

**Contextualizing Gender**  
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**Indian Institute of Technology, Roorkee**

**Lecture - 48**

**Female Bodybuilding, Cosmetic Surgery and New Imaging Technologies in Anne Balsamo's Technologies of the Gendered Body**

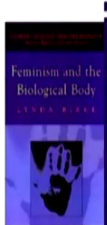
Welcome dear participants. In the current module we will look at Balsamo's analysis of female body building and the idea of humanizing the female body as opposed to commodification. In this segment, Balsamo refers to feminist sport sociologists, particularly Lynda Birke, a professor at the university of Chester, UK and Helen Lenskyj, professor Emerita of Social Justice Department at Toronto University.

In order to highlight the preconceived identification of science and sports as non-feminine. Birke has drawn our attention to the exclusion of women from sports and science on the basis of biological arguments. Locating the inferiority of women in their physiological body.


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### Feminist Bodybuilding


- Birke draws attention to the exclusion of women from sports and science on the basis of biological arguments, locating women's inferiority in their physiological body; after the *science* of craniology failed to prove that this inferiority resided in her brain (*Feminism and the Biological Body*, 1999).
- Helen Lenskyj's *Out of Bounds: Women, Sport and Sexuality* (1986), attempts to explain how woman's gender identity became intimately tied to her reproductive physiology.
  - "The physiological "facts" of her reproductive system establish the biologically sexed female body as the "natural" emblem or guarantor of female identity." (42)





Source:  
edinburghuniver  
sitypress



Source:  
worldcat.org



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As we have discussed earlier, during the 18th and early 19th century it was the so-called science of craniology. The size of the brain the skull size of men and women in which people used to think the inferiority of women lies. When the scientific development proved the inadequacy or the wrongness of this idea, people turned to physiological body

to locate the inferiority of women into biological arguments. Helen Lenskyj in her work attempts to explain, how woman's gender identity became intimately connected to her reproductive physiology.

Gender identity is conventionally related to the reproductive system. The pathological discriminatory discourse is produced by subjecting the woman to an inferior position. Lenskyj describes that the early 19th century medical textbooks, had emphasized the fact of reproduction when suggesting safe and suitable sports activities for women.

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- Lenskyj in her work describes that medical textbooks in the early nineteenth century emphasized the fact of reproduction when prescribed safe and appropriate sporting activities for women:
  - Women have a moral duty to preserve their vital energy for childbearing and to cultivate personality traits suited to the wife-and -mother role. Sport wastes vital forces, strains female bodies and fosters traits unbecoming to "true womanhood." (42)
- Patricia Vertinsky critiques the opinion of women being eternally wounded due to puberty and childbirth. She looks at ideas propagated by 19<sup>th</sup> century medical texts and their construction of woman (*The Eternally Wounded Woman*, 1989).
  - This popular myth-again supported by medical knowledge of the time-- defined women as chronically weak and as victims of a pathological physiology.

Patricia Vertinsky Source: twistedoutreachproject.com  
Helen Lenskyj Source: torontoasis.org

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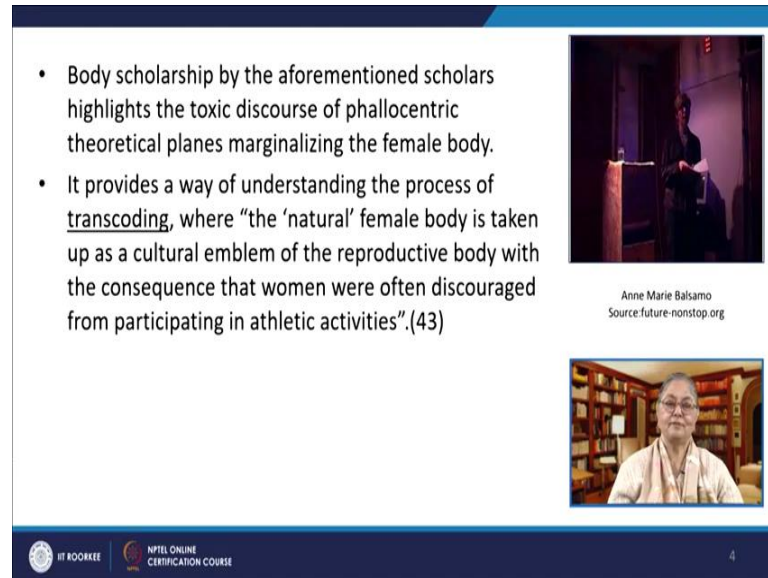
She notes that how the earlier texts used to suggest, that women have a moral duty to preserve their vital energy for childbearing and to cultivate those personality traits which are considered to be suitable for a wife and a mother.

According to the earlier medical texts, sports, vital forces strains female bodies and foster traits which are unbecoming to "true womanhood". Patricia Vertinsky critiques the opinion of women being eternally wounded due to puberty and childhood. She looks at ideas propagated by 19th century medical texts and their construction of woman.

The popular myth that is that women are permanently wounded due to puberty and later on due to childbirth was supported by the contemporary knowledge of the medical sciences and it defined women as being chronically weak and victims of a pathological physiology.

For Balsamo such body scholarship involves rereading the female body. It illuminates the process where one set of beliefs about female physiological inferiority is articulated with another discursive system.

