

# Beauty and the Yield: Cosmetic Surgery as Facet of Neoliberal Entrepreneurship in Lebanon

## REPORT

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Following the recent scandal (Rabah, 2017)<sup>1</sup> involving plastic surgeon Dr. Nader Saab and the patient who allegedly died in his care, Farah Qassab, along with the dubiousness surrounding the incident's investigation, this study seeks to analyse cosmetic surgery in Lebanon in relation to the wider power structures and socio-economic dynamics the industry is situated in. I will do so by posing and attempting to answer two separate but interlinked questions: How does the increasingly precarious situation of the middle and lower classes in Lebanon encourage the cultivation of the subjectivity rooted ideology of neoliberal entrepreneurship, which forces an investment in one's self and, by extension, one's image? And, what role does the prominence of the banking sector in Lebanon, which is a key supporter of this notion of the citizen as a neoliberal entrepreneur, and which is famous for offering loans for plastic surgery, play in the popularity of cosmetic surgery in the country?

In my attempt to explore the socio-economic context informing the Lebanese beauty industry, I draw conceptually on Andrew Mazzaschi's dissertation *Bodies of Value: Transnational discourses and practices of plastic surgery*<sup>2</sup>, and Michael Taussig's seminal study, *Beauty and the Beast*<sup>3</sup>, based on fieldwork on Colombia's popular beauty industry. Both works center the economic component of plastic surgery, framing the practice more as the product of a drive to be a more successful, self-reliant economic subject, than merely a product of gender-based oppression, articulating the latter as inextricable from the former. Looking at the economic component allows us to see the ways in which even the oppressive pressure to enhance one's body and image can also at times be subverted to one's advantage.

My understanding of neoliberalism, and by association its ideological representation of "neoliberal entrepreneurship" within the Lebanese cosmetic industry, and to what is more broadly referred to as the "Lebanese job market," can be best summed up with reference to the work of John Gledhill, as quoted by Mazzaschi: "Market liberalism and advocacy of free trade are not new. What makes neoliberalism something that a classical liberal such as Adam Smith would have found as disturbing as Pope John Paul II does is its elision of the distinction between a market economy and a market society, to the point where the latter seems to engulf life itself. Neoliberalism is not simply the response to a crisis of accumulation and a readjustment of the relations between capital and labor following the formation of truly global markets. It is the ideology of the period in which capitalism deepened to embrace the production of social life itself, seeking to commoditize the most intimate of human relations and the production of identity and personhood"<sup>4</sup> (Gledhill, 2004, p. 340).

In terms of my methodology, in my examination of the banking sector, I outline the history of bank loan provision for cosmetic surgeries explaining how they started and why, as well as the financial strategies and customization tools tied to the industry. This paper will also highlight recurrent trends in the banking sector drawing both on interviews I conducted with employees of the banking<sup>4</sup> industry as well as media coverage and public statistics of customized personal loans tailor-made for private consumption in cosmetic clinics. I also look at<sup>2</sup> the banking

1 Rabah, M (2017, July 2).  
Cosmetic surgery shows  
the ugly face of Lebanon.  
**The Arab Weekly**

2 Mazzaschi, A.H.S.  
(2014). *Bodies of Value:*  
Transnational discourses  
and practices of plastic  
surgery.  
**Rutgers University  
Libraries**

3 Taussig, M. (2012).  
*Beauty and the beast.*  
**Chicago: The  
University of Chicago  
Press.**

4 Gledhill, J (2004).  
"Neoliberalism:" in  
*A Companion to the  
Anthropology of Politics,*  
edited by David Nugent  
and Joan Vincent.  
**Malden, MA: Blackwell.**

sector's role in encouraging the development of small to medium enterprises, and entrepreneurship more generally, exploring the link between this approach to the development of the Lebanese economy and citizenry and the support this sector provides to the cosmetic industry. Furthermore, I look at statistics and reports regarding beauty clinics proliferation in Lebanon to make sense of the correlation between the industry and economic developments on a national, regional, and global scale. Finally, I examine the media, and more specifically, interviews with media and entertainment industry professionals such as Sasha Elijah, a Lebanon-based transgender model, Leen Sleiman, a competitor on the 2003 edition of Miss Lebanon, and Sobhiyyeh Najjar, a prominent TV reporter with LBCI. This is to explore the ideological support that cushions the cosmetic surgery industry with the notions of beauty and proper comportment it promotes.

