations of descriptions about the Pretties and the Uglies (who could also be termed tweens) will no doubt offer resonances with readers and their experiences or knowledge of the world. For instance, when Tally discovers some old magazines from the past (the readers' present) she is unable to comprehend the kind of woman photographed:

The woman looked like she was starving, her ribs thrusting out from her sides, her legs so thin that Tally wondered how they didn't snap under her weight. Her elbows and pelvic bones looked sharp as needles. But there she was, smiling and proudly baring her body, as if she'd just had the operation and didn't realize they'd sucked out way too much fat ... 'What on earth is she?'

(p. 199)

When Shay explains that the woman is 'a model', Tally remains puzzled until Shay explains that a model is 'kind of like a professional pretty' (p. 199). The scene, like many others throughout the book, instructs readers about the female bodies and the culture of slimness and beauty. Tally even recalls 'that disease' that her teachers had told her about, one that young girls got 'back in the days before the operation' (p. 199). Thus, in terms of young people's engagement with this series, I suggest that pleasure comes in part from recognising familiar aspects of their current world with its promotion of a particular bodily aesthetic, the fast pace of the narrative, and its ironic, at times cynical, tone.

The story engages with beauty in other ways, drawing readers attention to its elevation through technology to a state that is no longer beyond the reach of the majority. Ugliers are in a liminal space and are essentially non-subjects, whereas becoming a Pretty is a path that is already mapped out for everyone. Thus, in this future world of the text, becoming, unlike in the Deleuzian sense, takes on a specific physical form. From a young age, children are told about the old world (the readers' world) where the 'Rusties' exploited the environment, waged violent wars, killed animals for food, and used archaic forms of transportation. The Ugliers know only what they are told and information is strictly controlled by the Special Circumstances group (the 'Specials'). Young children, known as 'littlies', make 'morphos' or images of how they want to look when they become Pretties (similar to Photoshop computer software). The life of the Pretties is one of excess: parties, fun, clothes, food, alcohol. Pretties don't have to think and choice is limited to what clothes to wear at the next party. The spell that Pretties cast simply by being beautiful is captured by Tally, a female Ugly who initially escapes Uglyville and the mandatory surgery: 'There was something magic in their large and perfect eyes, something that made you want to pay attention to whatever they said, to protect them from any danger, to make them happy. They were so ... pretty' (p. 8).

Tally's words echo the implicit messages of current consumerist hype, that gives a truth value to physical attributes so that people come to believe (both in this novel and in contemporary society) that a pretty, childlike appearance engenders a perception of vulnerability and the need for protection. While readers are positioned to view Pretties as superficial, mindless, and self-centred, the deeper implication is that 'beauty' or being pretty is both a singular state of being and a generic term for a number of disparate experiences and characteristics. In psychoanalytic terms, the desire for beauty is attained in this narrative, but when it is reached it still suffers from lack. Thus the Ugliers are taught to desire beauty because they lack it, but the desire and its promises are never fulfilled. In this novel, there is no beauty with brains. *Ugliers* is a cautionary tale for our times as it takes readers to the extreme edge of a world that responds to the 'what if?' question that speculative fictions engage with: What if we all became pretty? What then would the world be like? In *Ugliers*, it's not a pretty sight.

The paradox of beauty in *Ugliers* is that while beauty is visible on the surface of a Pretty's body, its ugly side develops from within. When Tally's friend Shay becomes a Pretty, her brain is covered with lesions

which destroy memory, and the capacity to develop other problems is yet unknown. This ugly side of beauty is captured in this excerpt:

Tally thought of the lesions on Shay's brain, the tiny cancers or wounds or whatever they were, that she didn't even know she had. They were in there somewhere, changing her friend's thoughts, warping her feelings, gnawing at the roots of who she was.

(p. 397)

The fantasy, that being pretty brings eternal happiness, is disrupted by the knowledge (for the reader) that Pretties have brain damage as a result of the operation. This means that Pretties can never understand real-life problems, and they lose the ability to develop empathy, qualities which are generally regarded as essential to the human condition. Perhaps the most significant loss is that Pretties have no agency. Before the operation, Ugliers have a choice: they can attempt to run away to the wilds of the Rusty Ruins and carve out a hard life away from the comforts and technological advantages of New Pretty Town, or they can have the surgery and enjoy a life of mindless partying. But once they are turned into Pretties they are forever under the control of the Special Circumstances group. Furthermore, their individual identities are lost to a collective identity: they become part of 'the Pretties', with their baby talk, immature behaviour, and meaningless existence. Consequently, only those Ugliers who have the courage to break away from their society and forge an identity that is not based on looks achieve agency.