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• Body scholarship by the aforementioned scholars highlights the toxic discourse of phallogentric theoretical planes marginalizing the female body.

• It provides a way of understanding the process of transcoding, where “the ‘natural’ female body is taken up as a cultural emblem of the reproductive body with the consequence that women were often discouraged from participating in athletic activities”.(43)

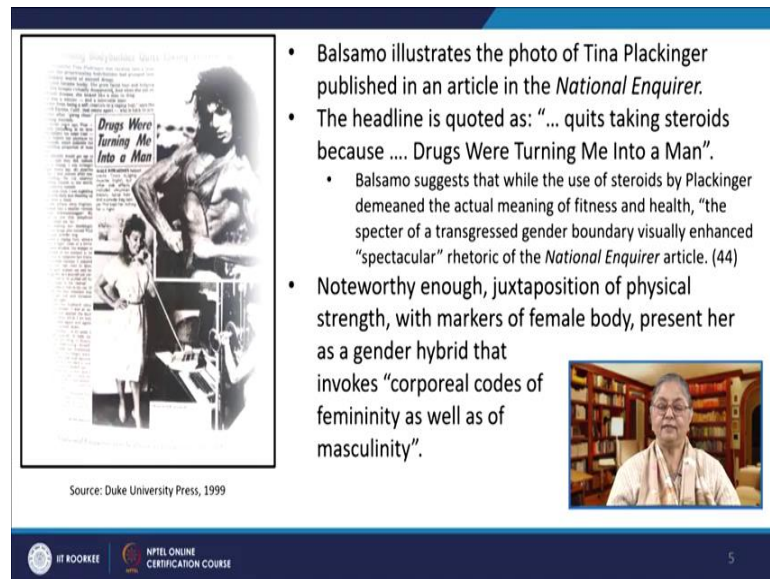
Anne Marie Balsamo  
Source:future-nonstop.org

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Such body scholarship highlights the toxic disclosure of phallogentric theoretical planes marginalizing the female body. It also provides a way of understanding the process of transcoding, where the natural female body is taken up as a cultural emblem of the reproductive body with the consequence that women were often discouraged from participating in athletic activities.

Balsamo quotes the example of Tina Plackinger, a former champion body builder, who had used steroids for 5 years while competing and claimed that steroids were turning her gradually into a man. Balsamo suggests that the use of steroids by players deflated the purpose of health and fitness.

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- Balsamo illustrates the photo of Tina Plackinger published in an article in the *National Enquirer*.
- The headline is quoted as: "... quits taking steroids because .... Drugs Were Turning Me Into a Man".
  - Balsamo suggests that while the use of steroids by Plackinger demeaned the actual meaning of fitness and health, "the specter of a transgressed gender boundary visually enhanced "spectacular" rhetoric of the *National Enquirer* article. (44)
- Noteworthy enough, juxtaposition of physical strength, with markers of female body, present her as a gender hybrid that invokes "corporeal codes of femininity as well as of masculinity".


Source: Duke University Press, 1999

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In her work Balsamo particularly illustrates a photograph of Tina Plackinger which has been published in an article in the *National Enquirer*, with the headline as "quits taking steroid because Drugs Were Turning Me into a Man". Balsamo suggests that while the use of steroids by Plackinger demeaned the actual meaning of fitness and health. The spectre of a transgressed gender boundary visually enhanced "spectacular" rhetoric of the national enquirer article.


Interestingly juxtaposition of physical strength with markers of female body, present her as a gender hybrid that invokes "corporeal codes of femininity as well as of masculinity". Balsamo also quotes the example of the media portrayal of Florence Griffith Joyner, she was painted as the exotic other at the 1998 Seoul Olympic Games. Her representation in media revealed the process of sexualization at work.

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Newsweek magazine cover featuring Florence Griffith-Joyner (September 19, 1988). Photograph by Mark Hanauer.

- Balsamo presents the case of Florence Griffith- Joyner’s performance at the 1988 Seoul Olympic games and media representation of the athlete which revealed the process of sexualization at work.
  - Most of the magazines before the Seoul Olympics (1988) covered her in flamboyant track outfits and did not primarily highlight her athletic abilities and prowess.
  - They portrayed her “exotic otherness”, labelled her as sexy and erotic in an attempt to undermine her athletic prowess and treat her as an object of desire.
- Balsamo contends that she is being identified only as an attractive, exotic, female body; whereas she is more than simply a body.




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Balsamo notes that most of the magazines before the Seoul Olympics covered her in flamboyant track outfits and did not primarily highlight her athletic abilities and prowess.

They portrayed her “exotic otherness”, labelled her as sexy and erotic in an attempt to undermine her athletic prowess and treat her ultimately as being an object of desire. Balsamo contends that she is being identified only as an attractive, exotic, female body; whereas she is more than simply a body.

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Source: people.com




Source: pinterest.com.mx

- Tony Duffy, a sports photographer, recalls: “She was one of the sexiest girls at the 1984 Olympics ... She has this Polynesian look and an exotic feeling about her.
- “I did a photo shoot of Florence eight weeks ago, in body suits and bathing suits on the beach, and I couldn’t give the pictures away. In the past two days (after her Olympic trials record), my phone has been ringing off the hook. *Playboy, Sports Illustrated, People, Life* - everyone wants pictures of her.”