**Good times  
In this life, life  
One too many years  
So taste what I lived on a facelift  
Mind over matter is magic  
I do magic  
If you think about it it's over in  
no time the best life**

- Frank Ocean, White Ferrari

According to the latest reports by the UN (2018)<sup>5</sup>, more than 1.5 million people in Lebanon live below the poverty line. Unemployment has consistently held at more than 10 percent for the last decade, with youth unemployment hovering close to 25 percent. This figure is compounded by the low participation of educated Lebanese women in the labor force (only 20 percent compared to 35 percent for the Arab region as a whole), and a high rate of emigration and expatriation.<sup>6</sup>

How, then, can we explain the continued prosperity of the cosmetic and plastic surgery industry in Lebanon, which seems to have been seemingly unaffected by the economic slump that has been gripping the country for more than three decades? Cosmetic and plastic surgery in Lebanon have constituted a booming industry since the mid 1990s. The post-war period witnessed a mushrooming of private clinics and franchises that continued to expand into the mid 2010s.

The establishment of private plastic surgery clinics increased significantly between the late 90s and the mid 2000s in Beirut, Jounieh, and the Metn region. This proliferation was driven by an educational system that produced unemployed, highly-skilled doctors forced to reinvent themselves in order to be able to profit off of their investment in medical school. Moreover, the growth of the industry was built on the vestiges of a post-war reconstructive surgery industry that eventually made way for plastic surgery. This reinvention came in the form of opening private beauty clinics both in Lebanon and in neighboring Gulf countries. In a 2014 Annahar article titled “Full lips, empty clinics. How much longer can Lebanon’s plastic surgeons keep a stiff upper lip?”, two prominent plastic surgeons in Lebanon, Dr. Tohme and Dr. Saab, admitted that they had to shift their business to Gulf countries in order to make up for the slump in plastic surgeries they were facing in Lebanon.<sup>7</sup> “All plastic surgeons in Lebanon are trying to open abroad in Arab countries,” said Dr. Tohme, “they go once or twice a month to ensure their continuity. I’ve already started going outside once a month and the main reason is to have a backup plan in case a war breaks out like in 2006, God forbid.” Saab already has two clinics outside Lebanon.

The deregulation in the Lebanese medical industry has helped it flourish despite the many corpses it has produced through unquestioned malpractice and unchecked negligence. In 2014, the Lebanese Transparency Association (LTA) published a study documenting medical malpractice and negligence in hospitals, health centers, and clinics in Lebanon. It reported that “between 1996 and 2013, more than a thousand complaints related to medical malpractice were filed at the Order of Doctors. While 400 of these complaints were referred to the disciplinary council, about 300 disciplinary rulings and penalties were issued in accordance with the law. Doctors were suspended from work for limited periods ranging between two and six months in only 50 of the 300 issued rulings. Only one doctor was permanently banned from practicing medicine, in 2001” (2014).

5 (2018, February 1)  
2018 LCRP appeals for  
\$2.68 billion for Lebanon  
response.  
Reliefweb

6 أرقام مخيفة عن ازدياد أعداد  
الفقراء في لبنان (8102).  
LBCI Lebanon News

7 Jay, M. (2014, October  
31). Full lips, empty  
clinics. How much longer  
can Lebanon’s plastic  
surgeons keep a stiff  
upper lip?  
Annahar



The LTA study built on another study carried out by the American University of Beirut, which “stated that most medical errors are not reported, referring to the fact that 81.7 percent of hospital staff surveyed feel that reporting mistakes they may have committed will affect them negatively, and 82.3 percent of them are concerned that their mistakes are kept in their records instead of being used to examine the problem and avoid repeating it in the future.” The study diagnoses the problem as stemming not from the laws that regulate the medical profession, “but [from] the regulatory systems and control mechanisms.”<sup>8</sup>

Medical doctors in Lebanon, until recently,<sup>9</sup> were seen as being above scrutiny or accountability, allowing the industry to flourish free of the quality control meant to insure the wellbeing of patients. This allowed the most prominent doctors in the field to derive even more profit out of the rising cost of an increasingly privatized healthcare system that prioritizes private clinics and hospitals at the expense of public institutions.

