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Alexander Edmonds' Pretty Modern

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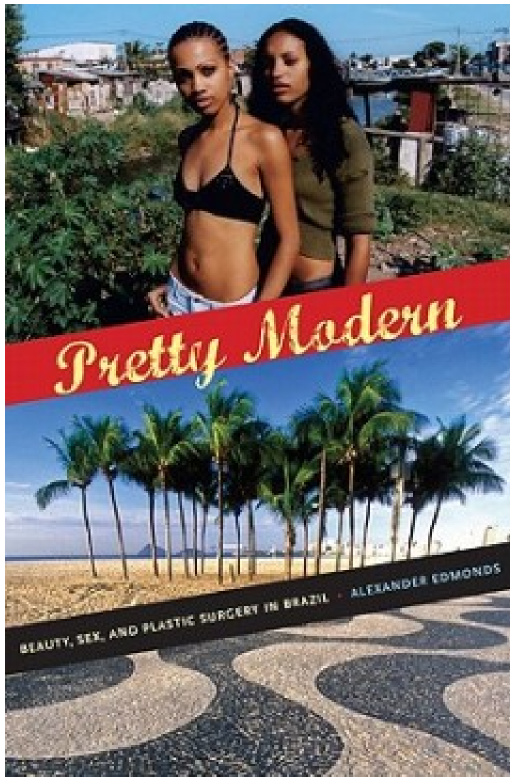

Pretty Modern: Beauty, Sex, and Plastic Surgery in Brazil

by Alexander Edmonds

Duke University Press, 2010, 321pp $24.95 paperback

In *Pretty Modern: Beauty, Sex, and Plastic Surgery in Brazil*, Alexander Edmonds situates plastic surgery within the medical, economic and psychological landscape of consumer capitalism in modern Brazil, unveiling a specific and intriguing socio-medical discourse of the "right to beauty". Edmonds traces how class and racial identifications are rearranged through domains of self-expression driven by a novel style, beauty and bodily practices, and in doing so, shows how beauty can be read both as a "sign and symptom of the social conflicts of modernity," (401). Treating beauty as a social domain and as a lens onto other aspects of sociality allows Edmonds to discuss some of the larger tensions

arising from the rapid modernization of Brazil—tensions that encompass issues of gender, sexuality, race, medicine, and the optimization of the self.

The first part of the book looks at the roles medicine and psychology have played in recoding aesthetic "defects" as illness. Both surgeons and patients blur the distinction between reconstructive and aesthetic surgery, allowing cosmetic surgery to become regarded "as a psychotherapeutic intervention worthy of being offered in a public health system to needy patients," (83). Rather than dismiss the incredible rise of plastic surgery as merely the result of marketing, Edmonds points to the concept of self-esteem, the position of psychoanalysis in Brazil, developments in public welfare, and Brazil's history as an importer of global technologies and commodities as contributing factors. Edmonds shows that the right to beauty seems to compensate for other rights that have not been realized (186), such as more transparent or formal access to resources such as education, jobs, and indeed health care.

In part two, "Beautiful People," Edmonds shifts the focus onto topics of race and nation in relation to beauty and aesthetics. Through careful writing, Edmonds shows how the imagination of *mestiçagem*, the so-called "rainbow of colors" that make up Brazilians, is crucial to modern Brazilian identity (207) and how this alluring image has allowed the state to evade accusations of hierarchal racism. Examining beauty practices allows Edmonds to call attention to the fact that although white has been integrated into the *mestiçagem* it is still presented as the ideal so long as appearance is heralded as a, if not the, central marker of social status (284). This is brutally exemplified through the examination of procedures for correcting the "negroid nose," as if it is the racial trait itself that is "the illness, or condition, to be treated in an otherwise healthy patient," (237).