“It’s absolutely essential that media starts to reflect the reality of women’s lives or we’re not going to change the reality of women’s lives.”

PAT MITCHELL  
PhD Student Fellow  
Co-Editor



Source: whatwilltake.com

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She also draws our attention to a statement by a sports photographer Tony Duffy who had done a photoshoot of Florence some time before the Seoul Olympic.

However, after the Olympic trials when people started to be drawn towards her athletic prowess, several magazines including Playboy wanted pictures of her. The representation of women's bodies is generally erotic, sexual, naturalized and commodified to cater to the male gaze.

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### Technological Construction of the "Ideal Femininity"

- Media representations surrounding the female body are filled with "cultural ideas of 'natural' femininity and erotic beauty".
  - Through body building, powerlifting, weight lifting, many female bodies are "technologically" transformed into material ideals of such media reportage. (47)
- The annual Miss Olympia contest was first staged in 1980. By 1989 there were dozens of annual competitions, ranging from the World Professional Women's Bodybuilding Championships to amateur contests sponsored by local fitness centres.
  - Specifically designed products: training courses, foods, jewellery, posing wear, skin and hair care products, bodybuilding horoscopes



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Media representations surrounding the female body are filled with "cultural ideals of 'natural' femininity and erotic beauty". Through body building, power lifting, weight lifting, many female bodies are "technologically" transformed into material ideals of such media reportage.

Balsamo also refers to the annual Miss Olympia contest which was first staged in 1980. However, the organizers soon realized the potential of the feminine charm within any type of organization of an event. And by 1989 there were dozens of annual competitions, ranging from the World Professional Women's Bodybuilding Championship to amateur contests sponsored by local fitness centres. And very soon we find that the market also grew around these activities.

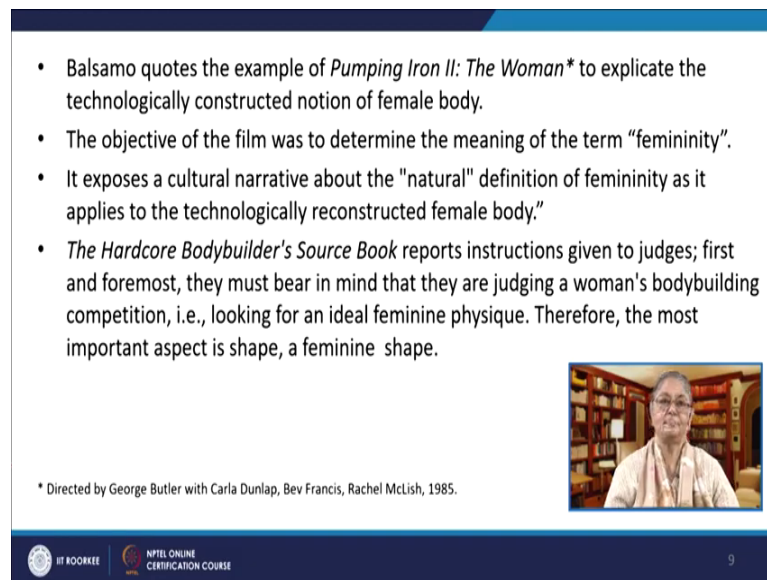
So, the market was immediately flooded with specifically designed products readymade capsule, training courses, special food, supplements, jewellery, posing wear, skin and hair gear products and also interestingly bodybuilding horoscopes.

The IFB annual Miss Olympia competition had started in 1980. However, in 1992 IFB made femininity rules in the contest. The judges guide to the competitors stated clearly that they were looking for a feminine, but not emaciated physique.

The question then becomes what is the purpose of a body building contest? Is it about having the most muscles? Is it about having some practical strength? Or is it a purely aesthetic exercise and if so, what is the basis for these aesthetics? To explicate her ideas further Balsamo quotes the example of a famous film ‘Pumping Iron II: The Women’.

The film is a fictional account of the Caesars Palace World Cup Championship a stage competition for this film particularly. Though it uses real and actual body builders yet we find that it is only a pseudo documentary.

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- Balsamo quotes the example of *Pumping Iron II: The Woman*\* to explicate the technologically constructed notion of female body.
- The objective of the film was to determine the meaning of the term “femininity”.
- It exposes a cultural narrative about the “natural” definition of femininity as it applies to the technologically reconstructed female body.”
- *The Hardcore Bodybuilder's Source Book* reports instructions given to judges; first and foremost, they must bear in mind that they are judging a woman's bodybuilding competition, i.e., looking for an ideal feminine physique. Therefore, the most important aspect is shape, a feminine shape.


\* Directed by George Butler with Carla Dunlap, Bev Francis, Rachel McLish, 1985.

The objective of the film was to determine the meaning of the term “femininity”. It also exposes a cultural narrative about the “natural” definition of femininity as it applies to the technologically reconstructed female body. The Hardcore Bodybuilder’s Source Book report instructions which had been circulated among the judges; which had cautioned them that first and foremost they have to bear in mind that they are judging a

woman's bodybuilding competition that is looking for an ideal feminine physique. And therefore, the most important aspect is the shape, the feminine shape.