Although some reports suggest that Lebanon suffered an almost 30% decrease in clientele in 2014 due to Dubai and, more recently, Turkey’s growing popularity as nip and tuck destinations, the country can still be framed as the “Mecca”, as CNN once called it, of cosmetic and plastic surgery.<sup>10</sup> According to a 2017 article by the Center for Strategic and International Studies,<sup>11</sup> 1.5 million operations are carried out per year in Lebanon – a huge number considering the country’s population of no more than 6 million people.

Lebanon offers a solution for almost every conceivable cosmetic request, especially those concerning the face and chest area. From rhytidoplasty to breast augmentation, Lebanon’s cosmetic and plastic surgery scene offers an abundance of procedures. People from all over the Gulf and North Africa flock to Lebanon to get work done.

Not only is Lebanon much closer than Europe and the United States for customers from the Middle East, but its procedures cost around only one-fifth of the price of equivalents in the US.<sup>12</sup> Up to 40 percent of cosmetic patients in Lebanon are said to be medical tourists.<sup>13</sup>

In 2010, a documentary by French TV channel M6 reported that one out of every three Lebanese women had undergone a cosmetic procedure, with such figures likely to increase. Such numbers when analyzed on a per capita basis, demonstrate that the Lebanese undergo more cosmetic and plastic surgeries than any other neighbouring nationality.

It is necessary to question the assumptions underlying the reports highlighted above in order to introduce the themes that inform this paper. The prevalence of monetary figures and references to the economy highlight the interconnection between cosmetic and plastic surgery and the state of permanent economic crisis from which Lebanon appears to suffer.

8 (2014, November 22). Few doctors in Lebanon held accountable for medical practice: LTA study. **Al Akhbar English**

9 (2017, April 13). Three doctors, hospitals charged with negligence in Tannous case. **The Daily Star**

10 Neild, B. (2010, November 19). Lebanon emerges as Mideast’s ‘Mecca’ for cosmetic surgery. **CNN**

11 (2017, April 12). Beauty therapy: Cosmetic surgery in Syria and Lebanon. **Center for Strategic Studies**

12 Murdock, H. (2010, November 15). Tourists flock to Lebanon for plastic surgery. **PRI**

13 (2017, April 12). Beauty therapy: Cosmetic surgery in Syria and Lebanon. Center for Strategic Studies. **Center for Strategic Studies**

Economic crisis, I argue, feeds the need for more cosmetic and plastic surgeries to help people “get ahead” in a tough market that is only becoming tougher: it encourages a need to invest in one’s body in order to differentiate oneself in a market that is increasingly conflating one’s aesthetic with her or his success. Thus, I explore the conditions that enable a country like Lebanon to carry out 86 plastic surgery procedures per 100,000 people (number 4 per capita in the world)? <sup>14</sup>

In addition to discussing how the body has emerged as an important new site of investment in a crisis prone economy, one of the most important goals of this research paper is to show how the practices and discourses associated with cosmetic and plastic surgery can provide unique insight into the medical field’s entanglement with late capitalism or, more specifically, the neoliberal order that was rapidly established in Lebanon during the post-civil war period.<sup>15</sup>

