Beauty normalized: Normalization and optimization of the human body in cosmetic surgery and psychological attractiveness research

Cosmetic surgery has become so common that Abigail Brooks (2004) speaks of a ‘normalization’ of cosmetic surgery. The meaning of the term ‘normalization’ and related terms is somewhat cloudy in relation to cosmetic surgery, however. For example, the American Society of Plastic Surgeons (2007) employs the term ‘normal’ in order to distinguish cosmetic surgery from reconstructive surgery. According to this definition, reconstructive surgery is performed on ‘abnormal structures’ of the body that have been caused by genetic defects, developmental ‘anomalies’, traumas, infections, tumors, or diseases. It is supposed to improve the function of a body part or organ but it can also aim at improving the appearance of an ‘abnormal’ body. By contrast, cosmetic surgery is performed on ‘normal’ structures of the body in order to improve the appearance as well as self esteem of the patient. As Kathy Davis (2003a) has shown, it is not easy for plastic surgeons to determine exactly what counts as ‘normal’. The supposedly medical definition of ‘normality’ always seems to be bound to a socially constructed ‘normality’ of the outer appearance. In interviews with women who had undergone cosmetic surgery Davis (1995) found that these patients wanted to be ‘normal’ rather than ‘more beautiful’. Cressida Heyes (2007) draws attention to the ambiguity of ‘normality’ in these interviews: “first, the population is homogenized (everyone must be ordinary – even when “ordinary” is a state assiduously cultivated by the very discourse that claims only to represent it); then from the uniformity emerge individuals” (Heyes 2007: 95)

I draw my central question from these observations: If women optimize their bodies in order to be ‘normal’, is ‘normality’ shifting? Is it ‘normal’ to be beautiful? At first glance, this seems paradox because beauty is associated with the extraordinary and singular. I want to address this paradox with the German literary scholar Jürgen Link’s (2009) notion of ‘normalism’ which denotes people’s efforts to constantly normalize themselves by various normalization practices. I

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thus consider normalization as the central frame in which to contextualize cosmetic surgery. According to Link, the figuration of the ‘normal’ and the concrete practices associated with it have changed considerably: From a definition of the ‘normal’ that was closely aligned with the ‘norm’ to a more flexible and shifting understanding of ‘normality’. Link thus considers current normalization practices as located within the context of so-called flexible normalism.

In a first step I reconstruct the historical context in which normalization and cosmetic surgery became related. I follow Michel Foucault’s (2004) observation that the human sciences have been pivotal in the production of the ‘norm’. With Foucault, I put my emphasis on the relation between power and knowledge, i.e., on concrete normalization practices of individuals and scientific knowledge practices associated with them. The notion ‘normal’ first appeared in the context of modern mass production and the collection of mass data since the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century (Link 2009). I analyze the late nineteenth century notion of ‘normality’ of the physical appearance with the example of Francis Galton’s composite portraiture and his speculations about the distribution of ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ people in English society. The onset of cosmetic surgery is tightly interwoven with this early notion of ‘normality’. Cosmetic surgery, in part, is a response to the social and scientific construction of a physical norm by individuals that fall short to this norm. In a second step I ask about the current relation between the scientific construction of ‘normality’ and cosmetic surgery. I do this by first reconstructing the contemporary scientific reception of Galton’s composite portraiture within psychological attractiveness research. I argue that this research confuses ‘normality’ and ‘optimality’ and that this confusion proves to be absolutely vital to the operation of flexible normalism: normalization under conditions of flexible normalism entails a current self-optimization effort. Secondly, I trace this confusion between normalization and optimization in current media representations of cosmetic surgery by analyzing the Reality TV show The Swan.

The protonormalistic construction of normality: Francis Galton’s composite portraiture

Industrializing European societies of the nineteenth century experienced a massive increase in population especially in the cities (Robinson 2002). It was in this context that the notion of ‘population’ took central stage. The control technologies of power targeted reproduction rates, birth rates, death rates, life expectancies and health (Foucault 1998). In short: The individual body’s propensity for production and reproduction. Foucault calls the power at work in this context biopower. Its targets were twofold. On the one hand, it aimed at disciplining the individual body in order to increase its utility and productivity. On the other hand, the social body was supposed to be regulated as ‘population’. ‘Normality’ gained importance in this context (Link
2009). The modern production and management of the ‘norm’ is shaped by the modern human sciences and is closely tied to the production of deviancy: Deviance or ‘abnormality’ constitutes the modern norm and is absolutely indispensable for it (Foucault 2004). Francis Galton’s scientific work is exemplary for this form of ‘normality’. Galton is known as a pioneer of the bell curve and in contemporary psychology he is credited of having invented statistical principles like ‘regression towards the middle’ and twin research. In the following I will concentrate on his method of visually averaging faces, the method of composite portraiture, which for Galton was supposed to allow insights into the mechanisms of heredity.