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- The audience is told that the (film's) contest will determine with perfect clarity the "definite" meaning of the word "femininity".
  - "Judges are instructed to look for certain faults in women that are not usually seen in men: stretch marks, operation scars, and cellulite; they are also directed to observe whether female competitors walk and move in a graceful manner, which seemingly is not a concern with male competitors". (49)
- The film stages a contest between competing forms of female embodiment personified by two well-known female bodybuilders: Bev Frances, a muscular powerlifter, and Rachel McLish, a beauty-girl bodybuilder.
- Bev represents a negative, a manly looking, unattractive character and McLish is a beautiful, feminine character, with muscles but curvy, soft and sexy.



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Judges were also instructed to look for certain traits amongst women participants that were not usually seen in men participants for example, the presence of stretch marks, operation scars and cellulites and they are also directed to observe whether female competitors walk and move in a graceful manner, which seemingly is not a concern with male competitors.

The film also stages a contest between competing forms of female embodiment personified by two well-known female body builders: Bev Francis and Rachel McLish.


Bev Francis who is a muscular power lifter, and Rachel McLish who is a beauty girl bodybuilder. Bev represents a conventionally negative, a manly looking, unattractive character whereas, McLish represents a conventionally beautiful, feminine character having muscles, but ultimately curvy soft and sexy. The contest between Bev and Rachel is only a plot setting to portray two contrasting images through them.



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- Beginning with the sequences that introduce Rachel and Bev, the film visually constructs a system of differences between these two types of female bodies.
- Their differences concern not only the muscularity of their bodies, but also the type of clothes they wear, their local gyms, and their countries, cities, and families of origin. (51)
  - In a shot Bev sarcastically asks her trainer, "Did I look like a girl? How was my feminine quality?"



Bodybuilders Bev Francis, Carla Dunlap, and Rachel McLish.  
Source: *The Hardcore Bodybuilder's Source Book* by Robert Kennedy and Vivian Mason, 1984.

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Beginning with the sequences that introduce these two participants, the film visually constructs a system of differences between these two types of female bodies. And their differences concern not only the muscularity of their bodies, but also the type of clothes they wear, the local gyms they attend, their country, cities, and families of origin.


Interestingly in a short, Bev sarcastically asks her trainer, "Did I look like a girl? How was my feminine quality? Bev is discouraged for her looks whereas, Rachel is used as a visual treat for the audience. And we find that for these two the camera angles are also different.

Narratively, the contest between Rachel and Bev structures the plot of the film. At one level the film is about the competition between these two female body types, but at another level it is also a film of in about ideologies of femininity. However, the winner is Carla Dunlap. It is a twist in the plot setting as she is ultimately depicted as a racialized body. A former Miss Olympian, she is considered as the best candidate in terms of overall athletic ability in bodybuilding sophistication.

However, in terms of the film her victory comes as a surprise because she is never constructed as a featured competitor in the way that Bev and Rachel are.

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- Balsamo questions this portrayal, as her winning appears to be a convenient climax.
  - Carla has neither the massive muscle-bound physique of Bev Francis nor the powder-puff figure of Rachel McLish. She is the only Black contestant.
- The meaning of Carla's victory is subversively significant, not with respect to the issue of muscularity versus femininity but with respect to her racial identity.
- Balsamo asks, "If this indeed was a contest to determine the proper meaning of the word "femininity," how do we interpret the answer we've been given? What can it mean that a black female body is offered as a compromise between ideologies of muscularity and of femininity?"



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Balsamo questions the portrayal, as her winning appears to be a convenient climax. She does not have the massive muscular body physique of Bev or the powder-puff figure of Rachel McLish. She is also the only black contestant in the film. With respect to Carla's racial identity and not to the issue of femininity versus masculinity that Carla's victory is to be considered as subversively significant.

And Balsamo asks, "if this indeed was a contest to determine the proper meaning of the word "femininity", how do we interpret the answer we have been given? What can it mean that a black female body is offered as a compromise between ideologies of muscularity and of femininity?"


Although her racial identity is not discussed explicitly within the film. By promoting her as the compromise between two technologically reconstructed forms of female embodiment. The film implicitly engages a host of body issues that invoke different forms of body transgression. The creators of the movie convey that as a black woman Carla is perhaps not empowered to tell her own story.

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- Such practices reveal how culture processes transgressive bodies in such a way as to keep each body in its place—that is, subjected to its “other.”
- Bell hooks: such interpretation is constructed within a discourse of white racism:
  - Racist stereotypes of the strong, superhuman black woman are operative myths in the minds of many white women, allowing them to ignore the extent to which black women are likely to be victimized in this society and the role white women play in the maintenance and perpetration of that victimization. (Bell Hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, 1984).



Bell hooks  
Source: theguardian.com



Source: en.wikipedia.org


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This particular incident in the movie suggests how deeply culture processes transgressive bodies in such a way as to keep each body in its place, that is subjected to its other. It would be pertinent to refer to bell hooks here at this point who thinks that such interpretation is constructed within a discourse of white racism and I quote “Racist stereotypes of the strong superhuman black woman are operative myths in the minds of many white women, allowing them to ignore the extent to which black women are likely to be victimised in the society and the role white women play in the maintenance and perpetration of that victimization”.

To understand the constructed gendered identity of women in sports. Let us watch a video where Caster Semenya an Olympic medallist and a South African middle-distance runner was banned from her sport because she was considered a male due to her persona.