Westerfeld's account of a society where the hierarchical social arrangement is, as I mentioned, based on youth and beauty corresponds in many respects to the world that today's teenagers are growing up in. However, Ugliers attempts to show that when beauty is no longer the object of desire and when becoming popular is not the driving motivation, then the fantasy that shapes that desire collapses under the weight of normality. This scenario inverts the popular notion first put forward by Aristotle: 'to the beautiful belongs the right to command' (quoted by Montaigne, 1958, p. 337). However, the Pretties, despite their beauty, have no such power or right to command. The defining point then is that beauty loses its power when it becomes 'normal'. In the sequel, *Pretties* (2005), we learn that members of the ruling Special Circumstances group have been converted from 'Pretties' to 'Specials' by having their lesions removed so that they retain the necessary cognitive ability to exert adult power and control. Furthermore, their pretty faces have been surgically changed into 'horror movie looks' with

their 'wolflike teeth and cold, dull eyes' (p. 154) intended to terrorise everyone. This turn to horror undoubtedly provides readers who enjoy sci-fi and horror fiction with the kinds of pleasures that come from the perverse.

Sara's Face is also allegorical in the ways it can be seen to draw on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1912). In Shelley's novel, Dr Victor Frankenstein is the scientist who creates a monster, a creature he never names. Written during the time of the Industrial Revolution in England in the nineteenth century, a time of rapid social change and progress in science and technology, *Frankenstein* warns of the 'over reaching' of modern industrialisation and issues a dire warning about scientists who ignore the dangerous consequences of their more controversial experiments. In a related way, *Sara's Face* tells of the dangerous and fatal consequences when scientists use technologies to perform radical surgery on individuals in an attempt to discover ways to create perpetually youthful appearances. Dr Wayland Kaye assumes the Dr Frankenstein role; he is the unscrupulous surgeon who experiments, with disastrous results, with ways to graft a face from one body onto another. His endeavours are financially and philosophically supported by the ageing rock star Jonathon Heat, who represents real-world celebrities who undertake cosmetic surgery to remain popular and appear ever-youthful. Heat resembles most closely the American pop star Michael Jackson in that like Jackson he too has numerous cosmetic surgeries, which result in his facial structures collapsing to create an unnatural appearance. Heat's appearance becomes so monstrous that Kaye makes a series of lifelike masks to cover his disfigured and exposed face. Kaye experiments with the body parts of animals and eventually human faces in his quest to revolutionise facial surgery and achieve his ultimate goal of 'the full face transplant' (p. 27). At one point Kaye removes the snout of a dog and transplants it onto the front of Heat's face (p. 28), with the result that: 'No one could see the star's real mouth underneath it, and the nose, teeth and lips of the dog were obviously genuine' (p. 29). Kaye's determination to experiment regardless of the outcome nevertheless produces its own set of affects for women. Heat's new look gives him a beastly appearance, which women find attractive and men try to copy. This instance speaks to the fantasy that frames desire to be like someone else, to shape one's appearance in a way that identifies with another. It also speaks to the misogynist fantasy of feminine desire for the beast: the dangerous male who has power over women.

Both *Uglies* and *Sara's Face* focus on one part of the human body – the face – and its capacity to attract others and be the source of identity.

This abstraction of one part of the body to serve as a synecdoche for the whole body can also be read as the part standing in for the moral account of the whole person. The idealisation of the subject (whether the Pretties or Jonathon Heat) is premised on the body, particularly, the face which becomes the focus of projected desires and unrealistic expectations. Both novels approach their subject in a similarly didactic manner and as such they serve as instructive tales for the young, warning of the evils of cosmetic surgery and the idolisation and cloning that celebrity culture engenders. Both texts are horror stories, but each offers different accounts of youth agency. In *Uglies*, a group of young people who actively resist the surgery to become Pretties choose to live a life that is a return to a more natural world. Here their choice is between two extremes, and is only available in the short space when young people still have a mind of their own before the operation erases agency and the capacity to make critical judgements. In *Sara's Face*, the narrator is an inexperienced journalist who attempts to make sense of the story of the rock star Jonathon Heat and his young protégé, Sara Carter, whose ambition was to become famous. Sara, like many young people who have a Facebook presence, uses a video diary to give an account of her thoughts and daily events. Thus, the video record provides a form of testimony of the facts, but is of course a construction that blurs fantasy and reality.