Galton’s statistical endeavors need to be contextualized in the social conditions of English society in the middle and late nineteenth century. Surveillance techniques were almost obsessively used with statistical methods being part of these (Pearl 2010). These control techniques are linked to the population increase of the time. The increasingly industrialized cities experienced a massive and rapid population increase (Robinson 2002). On the one hand, people from rural areas migrated into the cities that promised work opportunities and better living conditions. On the other hand, London in particular was a popular destination for immigrants. Among the biggest groups of immigrants were Irish and Jews (Pearl 2010). The conditions and rights of immigrants in general were improved only slowly. However, the Irish and Jews formed relatively strong political interests groups and over the years some of their emancipative struggles paid off. For example, the Catholic Emancipation Act from 1829 granted catholic Irish the right to be voted into parliament, to vote in parliamentary elections, and to enroll at Oxbridge. Between 1830 and 1871 these rights were extended to Jews. Compared to immigrants from the British colonies, the legal rights of Irish and Jewish immigrants were better. Africans and Indians from lower castes, for example, were not allowed to marry an English person and hardly had access to power positions.

Already in 1848, Friedrich Engels (183/1844) devoted attention to the population increase in industrialized England and observed that the population seemed to big only in comparison with the available employment opportunities. Competition for work being one of the driving engines of the rather liberal political economy in England, it comes as no surprise that Sharrona Pearl (2010) makes competition responsible for many racist sentiments at the time. According to Pearls, many English perceived Irish and Jewish immigrants as a threat in the competition for employment opportunities. A newly developed genre of physiognomic caricature construed the Irish and the Jewish body as a ‘visual type’, using physiognomic markers in order to make them into ‘racial types’: “In many cases, visual depictions of the Irish and the Jews reproduced culture, but these cultural factors were labeled racial through physiognomic references” (ibid: 109). The racial construction of the Jewish body posed a particular conundrum and theories of ever more fundamentalist racism pondered whether Jews were supposed to be considered a ‘race’ at all
(comp. Jackson/Weidmann 2004). Galton is considered a proponent of fundamentalist scientific racism, and not least with his method of composite portraiture he picked up the question of a ‘Jewish race’ and tried to solve it with his own methodical means.

Francis Galton (1822-1911) was a half-cousin to Charles Darwin (1809-1882) and was particularly impressed by Darwin’s theory of evolution. Throughout much of his work Galton tried to prove that psychological traits were as heritable as morphological traits and that the principles of evolution could be transferred to psychological traits like character or intelligence. Galton (1883) assumed that a person’s personality could be diagnosed by analyzing the person’s face. Composite portraiture served as a diagnostic tool for this purpose. Building on the supposed ‘objective’ character of photography and on the ideal of ‘mechanical objectivity’ (Galison/Daston 1992), Galton hoped that a person’s (genetic) nature would show itself in front of the camera.

Figure 1: “Specimens of Composite Portraiture” (Galton 1883: 9)
Galton did not primarily aim at the representation of an individual’s character but at the depiction of types, being mostly interested in ‘deviant’ types like criminals, sick people, and racially constructed groups. It is thus not by chance that criminals, sick people, and racialized ‘others’ are among the chief motives for Galton’s composite portraits. In order to visually depict a type, Galton took photographs of several individual photographs successively within the exposure time of a single photograph. The resulting photograph contained all single faces but also provided an ‘average’ of them: Features that were common to all faces were sharply contoured whereas idiosyncratic features were very blurry. Galton defined the sharply contoured features which together made up the composite portrait as characteristic for a type, for example the type of the ‘criminal’ (see figure 1).