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The slide features a background image of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, with the Christ the Redeemer statue in the foreground and the city and bay in the background. The text "RIO DE JANEIRO" is overlaid in white. A "Vox" logo is in the top right corner.


- This video excerpt talks about the ambiguity of “being a woman” in sports, in Caster Semenya’s court case.
  - Semenya is a South African middle distance runner and winner of two Olympic gold medals.
  - She was banned from the sport because sports officials categorized her as a male.

Source: <https://youtu.be/MiCftLUzCI>

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The slide features a background image of the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, with the Olympic rings and the text "2016 SUMMER OLYMPICS" overlaid. A "Vox" logo is in the top right corner.


- This video excerpt talks about the ambiguity of “being a woman” in sports, in Caster Semenya’s court case.
  - Semenya is a South African middle distance runner and winner of two Olympic gold medals.
  - She was banned from the sport because sports officials categorized her as a male.

Source: <https://youtu.be/MiCftLUzCI>

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(Refer Slide Time: 16:41)



**Vox**


- This video excerpt talks about the ambiguity of “being a woman” in sports, in Caster Semenya’s court case.
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  - She was banned from the sport because sports officials categorized her as a male.

Source: <https://youtu.be/MiCftLUzCI>

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**Vox**


- This video excerpt talks about the ambiguity of “being a woman” in sports, in Caster Semenya’s court case.
  - Semenya is a South African middle distance runner and winner of two Olympic gold medals.
  - She was banned from the sport because sports officials categorized her as a male.

Source: <https://youtu.be/MiCftLUzCI>

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(Refer Slide Time: 16:56)



• This video excerpt talks about the ambiguity of “being a woman” in sports, in Caster Semenya’s court case.

- Semenya is a South African middle distance runner and winner of two Olympic gold medals.
- She was banned from the sport because sports officials categorized her as a male.


Source: <https://youtu.be/MiCftUjCI>

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The video excerpt talks about the ambiguity of being a woman in sports in Caster Semenyas’ court case.

“With the few seconds to go in the women’s 800 hundred meters the group of athletes was tightly packed, then on the final straightway Caster Semenya broke away to win gold at the 2016 Olympics in Rio 3 years later the South African runner was at court appealing a ban that could keep her from defending her title at the next Olympics.

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• This video excerpt talks about the ambiguity of “being a woman” in sports, in Caster Semenya’s court case.

- Semenya is a South African middle distance runner and winner of two Olympic gold medals.
- She was banned from the sport because sports officials categorized her as a male.

Source: <https://youtu.be/MiCftUjCI>

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She was not being banned because she cheated, but because sports officials had decided that she no longer qualified as a female athlete.

So, effectively you are saying to her you no longer belong in sport. I cannot stop because of people saying no she looks like a man. Is the new world champion of the women's 800-meter race really a woman at all. There is no you know scientific you know test or anything that can define a human.

There will be 2 x chromosomes.

We have drawn the line between women's and men's sport.

For being who we are. So, we can be the best that we can be.


Such allegations if I may say they are not my business you understand. So, for me they do their job I do my job I do me they do them”.

We see that the transgression from traditional gender norms foregrounds racial gendered and hegemonic hierarchies. According to Balsamo the possible solution to this problem is to humanize the female body and provide grounds for performance and not femininity in sports bodybuilding and health.

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**Humanizing the Female body: Way forward**

- In addition to gender and racial hierarchies, female bodies are categorized as operating in the phallogentric discourse and are not considered human enough, and female enough.
- They are criticised for their performance and also for their assertiveness.
- However, recent developments in the form of Naomi Osaka's and Simone Biles' announcements on "taking care of their respective mental health and physical well-being" humanises them as beings, humans and athletes which in return transgresses the constructed-ness of bare female bodies, female athletes or females.



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In addition to the existing hierarchies of gender and race, female bodies are categorized as operating in the phallogentric discourse and are not considered human enough or female enough. They are criticised for their performance and also for their assertiveness.

However, recent developments in the form of Naomi Osaka's and Simone Biles' announcements on "taking care of their respective mental and physical well-being" humanises them as human beings and athletes, which in return transgresses the constructed-ness of bare female bodies, female athletes or females.

Balsamo refers to their rejection of continuing their participation in sports competitions.

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The slide is titled "Humanizing the Female body: Way Forward". It features two main images: a gymnast (Simone Biles) in mid-air and a tennis player (Naomi Osaka) in a close-up portrait. A quote from Biles is included: "We also have to focus on ourselves, because at the end of the day, we're human, too .... So, we have to protect our mind and our body, rather than just go out there and do what the world wants us to do." (Biles, USA TODAY pub. 3 August 2021. by Sara M Moniuszko.) A URL is provided below the quote. A callout box on the right states: "It is a new way of understanding the human beyond the gendered notions of building a narrative around female body which needs to be encouraged." Another quote from Osaka is included: "It's OK not to be OK" (Naomi Osaka about her mid-season hiatus in second Australian Title) with a URL below it. A small video thumbnail of an older woman is also present. The slide footer includes logos for IIT ROORKEE and NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE, along with the number 16.

When Biles says that we should protect our mind and our body or Osaka says that 'it is ok not to be ok': it should be considered as a new way of understanding the human beyond the gendered notions of building a narrative around female body which needs to be encouraged within sports. In order to further probe the production of the technologically gendered body in popular discourse Balsamo looks at cosmetic enhancement as a subject in the next segment of a work.