In his doctoral dissertation, *Bodies of Value: Transnational discourses and practices of plastic surgery*, Andrew Mazzaschi reminds us that “cosmetic surgery has become paradigmatic of the commodification of medicine within the contemporary era” (2014, p. 2).<sup>16</sup> Drawing on Mazzaschi and Michael Taussig, I argue that the Lebanese economy, in its current form, encourages those mired within it towards “literally investing capital into their bodies and transforming them through that investment” (2014, p. 2) in order to become better neoliberal subjects. Like Mazzaschi, I am interested in “the specific forms of investment and its effects on the micropolitics of bodies” (p. 2). To view cosmetic and plastic surgery as a means of investing in bodies allows one to trace its dependence on “trans/national economic circuits in such a way that they enable us to see the intimate relation between body, capital and the nation” (p. 2-3). I am interested in applying Mazzaschi’s framework, along with Taussig’s concept of “depense”, or wasting, which I will discuss in detail later, to challenge the popularly held critique of Lebanese women simply being victims of, or complicit with, an oppressive discourse around female beauty and bodily comportment. It is important to note here that women constitute the bulk of consumers of plastic surgery in Lebanon and according to CSIS, one in three women in Beirut have had cosmetic surgery.

Thinking in terms of trans/national economic circuits can allow us to locate the agency in practices that, on the surface, appear to rob women of desiring and shaping bodies and images of their own choosing. My desire is not to argue for an understanding of cosmetic or plastic surgery as a tool of liberation. Rather, by locating it within a larger socio-economic structure that encourages an approach to citizenship as entrepreneurship, and an understanding of success as a product of proper self-investment, plastic and cosmetic surgery can also be framed as a means of coping and surviving within such an oppressive structure that is structurally designed to be more exclusionary towards women. This type of analysis forces us to think about the intersections between capitalism and patriarchy, and their dependence on one another.

**14** Syndney for Women  
View statistic

**15** Baumann, (2012).  
Citizen Hariri and  
neoliberal politics in  
postwar Lebanon.  
SOAS

**16** Mazzaschi, A.H.S.  
(2014). *Bodies of Value:  
Transnational discourses  
and practices of plastic  
surgery.*  
Rutgers University  
Libraries

Mazzaschi writes that while feminist scholars have been “most prolific” on the subject of cosmetic surgery, “for much of the 1990s, the scholarship was focused on debates regarding the agency of women who underwent surgery and whether they should be viewed as perpetuating patriarchal standards, cultural dupes of the cosmetic surgery industry, or rational agents negotiating constrained choices” (p. 6). He explains that “while these debates were useful in illuminating the disciplining aspects of the practice, the focus on norms of beauty and critique of mind/body dualism involved in these discussions did not leave much room for a discussion of the politics and economics of the nation” (p. 6). This can then cause scholars to ignore the ways in which the logic of plastic surgery is “linked to changing economic configurations, and how it forms a key arena for the integration of bodies into particular economies and the valuation and devaluation of bodies within contemporary capitalism” (p. 6).

Building on Mazzaschi, I ask why a Lebanese woman would choose to undergo a (mostly) painful procedure in order to alter the way a part of her body looks, for the sake of an ad she saw on TV or because of the unachievable beauty standards imposed by peers, relatives, and the media? This question, I argue, cannot be answered through an adherence to a duality that labels patients either as rational agents or cultural dupes. With all of the above, this paper aims to understand the complicated and economically-rooted why behind the prevalence of cosmetic and plastic surgery in a country like Lebanon.

Lebanon ranks 40th on the Medical Tourism index.<sup>17</sup> The index is based on three variables: the local environment, medical tourism industry, and quality of facilities and services.

In her article *Medical Tourism in Lebanon: An Analysis of Tourism Flows*, Viana Hassan (2015) defines medical tourism as “the travelling activities of patients seeking low-cost treatment in third world countries” (p. 153).<sup>18</sup> Hassan writes that in Lebanon, “medical tourism could evolve to account for an important share of the regional economy, as only in 2014, it has generated growth worth of \$1.2 billion. In the recent years, several factors have been contributing in medical tourism’s progress such as medical professionalism, the media and the attractive landscape” (p. 153).