Edmonds moves his discussion of gender and sexuality into a sharp analysis of socio-biological theories —theories that tend towards a preference for youth almost universally. In the third part of the book, "Engineering the Erotic," Edmonds gives a captivating critique of how physical marks of motherhood are regarded as defects that separate women from their potentially healthy, sexual selves. Surgeons appear to have no qualms about discussing the ugliness of the maternal body, and women, in turn, time their surgeries to fit the schedule of their pregnancies so as to restore their bodies back to "normal." In his analysis, Edmonds goes far in engaging with socio-biology, a somewhat controversial move that could, if handled with less delicacy, run the risk of reducing his ethnographic argument of females desiring beauty to an explanatory model of males simply desiring a ''nulliparous'' body, a body that has not given birth (335, 398). However, Edmonds manages to situate this interpretation in a broader context of consumer capitalism where new

tensions arise in "the forms of sexual and economic exchange" (401) in effect exposing new hazards placed upon those engaging in beauty cultures (407). Without resorting to relativism, Edmonds distinguishes between what he terms "qualified sex" and "bare sex," the former defined symbolically and morally, and the latter defined biologically (392). Edmonds shows how the self as "bare sex" is revealed and made available through plastic surgery, "imagined as a domain of biological activity that can be regulated or enhanced with medical techniques" (396). By parsing out the paradoxes in "sexual and reproductive rights and duties" and "freedom and objectification" (288), Edmonds demonstrates how female nature, nonetheless, is reinvented and re-identified through a procedure of "biologization of sex" that takes place in beauty cultures of late capitalism.

The ethnography laid out in *Pretty Modern* is engaging. Edmonds' descriptions of the cityscapes of Rio de Janeiro are vibrant and lush. His encounters with informants, be they socialites or street vendors, are intimately depicted and full of warmth, and succeed in transmitting the "rhythms and tone" of the "source language" (45)—what one might call the lived experience of beauty and sex in Brazil. Still, at times Edmonds offers ethnographic hints rather than details. For example, we are never privy to a thick description of the surgical procedures he witnessed. The emphasis on theory and analysis, however, is balanced by some longer descriptive passages, particularly in his wonderful chapter "Lens of Dreams," wherein he follows the highs and lows of some informants as they strive to model, to feel sexy, and perhaps most importantly, "to be seen" (360). Here Edmonds is able to tie together his previous observations with analysis, pointing a finger at the skill of beauty marketers to tap into a fantasy of dissolving obstacles of social mobility through beautification. The photographic images in the book, both the beauty advertisements and Edmonds' photos of his informants, complement the text, and deepen the readers' understanding of beauty cultures and the people negotiating them. Edmonds style of writing and arguing is cautious, and while he does not point to clear-cut causalities, he demonstrates that beauty, sex, and plastic surgery are topics, though sometimes dismissed as superficial, trivial or vain (34), are in fact very *good to think with*.

Edmonds has produced a study that is impressive in its utilization of a wide array of methods. To discover what beauty "mean[s] and do[es] for different social actors" (38), he looks to history, medicine, and psychology (as well as critical theory). Edmonds introduces us to beauty as that which is seen, interpreted, and experienced by actors across the various stratums of wealth, health, race, and gender. In his book we find the celebrity *siliconada*, the street vendor, the mistress, the maid, the famous surgeon, the intern, the young favela girl, the advertising agent, and even

the fictional characters of the telenovelas. There is of course the danger of spreading a study too thin by incorporating such a diverse range of informants, but here Edmonds cleverly navigates through the “messiness” of social negotiations taking place within the beauty cultures in contemporary Brazil. Noting that “celebrities, unlike other beings endowed with superhuman qualities, can actually be interviewed” (44), Edmonds makes a compelling case for why social scientists should not shy away from so-called interviewing-up. Perhaps particularly relevant for researchers in medical social sciences, where sometimes the main source of information comes from doctors and other health professionals, it is encouraging to see that *field work by appointment* is not in opposition to the more traditional *hanging out*. By examining modernity through the perhaps easily dismissed topic of beauty, *Pretty Modern* offers a unique insight into the complexities of defining the modern subject in a rapidly changing consumer landscape.

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