In his first paper on composite portraiture Galton (1878) listed four different applications for it: (1) Constructing ‘racial typologies’, (2) comparing average faces of the parent generation with those of the offspring generation, (3) identifying the most authentic representation of historic personalities, and (4) revealing a person’s ‘real’ character. According to Galton, drawings were inferior to photography because they could only depict fleeting expressions at a given moment. Composite portraiture, by contrast, was supposed to get to the core of a person’s character. In his major work Human Faculty and its Development, Galton (1883) only took up three of the initial applications: (1) Portraits of historic persons, (2) family portraits, and (3) portraits of ‘criminality’ and ‘illness’ (see figure 1). “Officers of the Royal Engineers and privates” (Galton 1883: 10) were the ideal figures of ‘health’ to Galton, the officers’ physiognomy allegedly offering “an expression of considerable vigour, resolution, intelligence, and frankness” (ibid: 10). As a contrast, Galton introduced a composite of „two of the coarse and low types of face found among the criminal classes” (ibid), containing photographs of men who had been convicted for murder and similar offences or for theft.

In his first paper on composite portraiture (Galton 1878) Galton remarked that the composite portraits tended to be ‘more beautiful’ than the individual photographs. He thought this was because individual facial ‘irregularities’ were smoothed out in the composites and the features of the composites were more symmetrical. Furthermore, Galton was convinced that a heritable disposition was not necessarily realized by a person. In other words, the heritable disposition for crime that was allegedly revealed by the composite portraits did not seem as bad as the actual crimes of the convicted criminals to Galton. Galton believed his composites of ‘Jewish faces’ to be his most successful (comp. Novak 2004). He was convinced to have proven the existence of a ‘Jewish race’ with these photographs. Galton hardly commented on the composites apart from remarking that the “dirty little fellows” (Galton 1885: 243) whose faces had been visually
averaged in the composite were “wonderfully beautiful” (ibid) in the composite, again assuming the construction of beauty by the method of composite portraiture.

Galton is an especially telling example of a normalizing strategy called protonormalism by Link (2009). Link takes up Foucault’s studies on the construction of normality and normalization (e.g. Foucault 1975) but remarks that Foucault’s notion of normalization (in French: normalisation) is based on the model of industrial standardization typical for protonormalism (Link 2009). As a normalization strategy, protonormalism is closely linked to the concept of (industrial) norm. That is, even when protonormalist normalization is coupled to an empirical statistical collection of data, it is still oriented by a norm that is a priori defined and depends on unchangeable boundaries between the ‘normal’ and the ‘abnormal’. Link calls these boundaries “stigma-borders” [Stigma-Grenzen] (ibid: 137). Protonormalism produces radical exclusions and stable ‘abnormal identities’ that are equated with (genetic) familial lineages. The normality spectrum in protonormalism is narrow whereas its range of ‘abnormalities’ is broad. The scientific production of rigid norms and deviances as exemplified by Galton’s composite photography corresponds to a disciplinary regime that is state-regulated and based on coercion. Insofar as protonormalistic norms are associated with statistics, they are related to the bell curve. With the composite portraits of officers on the one hand and criminals, the ill, and Jews on the other hand, Galton has visualized physiognomies ‘above’ and ‘below’ the average. The average British population is never visualized, however. To Galton, the average is only interesting as long as it can be pushed in the direction of the optimum.

**Power and knowledge in protonormalism: Eugenics and cosmetic surgery**

Galton’s scientific construction of ‘normality’ and ‘abnormality’ was directly linked to a socio-political agenda aiming at the regulation of the population: *eugenics*. In Galton’s view, individuals of each population were clustered around the population average; this average was supposed to be improved by means of eugenics. Galton mentioned the term ‘eugenics’ for the first time in *Human Faculty* (Galton 1883), but already in his essay *Hereditary Improvement* (Galton 1873) he had foreshadowed the program using the term ‘viriculture’. He then claimed it should be “feasible to improve the race of man by a system which shall be perfectly in accordance with the moral sense of the present time” (ibid: 116). Galton’s notion of the ‘moral sense of the present time’ referred to the leading role of the Catholic Church. When Galton wrote *Human Faculty*, however, the status of the Church had already crumbled far enough for Galton to confront the religious authorities openly:
He [man; NR] ought therefore, I think, to be less diffident than he is usually instructed to be, and to rise to the conception that he has a considerable function to perform in the order of events, and that his exertions are needed. It seems to me that he should look upon himself more as a freeman, with power of shaping the course of future humanity, and that he should look upon himself less as the subject of a despotic government, in which case it would be his chief merit to depend wholly upon what had been regulated for him, and to render abject obedience. The question then arises as to the way in which man can assist in the order of events. I reply, by furthering the course of evolution. (Galton 1883: 18)