As I will show later in this paper, the policies adopted by Banque du Liban, the Lebanese central bank, have had direct and indirect effects on the health industry in general, but more specifically on the cosmetic and plastic surgery industries. Governmental institutions like the central bank of Lebanon (BDL) not only shape what Mazzaschi, borrowing from Michel Foucault, calls the “micropolitics of bodies” by promoting and enabling cosmetic and plastic surgery but also shape most industries in their own image by controlling monetary policies of borrowing and lending in the private sector. Medical tourism thus becomes another term representing first and foremost deepening competition between private hospitals and clinics but also personal and customized banking loans and packages between major banks. Moreover, and most importantly, by bolstering the medical tourism sector, banks encourage local and regional subjects to participate in and nurture a regional network of medical neoliberalism that, in turn, pressures individuals to transform their bodies in particular ways.

As Kathy Davis (1995) writes, “cosmetic surgery and its treatment of the body are thus the product of a system of medicine in which the body becomes something that can be “endlessly manipulated – reshaped, restyled, and reconstructed” (p. 17).<sup>19</sup>

Davis pushes for an understanding of women who undergo cosmetic procedures as grappling with the gendered demands that routinely equate them with their physical appearance (1995). I believe Davis’ argument is helpful for making sense of the popularity of the relatively affordable rhinoplasty procedure among women of all classes in Lebanon. Its popularity not only points to the dominance of the regional conception of smaller noses as more feminine and, therefore, more beautiful, but it also highlights the transformative effect that cost has had on the procedure, changing it from a luxury into, as I hope to show, a necessity for economic survival.

Reinvention often takes the form of fixing a feature perceived as “problematic”.<sup>20</sup> Jamila Halfichi, fashion and lifestyle editor at pan-arab daily Asharq Alawsat, writes that “the shape of the nose has long been seen as ‘problematic’ by some in our region. We are not all ‘blessed’ with small and straight noses

**17** Medical Tourism Index  
View Index

Hassan, V. (2015).  
*Medical Tourism in Lebanon: An Analysis of Tourism Flows*.  
**18** Athens Journal of Tourism

Davis, K. (1995).  
*Reshaping the female body: The dilemma of plastic surgery*. London:  
**19** Routledge.

Twigg, M. (2017, July 5).  
*Where plastic surgery is fantastic: The world's cosmetic surgery capitals*.  
**20** Business of Fashion



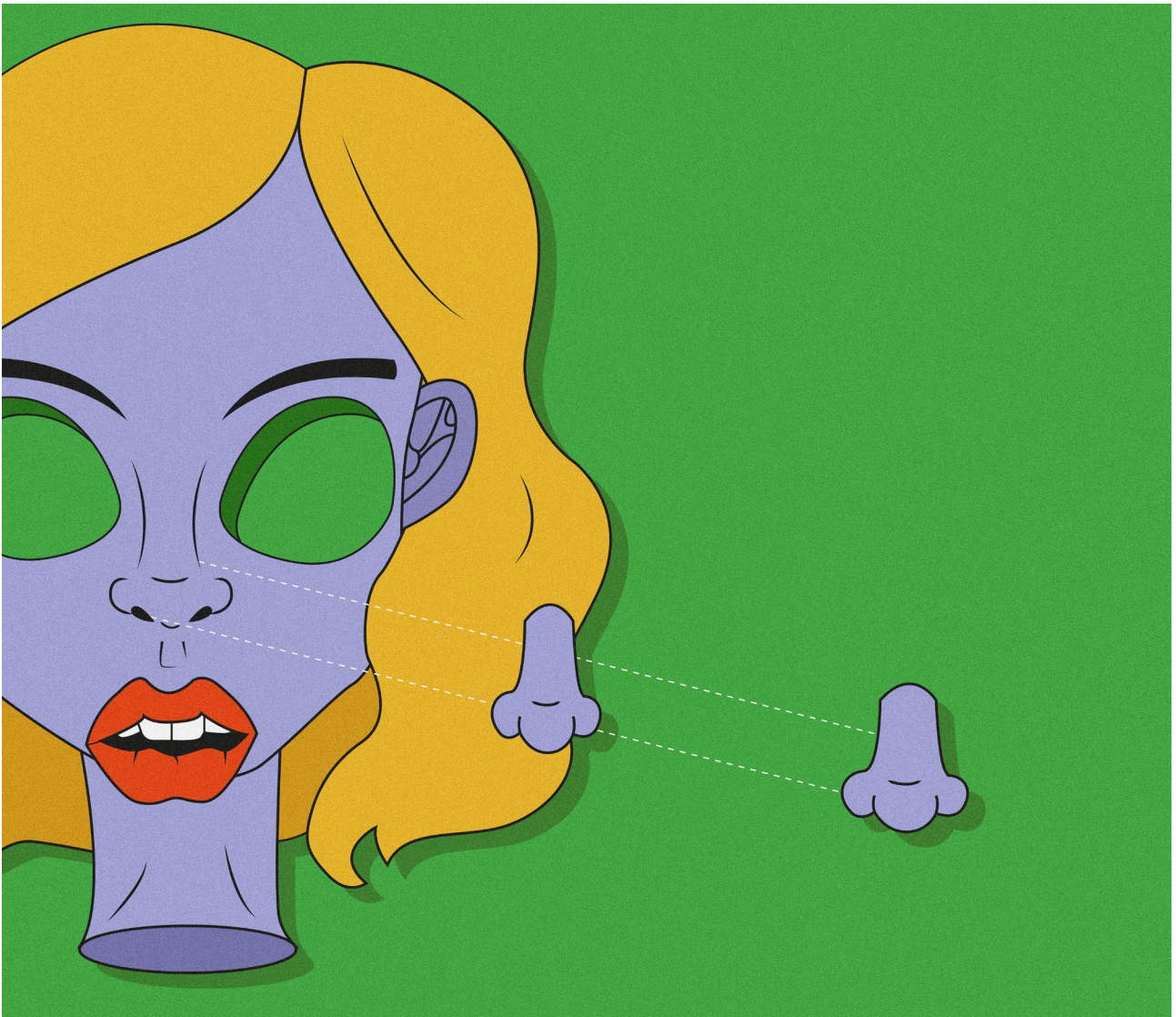
that fit the idea of Western beauty standards which have been peddled for so long across the Middle East.”

