

Stealing Beauty

By Dr Oh Jen Jen, Editorial Board Member

"Tell me what you don't like about yourself."

- TV drama "Nip/Tuck"

As the saying goes, there are always two sides to a story. What they don't teach you, however, is which side to believe. With the recent rapid progression of aesthetic medicine in Singapore, and the inevitable avalanche of advertising campaigns, one is inclined to embrace the effusive testimonials from those who (claim to) have attained their ideal weights / complexions / hour-glass (albeit a-little-too-top-heavy) figures. The pictures are dramatically impressive, right down to the depressed scowls before "treatment" and the beams of satisfaction after.

Most ads take themselves a little too seriously, like the aptly titled TV series "Extreme Makeover". Each week, 2 lucky victims – sorry, I mean "winners" – are picked to undergo an all-expenses-paid programme comprising obscenely costly dental treatment, facials, hairstyling, gym sessions with a personal trainer and, of course, the all-important cosmetic surgery. There's a self-proclaimed "panel of world-renowned experts", lengthy shots of the participants sweating on the treadmill and then mummified and groaning after major operations, with the inevitable climax of The Unveiling in the last 10 minutes, where we witness the final result and what I like to call the 5 Stages Of Extreme Makeover Emoting: Fear, Shock, Suspended Disbelief, Uncontrollable Bawling and Joyful Whooping.

All this no doubt makes for some very compelling television. Each person has his/her own sob story – some poignant, some downright cheesy – but one recurring theme consistently stands out: they all believe that a complete physical transformation is the answer to ultimate happiness. Never mind if they are married to devoted spouses who already think they're beautiful. In fact, some of these so-called "uglies" don't even need surgery. It's disturbing to see how all-consuming one's sense of self-image (or actually, lack thereof) can become. What's even worse, however, is the perpetuation of this mindset by not only fulfilling these individuals' wishes, but also propagating it through the mass media.

Another TV series which dwells heavily on the subject of aesthetics, yet severely pokes fun at it, is the irreverently funny, gory and intermittently vulgar "Nip/Tuck". Already a huge favourite in the US, with a Golden Globe win for Best Television Drama earlier this year, the show revolves around 2 plastic surgeons – straight-laced, boyish Sean McNamara (played by Dylan Walsh), and his roguishly handsome bachelor-from-hell partner Christian Troy (perfectly portrayed by the devilish Julian McMahon). This unlikely duo of best friends yet reluctant colleagues, together with some of television's best writing and acting, is a potent mix of intelligent humour and memorable one-liners.

Like "Extreme Makeover", "Nip/Tuck" has its fair share of needy (if slightly self-deluded) cases. Thankfully, however, it also has an entire crop of much more interesting scenarios.

There's the psychotic drug dealer who blackmails and terrorises, only to receive his comeuppance when Sean and Christian outmanoeuvre him in an ingenious and hilarious manner. We have Sean's ageing mother-in-law (gleefully played by a luminous Vanessa Redgrave) who asserts her 60 years on earth by having a facelift and a roll in the sack with none other than 40-year-old Dr Troy. A breast cancer patient proves too great a temptation for Sean, causing a near-catastrophic chain of events. But lest we crave some external source of mindless superficiality to soothe our own egos, just take a good look at the elderly millionairess with an incurable addiction to cosmetic surgery, and Kimber, the materialistic and ambitious (not to mention homicidal) model / starlet.

But despite its theatrics, the underlying message is clear: good looks do not equal happiness and contentment. Not by a long shot. On a world stage where the gorgeous are worshipped, "Nip/Tuck" provides a vital and realistic behind-the-scenes perspective.

*"Maybe go to the gym so I don't get fat
Aren't things more easy with a tight six-pack?"*

- Lyrics from Jamie Cullum's Twentysomething

Of course, like I mentioned before, we choose what we want to believe. A friend of mine hated her front teeth so much she had them all yanked out and then refashioned from scratch, thinking it would give her a greater edge in life. It turns out her dentition wasn't that important a factor when her personality and work ethics didn't match her dazzling smile. Similarly, Oprah Winfrey, who does her own makeover episodes, revealed in subsequent impromptu follow-ups with previous guests that a significant number either reverted to their old ways because they couldn't cope with the maintenance, or found that they really weren't that happy even after the massive overhaul. Not so long ago, Oprah also mentioned a viewer who donated thousands of dollars meant for a nip/tuck procedure to charity after "coming to my senses".

I don't begrudge others the little rituals required for good self-grooming, but I simply must draw the line when the beautification process becomes a pathological obsession. For most, everything in between, I suppose, is still a Murky Grey Area for now. No prizes for guessing which side I'm on, or which TV series I love and hate respectively. ■

The latest season of "Extreme Makeover" is screened every Friday at 10pm on Channel 5, while "Nip/Tuck" Season 2 fills the Wednesday 10 pm slot. "Nip/Tuck" Season 1 is available on DVD.



About the author:

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