Galton expresses the politically liberal attitude that ‘man’ should free himself from the chains of a ‘despotic government’ and stop being ‘regulated’ and ‘obedient’. Thus freed, ‘man’ should further the course of evolution. Some twenty years later, Galton (1904) had devised a three-step program for furthering the course of evolution. First, he says, eugenics needed to be taken serious as an academic question. Second, it was necessary that its practical implication be taken up. And thirdly, eugenics needed to be installed in the British ‘national mind’ like a new religion. By assigning a leading role to academics, Galton in fact designed eugenics as an ideology of the professional middle class whose status would be considerably furthered and who should determine the course of humanity in a eugenic society. Galton assumed that nature itself was driven in a eugenic direction by the competition between different ‘races’: “It has, indeed, strong claims to become an orthodox religious tenet of the future, for eugenics cooperate with the working of nature by securing that humanity shall be represented by the fittest races. What nature does blindly, slowly, ruthlessly, man may do providently, quickly and kindly” (Galton, 1904: 82). Eugenics is thus introduced as mirroring evolution itself.

Galton’s eugenics combines two forms of power: A disciplinary power regime for those constructed as ‘abnormal’ and a biopower regime for the middle classes, i.e., for the supposedly ‘normal’ population (comp. Dreyfus/Rabinow 1983). So while the ‘abnormal’ are supposed to be either locked away or erased from society at all, it is the members of the middle classes that are supposed to be convinced of eugenics as a new religion. Galton’s (1904) so-called ‘positive eugenics’ aims at convincing members of the middle classes in particular to chose their marriage partners not according to their own preferences but to eugenic sensibility. Furthermore, women are supposed to marry earlier and use their entire fertile life to get as many children as possible. With these measures, Galton speculates, the ‘good’ members of British society would soon outnumber the ‘bad’.

What did the protonormalistic logic of exclusion mean for people who were constructed as ‘deviant’ and what options and what forms of agency were available to them? On a collective
level, many groups, for example the Irish and Jews, who were constructed as ‘racially inferior’, fought for emancipation and equal rights. On the other hand, Sander Gilman (1999) claims that it was not the least constructions of racial differences that furthered the development of cosmetic surgery: Many stigmatized, especially Jews and Irish, turned to plastic surgeons to have the visual signs of difference removed and ‘pass’ as members of the majority society. Many early procedures of plastic surgery aimed at changing physical signs of racialized difference like the supposed ‘Irish hook nose’ or the alleged ‘Irish pug nose’. Most of these operations were not successful in the sense of patients really passing as majority members of British society, though. In Gilman’s words, “there is no hiding from the fact of a constructed difference. There is no mask, no operation, no refuge” (Gilman 1998: 78).

**Contemporary reception of composite portraiture: Psychological attractiveness research**

As Richard Levins and Richard Lewontin (1985) have remarked, the theory of evolution in the nineteenth century was deeply marked by an ideology of progress and optimization. Optimization progresses as selective reproduction, i.e., only some members of a species carry their genes into the next generation. Optimization in Galton’s (1904) eugenic fantasies is a matter of society itself and only manifests itself in the next generation. It means that entire groups within the British population that are either constructed as ‘normal’ or as ‘abnormal’ are supposed to be regulated in their reproduction such as to improve the entire population average and to make the ‘abnormal’ disappear from society altogether. The unit of improvement is the group. It is interesting that only the members of the middle class are supposed to regulate themselves out of conviction because it seems that what was foreshadowed in the middle classes has become generalized nowadays. However, it is still important to keep in mind that even the eugenic self-regulation of the middle classes was coupled to their reproductive efforts; the effects of self-regulation, i.e., the optimization of the group, were delayed into successor generations. It seems that contemporary self-normalizations are much more immanent, i.e., their effects are to be achieved within a single lifespan. This shift can also be traced in contemporary scientific receptions of Galton’s composite portraiture. In the following, I contrast Galton’s composite portraiture with its current usages in psychological attractiveness research. I will specifically ask about the scientific construction of beauty norms and the relation between normalization and optimization.