The same dichotomy mentioned earlier between rational agents (in this case malevolent) and cultural dupes (although the latter is more common, is usually used to make sense of Miss Lebanon contestants. Many argue that these contestants “subject themselves” to an unbearable humiliation, especially during the question portion of the event, for the pleasure of the male gaze; they are knowingly presenting themselves as objects of a sexist institution that reproduces harmful beauty standards for commodification purposes. All of these arguments, however, neglect why these participants would want to participate in such a “humiliating” competition, usually with their family’s blessing and support.

The decision to navigate a specifically sexist institution can also be a response to an awareness that economic precarity is much more pronounced among women than men, that working women are still ostracized socially, and that there are few ways of overcoming dependency, precarity, and unemployment in Lebanon. Thus, by making it to the finals of Miss Lebanon, which comes with a variety of financial rewards and also presents finalists with opportunities that might otherwise not be possible, one is offered the means to escape the aforementioned precarity and ostracization. For instance, Leen Sleiman, a competitor of the 2003 edition of Miss Lebanon, credits the competition with having helped her land a job as a television anchor. Speaking to me about her experience, Leen told me she chose to compete that particular year because it was the first time the show was presented through the format of reality TV, giving the competitors the opportunity to have twenty-four hour on-camera exposure for a two month period. “This encouraged a lot of people to compete. Family and friends were encouraging me. Some people don’t want to be on TV just once.”

The scrutiny of having twenty-four hour on-camera exposure presents then an opportunity to display one’s characteristics, skills, and personality to a wider audience willing to be more forgiving than that of an audience for a one-night pageant competition. But this opportunity comes at a cost as contestants have to then continuously reinvent (or reinvest in) the characters they put forward to garner the most votes from viewers in a two month period. The cost may then come in the form of psychological distress for having to perform and/or maintain an ever-changing, always chiseled, and perfect identity shaped by the viewers’ expectations, the contestant in relation to other contestants, and the production team’s choices based on maximum profitability.