As female bodybuilding is subjected to male gaze, cosmetically enhanced body is subjected to a medical gaze.



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**On the Cutting Edge:  
Cosmetic Surgery and New Imaging Technologies**

- Cosmetic Surgery highlights different parts of the body which can be carved out, manipulated and reformed, thus transforming the material body into a sign of culture.
- Advanced forms of visualization techniques and technologies formulate a “new form of scientific biopower,” staining the female body through objectification and “subjection of that body to the surveillance of the female body”.
- Balsamo traces the way in which the medical gaze of the cosmetic surgeon is transformed into a technological perspective.



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Cosmetic surgery highlights different parts of the body which can be carved out, manipulated and reformed and thus transforming the material body into a sign of culture. Advanced forms of visualization techniques and technologies formulate a “new form of scientific biopower,” staining the female body through objectification and subjection of that body to the surveillance of female body. Balsamo traces the way in which the medical gaze of the cosmetic surgeon is transformed into a technological perspective.

The medically carved female body is a gendered artifact and thus formulates scientific biopower. Also, cosmetic alterations cater to the western ideals and notions of beauty.

We find that new body technologies developed during the 1980s. Laparoscopies, CT or computed tomography make the body visible in such a way, that its internal status and structure can be assessed before it is opened up in a surgical manner.

Such technologies transform the material body into a visual medium. Balsamo refers to Carole Spitzack in this context. For Spitzack the medical appropriation of the female body adheres to the culturally embedded notion of flaw and abnormality associated with the female body.

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- Spitzack suggests that “cosmetic surgery actually deploys three overlapping mechanisms of cultural control: inscription, surveillance, and confession.” (“The Confession Mirror: Plastic Images for Surgery,” 1988).
- She compares the medical gaze with the disciplinary gaze in the Foucauldian narrative, which is situated within apparatuses of power and knowledge that construct the female figure as pathological, excessive, unruly, and potentially threatening.
- When a woman internalizes a fragmented body image and accepts its “flawed” identity, each part of her body then becomes a site for the “fixing” of her physical abnormality.



Carole Spitzack  
Source: researchgate.net



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Spitzack had suggested that “cosmetic surgery actually deploys three overlapping mechanisms of cultural control: inscription, surveillance, and confession. She compares the medical gaze with the disciplinary gaze in the Foucauldian narrative, which is situated within apparatuses of power and knowledge that construct the female figure as pathological, excessive, unruly, and potentially threatening.

When a woman internalises a fragmented body image and accepts its flawed identity each part of her body then becomes a site for the fixing of her physical abnormality. This clinical eye attempts to fix the supposed abnormalities in the female body by cosmetically enhancing or altering them. Spitzack has termed plastic surgery as an intriguing site for the deployment of contemporary power relations. The medicalization of the female body relies on a surface depth model of the body and this inherent misrepresentation creates gendering.

Visualization technologies used in cosmetic surgery depict traditional and ideological beliefs that keep the female body positioned as a privileged object of a normative gaze. And that is now not simply a medicalized gaze or the clinical eye only, but also a technologized view. The technological gaze of the medical professional leaves no space for beauty or truth. Inner or essential woman is not visualised anywhere in this encounter between a woman and the cosmetic surgeon and her interior story has no truth or validity of its own.

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- Cosmetic surgeons use technological imaging devices to reconstruct the female body as a signifier of ideal feminine beauty and enact the logic of assembly-line beauty.
- “Difference” is made over into sameness. Thus, the technological gaze refashions the material body to reconstruct it in keeping with culturally determined ideals of Western feminine beauty.
- Cosmetic surgery is not simply a discursive site for the “construction of images of women,” but a material site at which the physical female body is surgically dissected, stretched, carved, and reconstructed according to cultural and eminently ideological standards of physical appearance. (70)



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So, we see that technological imaging devices are used by cosmetic surgeons to reconstruct the female body as a signifier of ideal feminine beauty and to enact the logic of assembly line beauty. “Difference” is made into sameness. Thus, the technological gaze refashions the material body to reconstruct it in keeping with culturally determined ideals of Western feminine beauty.


Cosmetic surgery is not simply a discursive site for the construction of images of women, but also a material site at which the physical female body is surgically dissected, stretched, carved, and reconstructed according to cultural and eminently ideological standards of physical appearance in a woman.

For Balsamo the cosmetically enhanced body is the cultural inscription of material information. Plastic surgery can be of two types reconstructive and cosmetic.

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## Plastic Surgery

- Reconstructive surgery works to repair catastrophic, congenital, or cancer-damage deformities, cosmetic or aesthetic surgery is often an entirely elective endeavor.
  - For restoration of health, normalcy, and physical function.
- Cosmetic surgery is said to improve self-esteem, social status, and sometimes even professional standing.
- All plastic surgery implicitly involves aesthetic judgments of proportion, harmony, and symmetry.
  - One medical textbook strongly encourages plastic surgeons to acquire some familiarity with classical art theory so that they are better prepared to "judge human form".
  - The body is evaluated to produce desirable results.



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Reconstructive surgery is used to repair deformities, which are a product of certain catastrophe or certain disease and which is often an entirely elective endeavour.