Psychological attractiveness research started off in the early 1970ies as social psychology of stereotypes (e.g., Dion et al. 1972). Early attractiveness researchers asked if and why beautiful people were (wrongly) associated with positive character attributes and a ‘better life’. Since the
early 1990ies, psychologists are trying to figure out the criteria of beauty. Judith Langlois and Lori Roggman (1990), for example, proposed that beautiful faces are average. The authors averaged faces with a procedure comparable to Galton’s composite portraiture and had the original photographs as well as the averaged photographs rated for attractiveness by undergraduate students. The results showed that the averaged photographs were by and large considered more attractive. Langlois and Roggman explain these results with reference to Galton’s composite portraiture. Under the heading “Galton’s meat eaters” they write:

In the 1800s, a number of articles and commentaries were published on composite portraits created by Galton and Stoddard in which they superimposed photographic exposures of faces [...]. The apparent purpose of these composite portraits was to create graphic representations of types of faces. Galton enjoyed creating composites of criminals, meat-eaters, vegetarians, and tuberculosis patients. [...] Although both Galton and Stoddard noted that the composites were ‘better looking’ than their individual components because ‘the special villainous irregularities in the latter have disappeared’ (Galton, 1878, p. 135), their observations were not pursued systematically until now. The data provided here offer empirical evidence that composite faces, at least those of a group of predominantly Caucasian males and females, are indeed attractive and are rated as more attractive than are the individual faces comprising the composite. (Langlois/Roggman 1990: 118)

Langlois and Roggman ignore both context and aim of Galton’s composite portraiture and claim that the sole objective of creating composite portraits was to create graphic representations of faces. Given that criminals, sick people, and racialized persons were among the bodies most often depicted by Galton, it is somewhat surprising that Langlois and Roggman choose ‘meat eaters’ as a heading for discussing Galton’s method. Galton indeed had no interest in pursuing the question of beauty systematically, focused on ‘negative deviance’ as he was.

Langlois and Roggman’s (1990) hypothesis could in fact only be devised by modern technologies that allow for the digital averaging of faces. The technology used since the 1990ies is called morphing. In contrast to Galton’s composite portraiture, an average of several individual faces is produced digitally. Each individual black and white photograph is divided into a 512 x 512 matrix of fields, each with a specific gray value. In order to construct a composite of two photographs, an arithmetical average gray value for each field is created. All arithmetical average numbers for all fields are then converted back into the appropriate gray shade and all fields added up to a composite image (see figure 2). These black and white figures were given attractiveness ratings by undergraduate students in Langlois’ and Roggman’s psychological experiment.
What exactly does ‘average’ mean in Langlois’ and Roggman’s definition? On first view, the authors evidently employ an arithmetic definition of ‘average’ that refers to the ‘mean’ of empirical values in a normal distribution. Average faces occupy the mean in the distribution of facial features. For example, if the noses in the original sample of photographs ranged from very small to very big the composite nose would be average. From this perspective, ‘attractiveness’ is related to the absence of extreme facial features. It could also be, however, that the composites in Langlois’ and Roggman’s sample are considered attractive because they are highly symmetrical (Thornhill/Gangestad 1993). When discussing Galton, Langlois and Roggman (1990) in fact consider this possibility, too. However, the authors also employ a different notion of ‘average’ that is closer to the common sense understanding of the term. Langlois’ and Roggman’s paper is called *Attractive Faces are Only Average*. This is also the catchy formula which with the authors summarize their results. From a common sense understanding, this means that attractive faces are somewhat normal, i.e., that they are fairly common or appear rather often in the population.
Langlois and Roggman explicitly suggest such a common sense reading in their concluding words:

We end by noting that the topic of physical attractiveness and its effects on social behaviors and relationships has been described as “undemocratic” […]. Social scientists may be less disturbed by studying the effects of attractiveness knowing that attractive faces, in fact, are only average. (Langlois/Roggman 1990: 120)

In this quote, Langlois and Roggman (1990) take up the social scientific notion that beauty is ‘undemocratic’. They then equate the averageness of attractive faces with democracy, thus relating averageness to the common sense notion of ‘normality’ or ‘majority’. If the average population can take part in attractiveness, then attractiveness is democratic. Of course, however, this is not the case and Langlois’ and Roggman’s results in fact never suggest that it is: In fact, faces with facial features such as the composites do not exist in the population and approximations are extremely rare. The morphological features of the faces are average but in terms of attractiveness these average features are at the same time optimal: Average facial features are optimally beautiful. This confusion of normality and optimality results from the confusion of two normal distributions. In Langlois’ and Roggman’s experiment there are two normal distributions at stake. Facial features have a normal range, a range below the normal and a range above the normal. The same goes for attractiveness ratings. Faces occupying a position in the normal or average ranges of facial features are positioned above the average in the distribution of attractiveness ratings. Hence the paradox that attractive faces can be called average and optimal at the same time.