In her article, “Under Neoliberalism, You Can Be Your Own Tyrannical Boss”, Meagan Day discusses the “alarming rise of a novel form of psychological distress” that she calls “neoliberal perfectionism”.<sup>21</sup> If the body is a site of constant investment, enhancement, and upgrade, it comes as no surprise that neoliberal perfectionism might accompany it as a constant source of anxiety over whether the body has reached or will reach the state of perfection



demanding of it. Meagan Day adds that “a new study by Thomas Curran and Andrew Hill in the journal *Psychological Bulletin* finds perfectionism is on the rise. The authors, both psychologists, conclude that “recent generations of young people perceive that others are more demanding of them, are more demanding of others, and are more demanding of themselves” (2017, p. 1).

When looking to identify the source of this growing hunger for perfection, Day, drawing on Curran and Hill, does not avoid recognizing the root of the problem: neoliberalism. “Neoliberal ideology reveres competition, discourages cooperation, promotes ambition, and tethers personal worth to professional achievement. Unsurprisingly, societies governed by these values make people very judgmental, and very anxious about being judged.”

It is within this context that “performing” becomes crucial. If one can blur one’s rank on the social ladder using aesthetics, access to exclusive social gatherings where social capital is nurtured becomes more possible, and in this environment, one can both dupe and come to belong to a more exclusive social circle.

The Arab Development Portal's<sup>22</sup> description of Banque du Liban's (BDL) 2016 Accelerate event exemplifies the rapid transformation of the startup economy in Lebanon:

"Banque du Liban (BDL) Accelerate 2016 is Lebanon's 3rd annual international conference, and officially the biggest and most influential on the Mediterranean and in MENA. It is the only innovation and startup conference in the world that is inclusive because it's free. They don't charge attendees, so that everyone, from all walks of life, can learn, engage, be inspired, and connect with industry experts, investors, like-minded individuals, and change-makers from around the world."

Four thinkpieces between 2016 and 2017 tried to characterize the shift, sponsored by Banque du Liban (BDL), towards a more startup-oriented economy in Lebanon. All four pieces highlight the capabilities of Lebanon's creative entrepreneurs while arguing that the state is holding them back (The Economist's "Startups in the Arab world"<sup>23</sup>, Arab Business' "Is Lebanon an entrepreneur utopia"<sup>24</sup> and Executive's "Is Lebanon's startup ecosystem sustainable?"<sup>25</sup> and "Still starting up"<sup>26</sup>).

In the Executive article, "Is Lebanon's startup ecosystem sustainable?", the author asserts that "there is no question that Beirut's ecosystem has expanded significantly in the last five years. A lot of the credit for this should go to the intermediaries that have been working hard to help startups grow and get funded. BDL's Circular 331 built on this organic tissue and turbocharged the ecosystem to where it is today." The credit the author is claiming should go to "the intermediaries" is an example of how a thriving industry is almost always attributed to a couple of individuals rather than the brick and mortar companies and governmental institutions (in this case BDL) that have enabled its success. Here we see how, in the same breath, an author can praise a governmental institution while blaming the government's shortcomings for the inadequacies of the startup industry. This contradiction opens up space for valuing one's own skills and knowledge and perceiving one's intellect or body as a site for investment and enhancement, since the public sector is not only inefficient but seen as not worthy of investing in. Thus, bodies of value are enabled by infrastructures of no value, or as they are more commonly known, failed states.

Arab Business' piece "Is Lebanon an entrepreneur utopia?" quotes Naim, who says that "Beirut is second to none in the Middle East when it comes to human capital: access to the best universities in the Middle East, highly educated and skilled workforce, young and hungry talent eager to work at innovative companies and make a difference." What Naim and the author of the piece are trying to reaffirm is the stark difference between Lebanon's thriving, "highly educated and skilled workforce, young and hungry talent eager to work," and the old, slow to react, corrupt institutions that govern them.