Sara we are told is a pretty girl, 'highly desirable' (p. 16); but she self-harms by cutting herself and hates her face and body. When Jonathon Heat offers to share his home with her, he becomes a Svengali-like figure in the control and power he exerts over the increasingly dependent and dysfunctional Sara. Such is his spell and her desire for fame and change that she willingly succumbs to cosmetic surgery at the hands of the incompetent and unethical Dr Kaye. Sara's desire to erase her face and get a new one can be seen as an identity makeover first and foremost. Her actions in one sense are a result of the hold Heat has over her, but her self-loathing is a driving force, even when she has seen first-hand the bungled results of Kaye's surgical efforts on the disfigured face of Heat. While Sara's face is saved and remains intact, she nevertheless changes her name and identity to 'Lucy Smith'. The tabloid story of Sara's life and her mystery disappearance mean that she not only achieves her goal of becoming famous, but she also achieves the ultimate celebrity goal of becoming elusive and mysterious. In discarding her name, Sara *becomes* Lucy. After he interviews her, the narrator explains in the 'Epilogue' the enigma that Sara Carter has become: 'She told me nothing was real, that everything was real, that she had been

both cured and murdered. Surely that was enough' (p. 263). And finally, she requests that the narrator include her words as an epilogue: 'Just put me in ... as an epilogue. That's all I really am. An epilogue to Sara's life' (p. 263).

With these final words Lucy speaks of her old self (Sara) as a mystery woman, which recalls the 'feminine mystique' that has enveloped notions of beautiful women for centuries. But her reference to her story as real, but not real, and her statement that she was both cured and murdered posit the contradictions and ambivalences that shape the fantasy of the beauty ideal as something both real and unreal, created and destroyed. For Sara to exist as an epilogue – the part that comes after the story, but which is nevertheless a comment on what has been told – demonstrates that she is both present and not present. This ambivalence complicates the simple opposition between the oppressive agents (Heat and Kaye) and an oppressed, implicitly passive, female subject (Sara). In becoming Lucy, Sara is no longer visible to the eye of the beholder as she is replaced by Lucy who becomes the 'epilogue to Sara's life'. This relation between past and present selves suggests a different way of perceiving Sara/Lucy as not simply a split personality in psychoanalytical terms, but as a complex 'assemblage'. In this Deleuzian interpretation, the body is not perceived as just corporeal, but becomes a set of continuous flows, energies, organs, affects (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

I conclude this chapter with a closing comment from a memoir 'Beauty and the *Bête Noir*' by Meera Atkinson (2004, p. 120): 'How much more she was worth than beauty alone'. Atkinson is talking about her mother who died at the age of 63, a woman who was considered by all who encountered her to be beautiful. Indeed, Atkinson came from a long line of beautiful women: 'I have observed others' responses to my mother, my grandmothers, and my aunts and have been the unwitting apprentice of the great importance and burden of appearing beautiful' (p. 111). Atkinson's account of 'the burden of appearing beautiful' provides insight into the way women in her family felt the need to live up to beauty's demands, which in her mother's case included breast implants, nose reshaping, wigs, dieting, and make-up. Atkinson describes her own coming to terms with a beauty that eluded her much to the disappointment of her mother and grandmother. This memoir gives the practical side to the beauty ideal, and like the texts I have discussed it gives voice to young people's daily traversing of the cultural mediascape that attempts to shape and contain youthful energies and desires with its prohibitions and enticements regarding 'ways to be'

and 'ways not to be' in a culture obsessed with beauty, youth, and a consumerist ethic.

The fictional texts discussed in this chapter are unable to give the concept of beauty a fixed and stable meaning, so Pacteau's question in the epigraph to this chapter remains elusive. My analysis of these texts has attempted an engagement with the aesthetic, as both subject and form, and the various ideological, theoretical, and textual possibilities for its interpretation. The narratives I have explored cover a wide range – cautionary tales, tales of female agency, the carnivalesque and playful – and have also provided me, and hopefully readers, with ways for rethinking the aesthetic with respect to the different perspectives of gendered categorisations, identities, subjectivities, and binaries. The beauty dilemma does not mean one set of practices over another. Rather, as this chapter has attempted to show, it is more complex. In exploring the challenging and often poetic ideas of Deleuze and Guattari and other theorists, we have found other ways to think about the tensions and contestations that encircle gender and beauty and how texts can be read as pleasurable, desirable, and disturbing outside familiar binaries and frameworks of the body as image and representation alone.