I suggest that this paradox is in fact an integral part of the logic of flexible normalism (Link 2009). In contrast to protonormalism, flexible normalism is characterized by a flexible and changeable ‘normality’ range. Individuals are not equated with fixed identities but can be ‘normal’ or ‘abnormal’ according to a variety of measures and both at the same time. People can also change positions in diverse normal distributions. Attractive individuals, for example, can be average in terms of their facial features but extraordinary because of their beauty while at the same time being below average on intelligence, average in creativity, and above average on body hair. With education one can change one’s position on the intelligence scale while dieting, working out, cosmetics, and cosmetic surgery may be used to improve one’s position on the beauty scale. The dichotomy ‘normal’/’abnormal’ is employed to almost every domain of life and people spend much time figuring out whether they are ‘normal’ in terms of their professional, private, or social life. Flexible normalism does not function via a disciplinary regime but via self-
regulation of individuals. For effective self-regulations to work out individuals need to know the boundaries of ‘normality’ which, however, can change at any given moment. Individuals are thus required to constantly check their own status against the current definition of ‘normality’. It is absolutely vital, however, that optimality is considered attainable because otherwise no one would be motivated to even try to improve themselves. Langlois’ and Roggman’s (1990) equation of attractiveness with averageness or ‘normality’ is thus part of the very motivational structure of flexible normalism: If beauty was not attainable no one would try to beautify themselves and cosmetics, diets, fitness programs as well as cosmetic surgery would not sell.

An example of self-regulation via self-beautification: The Swan

It is not by chance that psychologists like Langlois and Roggman (1990) suggested physical beauty as ‘democratic’, average and attainable in the beginning of the 1990ies when beauty was in fact more attainable than ever before. In the 1990ies, cosmetic surgery had been deregulated and subject to market principles (Brooks 2004). Before, cosmetic surgery like many other medical procedures could not be advertised because of regulations by the medical community itself. Once deregulated, cosmetic surgery could be advertised and competition between cosmetic surgeons could dump prices and make many procedures more affordable. Increasingly, cosmetic surgery is also consumed by working class people who are in fact targeted by the most effective advertising strategy of the early 21st century: Reality makeover television (see Wegenstein 2007). Such shows usually depict the life transformations of women who are changed from ‘ugly’ or ‘average’ into ‘beautiful’ women by means of cosmetic surgery, a rigid dieting schedule, a work out plan, and styling. The first format started with ABC’s Extreme Makeover in 2002, and other such series were soon to follow. Very often, these shows are also game shows and rely on the principle of competition between contestants (ibid). The Swan, produced by Nely Galán for FOX from 2004 on, is often regarded as the climax of reality makeover television. The Swan was an incomparable success: Ten million Americans watched the first season in 2004 and 300,000 (ibid). The Swan was also an effective advertisement for cosmetic surgery. When the show was first aired cosmetic procedures increased by 44 percent to a total of 11.9 million surgeries (ibid).

The Swan featured two seasons with eight episodes each. In each episode two contestants run against each other and at the end of each episode one of them goes on to the final pageant in which ‘the swan’ of the current season is crowned. At the beginning of each episode a male voice-over summarizes what the show is all about:
In the most unique competition ever, a group of ordinary women hand over their lives to a team of cosmetic and plastic surgeons. They will be put through a brutal 3 months makeover for the chance to become beauty queens. Each week, two contestants will be transformed, but only one will be judged beautiful enough to move on to the pageant. One transformation requires discipline, sacrifice, and pain. They will be constantly evaluated. And they will do all this without ever seeing their reflection. Until the final reveal. All in the quest to be crowned. (The Swan 2006: Intro for each episode)

The voice-over introduces the competition as ‘unique’, not the least because it involves ‘ordinary women’ who ‘hand over their lives’ to ‘experts’ and subordinate themselves and everything they have and are to their goal of becoming ‘the swan’.