The purpose of the reconstructive surgery is the restoration of health, normalcy and physical function. On the other hand, cosmetic surgery is said to improve self esteem, social status and sometimes even professional standing. All plastic surgery implicitly involves aesthetic judgments of proportion harmony and symmetry.


One medical textbook has strongly encouraged plastic surgeons to acquire certain familiarity with classical art theory so that they are better prepared to judge and assess the possibilities of the human form. And the body is evaluated to produce desirable results.

Balsamo further explains this point by providing the example of a 1984 book by Nelson Powell and Brian Humphreys. The title of the book is proportions of the aesthetic face and the writers try to decode the myth of the ideal face.

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### The *Ideal Face*

- Balsamo quotes Nelson Powell and Brian Humphreys (*Proportions of the Aesthetic Face*, 1984) to demonstrate the gendered and racial identification of the face where the “ideal face” is considered to be symmetrical, proportionate and aligned.
- It reports that preference is given to white, symmetrical faces that heal (apparently) without scarring.
  - Powell and Humphreys implicitly argue that black faces can be evaluated in terms of ideal proportions determined by the measurement of Caucasian faces, but they fail to address the issue of postsurgical risks (keloid formation) that differentiate black patients from Caucasian ones. Balsamo shows these discrepancies.
- Scars and Pigmentation are considered inappropriate.
  - Napoleon N. Vaughn reports that many cosmetic surgeons, “mindful of hyperpigmented scarring, routinely reject black patients.” (“Psychological Assessment for Patient Selection”, *Cosmetic Plastic Surgery in Nonwhite Patients*, 1982)



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Balsamo has referred to this work of Powell and Humphreys to demonstrate the gendered and racial identification of the face where the ideal face is considered to be symmetrical proportionate and aligned.


It also reports that preferences given to white symmetrical faces that apparently heal without any scarring. Powell and Humphreys implicitly argue that black faces can be evaluated in terms of ideal proportions determined by the measurement of Caucasian faces, but they fail to address the issue of post surgical risks, example keloid formation that differentiate black patients from Caucasian ones. And Balsamo shows these discrepancies effectively.

Scars and pigmentations are also considered to be inappropriate. Napoleon Vaughn has reported that many cosmetic surgeons mindful of hyper pigmented scarring routinely reject black patients. Balsamo condemns the demonizing of scars and pigmentation on the face and the beautification according to the western yardsticks and also the desire to fit into the popular trends.

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### The Marketing of Youthfulness

- Several types of aesthetic surgery have been marketed explicitly for an aging baby-boomer population\*, with the promise that external symptoms of aging can be put off, taken off, or virtually eliminated.
- Baby Boomers are the preferred market for these new medical procedures.
- Balsamo mentions that as a demographic group they (1) have more money than time to spend on body maintenance, and (2) are just beginning to experience the effects of aging . (Ruth Hamel, "Raging Against Aging," *American Demographics*, 1990).



\*Baby Boomer- A person born after the Second WW.

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Interestingly as Balsamo records, several types of aesthetic surgery have been marketed explicitly for an aging baby-boomer population with the promise that external symptoms of aging can be put off, taken off, or even virtually eliminated.


Baby Boomers are the preferred market for these new medical procedures. As they have more money than time to spend on body maintenance and also, they are just beginning to experience the effects of aging. Society's emphasis on a youthful appearance has created a demand for cosmetic plastic surgery and we see that aging has become an important issue. It is also resulted in unhealthy body consumerism.

By the end of the 1980s the most requested techniques of cosmetic surgery in the US included face lifts, nose reconstructions, liposuction, skin peels or hair transplants. Surgical techniques that are specifically designed to counteract the effects of natural body deterioration. Balsamo notes that following such social preferences may also cause anxiety, body image issues, and loss of confidence amongst individuals.


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### Commodification of Cosmetic Enhancement

- Through the advertising channels of consumer culture, and now with an immersion in social media, the practices of cosmetic surgery have been transformed into commodities themselves, which bank on conventional beauty standards, contemporary social trends and cultural parameters.
- Balsamo had also correctly predicted a rising trend in advertisements for services such as dental bonding and implants as the baby boomers reach their late forties.



Source: beautologie.com



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Through the advertising channels of consumer culture, and now with an immersion in social media the practices of cosmetic surgery, now have been transformed into commodities themselves, which bank on conventional beauty standards contemporary social trends and cultural parameters.

Balsamo had also correctly predicted a rising trend in advertisements for services such as dental bonding and implants as the baby boomers reach their late forties. Balsamo suggests that by commodifying body and cosmetic surgeries we are normalizing colonisation of one's own body.

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- In an essay in a special issue of *Hypatia* on “Feminism and the Body,” Kathryn Pauly Morgan argues that the normalization of cosmetic surgery – “the inversion of the domains of the deviant and the pathological” – are “catalyzed by the technologizing of women's bodies.”
- Morgan goes on to discuss the more philosophical question of why “patients and cosmetic surgeons participate in committing one of the deepest of original philosophical sins, the choice of the apparent over the real”. (67)
- Balsamo attempts to answer the aforementioned question to determine the role of cosmetic surgery in the technological reproduction of gendered bodies.

Rethinking cosmetic surgery

- “Cosmetic surgery transforms more than a woman's appearance; it transforms her identity as well” (Davis 2003: 79)
- But – places women in a double bind – the “aim of inauthenticity” (Gambin 2002: 84); the problem of passing.
- Surgery always requires a defence: (a) that they deserve surgery; and (b) convincing themselves that the revised appearance is connected to the self.

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Balsamo also refers to an essay by Kathryn Pauly Morgan, which has been published in a special issue of ‘Hypatia’. Morgan argues that the normalization of cosmetic surgery is the inversion of the domains of the deviant and the pathological are catalyzed by the technologizing of women’s bodies.

Morgan goes on to discuss the more philosophical question of why patients and cosmetic surgeons participate in committing one of the deepest of original philosophical sins, the choice of the apparent over the real. Balsamo attempts to answer the aforementioned question to determine the role of cosmetic surgery in the technological reproduction of gendered bodies.

Drawing on Morgan’s analysis of the increasing naturalization of cosmetic alteration, Balsamo elaborates on the mechanism whereby the apparent is transformed into the real. For Balsamo cosmetically enhanced body is a technologically gendered cultural apparatus. However, it is not just a game of vanity as men also opt for surgery to enhance their career prospects. But often we see that it is the choices of women which are demeaned as self indulgence.



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### Cosmetic Surgery as a Technology of the Gendered Body

- Articulation of the *need of repair* is gendered and complicates agency.
- Essentialist views on gender define them contrarily. The cultural meaning of their gendered bodies determines the discursive rationale that can be invoked to explain bodily practices.
- More men are electing cosmetic surgery than in the past, but often in secret. Charges of narcissism, vanity, and self-indulgence are put aside for them.
- They construct different justifications for their decision to seek cosmetic alterations.
  - Ruddy, leathery skin is not considered a liability/deformity of male bodies.
  - Among women it is defined as “The Miami Beach syndrome”.
  - A man's choice to have cosmetic surgery is explained by appeal to a rhetoric of career enhancement: a better looking body is better able to be promoted.



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It can be said that the articulation of the need of repair is gendered and it also complicates agency.

Essentialist views on gender define them contrarily. The cultural meaning of their gendered bodies determines the discursive rationale that can be invoked to explain bodily practices. More men are eliciting cosmetic surgery than in the past, but often in secret.


Charges of narcissism, vanity, and self indulgence are also put aside easily for them. They still have to construct different justifications for their decision to seek cosmetic alterations. For example, whereas, amongst women a ruddy, leathery skin is criticised and is defined as the Miami Beach syndrome. Amongst men it is not considered as a liability or a deformity.

A man's choice to have cosmetic surgery is explained by appeal to a rhetoric of career advancement a better-looking body is better able to be promoted for example. Process of fragmentation of body parts for surgeons and patients occurs on the basis of the gender. Female body as always needs repair and women's choice for cosmetic surgery is often taken as natural, is normal and a routine consequence of their preoccupation with appearance.

Balsamo also presents the examples of video imaging in morphing technologies to showcase the real and imagined pictures of female bodies.

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- The strongest claim for the use of video imaging is that it provides a realistic image of the aesthetic treatment that the patient can visualize. (77)
  - While some surgeons dismiss it as a possibly unethical marketing device, others argue that it produces “realistic images,” and a better representation of reality itself.
  - Patients may fail to understand one of the major difficulties with any kind of cosmetic surgery, that soft tissue changes cannot be predicted accurately.
- Apparently, the digital transformation of one's own face produces a magical, liquid simulation that is difficult to reject.
- Video morphing dramatically undermines a patient's ability to distinguish between the real, the possible, and the likely in terms of surgical outcomes.




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The strongest claim which is put forward for the use of video imaging is that it provides a realistic image of the aesthetic treatment that the patient can visualize. While some surgeons dismiss it as a possibly unethical marketing device, others argue that it produces “realistic images”, and is a better representation of and still than reality itself. Patients may often fail to understand one of the major difficulties with any kind of cosmetic surgery that soft tissue changes cannot be accurately predicted.

Apparently, the digital transformation of one’s own face produces a magical, liquid simulation that is difficult to reject. Video morphing dramatically undermines a patient’s ability to distinguish between the real, the possible, and the likely in terms of surgical outcomes. Cosmetic surgery is an ideological site for the technological reproduction of the gendered body as it uses techniques of inscription, surveillance and confession as surgical procedures.

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- By using the application of techniques of inscription, surveillance, and confession, cosmetic surgery serves as an ideological site for examining the technological reproduction of the gendered body. (78)
- “The body becomes the vehicle of confession. For some women and some feminist scholars, cosmetic surgery illustrates a technological colonization of women’s bodies; others see it as a technology women can use for their own ends. (79)
- Cosmetic surgery offers women a way of technological reconstruction of their bodies, in actual application such technologies produce bodies that are very traditionally gendered.



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Thus, the female body becomes the vehicle of confession. For some women and some feminist scholars, cosmetic surgery illustrates a technological colonization of women’s bodies whereas, others see this technology, which women can use for their own ends. Cosmetic surgery offers women a way of technological reconstruction of their bodies in actual application we see that such technologies produce bodies that are already very traditionally gendered.

To conclude we can say that the technological construction of the gendered body promotes colonization of one’s body in a cultural mould, which is subjected to phallogocentric approaches to technology. We shall continue our discussion of Balsamo in the next module, where we shall analyze the technological construction of the gendered body in the virtual space.

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Thank you.