After the intro, each episode begins with a video of the two contestants shown to a group of ‘experts’ who sit around a table and watch and later discuss the contestants. The team of ‘experts’ mostly consists of two cosmetic surgeons, a dentist, a psychotherapist, two fitness trainers and the producer and coach Nely Galán. Most of the video casts show young women who are very unsatisfied with their lives, many of them very unhappy, and who want to change their outer appearance because they consider it the source of their problems. The majority of the women is either married or in a long term relationship. Without exception, the women are heterosexual and most are working class. From the total of 32 women only two African American contestants were admitted. In an interview with Bernadette Wegenstein Galán said treating the ‘complex issue’ ethnicity would have been too complicated and unprofitable (Wegenstein, interview for Wegenstein/Rhodes 2007). The image of experts sitting at their round table frames the contestants’ video casts. Sometimes the experts’ reactions to a part of the contestants’ narrative is cut in between the contestants’ video casts. After the video, the experts discuss the ‘case’ and lay out the plan of transformation. The two cosmetic surgeons mostly plan to render the women’s appearance more ‘feminine’, i.e., they plan to ‘open up the eyes’, scale down the nose, enlarge the mouth, remove fat from diverse body parts, and increase the ‘definition’ of both face and body. The psychotherapist mostly diagnoses week self esteem and the fitness trainers lay out the fitness plan. Several times during the expert discussion, the physical shortcomings of the contestant are shown and to mark the end of the discussion and the decision on the plan of transformation the contestant’s face and body are shown in a 3D matrix that next to the face/body lists all planned procedures. The makeover takes place during a three month period in which the contestants are separated from their families and friends. Their schedule is tough. After several painful operations the women need to follow a strict diet and a rigid fitness regime. Everything depends
on the contestant’s will to ‘surrender to transformation’. Accordingly, the first season is won by Rachel who was especially disciplined and compliant.

From the perspective of flexible normalism (Link 2009), Rachel’s ‘case’ is telling. In her video cast she describes herself as “I feel average. Because when I look in the mirror, that’s what I see” (The Swan 2006, season 1, episode 1: 00:08:00ff). To this, the experts react by showing pity on their face. However, when Rachel’s husband describes her as ‘average’ the experts change from pity to dismay and disbelief. The husband had said: “She is a little average. But when she’s happy, she’s a very beautiful person” (ibid: 00:08:09ff). Rachel also talks about her difficult relationship with her father who has always put her down because he himself lacks self esteem. Her father finally describes Rachel as a “female copy of me” (ibid: 00:08:19) – a description that sparks the experts’ dismay once again. Rachel’s makeover-plan for the face contains a nose job, lip augmentation, a chin implant, an eyebrow lift, fat removal, and several visits to the dermatologist. For Rachel’s body, the following procedures are undertaken: A breast lift and fat removal from five different body areas. The dentist bleaches and cleans her teeth and gives her a full set of veneers. Furthermore, Rachel is put on a 1200 calories/day diet and has to work out in the fitness studio for two hours per day. Finally, she receives psychotherapy and coaching. Rachel does not win the first season because she turns out to be the ‘most beautiful’ contestant at the end of the season but because she has shown the most discipline and will. Rachel complies best with the image of the contestants drawn in the intro: ‘an average woman who hands over her life to a team of experts in the quest to be crowned the swan’. Rachel’s case makes especially evident that ‘averageness’ is the negative horizon against which the ‘swans’ are measured. The positive measuring sticks are ‘beauty queens’ and a mix of attributes associated with beauty: self discipline, self esteem, a satisfying sex life, and not the least femininity. Paula Villa (2008) thus called the work carried out in the German version of The Swan ‘femininity work’.

At the same time, however, a new ‘average’ is produced by the show. Somewhat ironically, the refrain of the song that accompanies the final contest in which all episode winners compete against each other spells ‘they all look the same’. Bernadette Wegenstein and I had a graphic designer exchange the noses, mouths and eyes of three The Swan contestants and the results were remarkable (Wegenstein/Ruck in print). Figure 3 shows the before/after image of contestant Marnie. Figure 4 shows Marnie with the nose of a different contestant and the mouth of yet another. Evidently, the beauty templates used by the cosmetic surgeons are so limited that they tend to produce living composites. In the contestants’ averaged faces the paradox of optimality and normality in flexible normalism becomes manifest once again: The contestants are so uniformly adjusted to the beauty optimum that the optimum is turned into the new average.
Figure 3: Marnie before/after (Galán 2004: 28-29)

Figure 4: Composite Marnie with Cindy's nose and Christie's mouth (Digital touch up by Glenn Feron G.C.F. Graphic Fantasies; courtesy Bernadette Wegenstein).
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