**22 The Arab Development Portal**

(2017, January 12). Startups in the Arab World. **The Economist**

Pupic, T. (2016, March 7). Is Lebanon an entrepreneur's utopia? **Arabian Business**

Mulas, V. (2017, January 18). Is Lebanon's startup ecosystem sustainable? **Executive Magazine**

Nash, M. (2017, November 6). Still starting up. **Executive Magazine**



The Social Entrepreneurship Summit in Lebanon event scheduled for March 2018 promises to “push forward the discourse around social entrepreneurship in Lebanon and foster people’s creativity, aspirations and engagement in responding to their personal and communal challenges.” It claims that “social entrepreneurship has proven to be a successful strategy to invigorate socio-economic opportunities, but further efforts are needed to create a policy and legal framework along with a strong ecosystem that would foster, leverage, and boost this field across the country.”<sup>27</sup>

Privatization as a hegemonic discourse has fed off disenchantment with the Lebanese state and its many shortcomings over the years to elevate entrepreneurialism and to argue that citizens’ capabilities and dreams are being hindered by a “failed state”.

Mazzaschi, quoting Foucault, explains the “failed state” by linking it to a suspicion of the state born from neoliberalism: “One feature that makes up neoliberalism, then, is deep suspicion of the state, a move that accounts for the neoliberal policy of privatization of state services even in countries where welfare states as such have never existed. State intervention into markets is viewed as both dangerous and as leading to inefficiency. One aspect of neoliberalism is a transformation of the relationship between the state and the market: the state’s role becomes the promotion of freedom through introducing a set of formal rules that will allow the proper functioning of the market. The state must set the proper rules of the game but must not direct the game’s outcome, and the players in this game are individuals (or, really, enterprises conceived of as individuals) (Foucault 2010, 173).”<sup>28</sup>

In Lebanon, as Joanne Nucho writes in her 2016 ethnography *Every Sectarianism in Urban Lebanon: Infrastructures, Public Services, and Power*, “the notion of the ‘failed state’ is pervasive.”<sup>29</sup> It is often held to be accountable for the lack of security and for crumbling infrastructure. The common explanation is that this failed state, moreover, is entwined in the patronage networks of more power states, such as Syria, Saudi Arabia, France, the United States, and Iran” (p. 2). Echoing this analysis, Sami Hermez writes that “it is more common for people to see the influence of communal leaders (tha za’im state) as reflective of a non-state. In the imagination of its various citizens, the state exists in the subjunctive mood, as something that would be rather than as something that is” (2015, p. 509). This failed state narrative is only compounded by the popularly held “success story” of the Lebanese diaspora that has done well for itself because of its exceptional creative abilities.

Understanding the bolstering of this startup economy and the ideology of entrepreneurialism that informs it is key to making sense of how the body has come to be perceived as a site of investment in Lebanon. As Mazzaschi writes, “plastic surgery is both historically intertwined with economic and market forces and contemporarily functions as a technology that promotes forms of medicalized self-entrepreneurship. This means that plastic surgery must be seen as a force driving the application of a market model to

27 Social Entrepreneurship  
Summit  
View event here

Mazzaschi, A.H.S.  
(2014). *Bodies of Value:  
Transnational discourses  
and practices of plastic  
surgery.*  
28 Rutgers University  
Libraries

Nucho, J. (2016). *Everyday  
sectarianism in urban  
Lebanon: infrastructures,  
public services, and  
power.* Princeton, NJ:  
29 Princeton University  
Press.



medicine, encouraging a view of the body as a project to be enacted through purchasing services and technologies in the market. But our understanding of the phenomenon is incomplete if we do not analyze both plastic surgery's transnational investments and how reconstructive surgery, which does not conform to a self-entrepreneurship model, is still productive of value" (2014, p. 9).

In the Lebanese context, a "resilient subject" is encouraged to overcome a "failed" or a "biased" state that is not in the business of servicing its citizens, but is rather an obstacle to their progress, by competing with others, forcing a routine reinvention and improvement of one's identity inside and out. Under neoliberalism, the Lebanese subject rationalizes his/her own precarity. With the decimation of unions in the post-civil war period and the imposition of austerity and privatization measures, Lebanese entrepreneurship has been nurtured by state institutions and a booming private sector, both structurally and ideologically. Ideologically, "the entrepreneur" has come to be a coveted and highly-respected profession, accompanied by extensive social capital.

Mazzaschi quotes Lisa Duggan to show how neoliberalism shifts the locus of social services towards the market: "The 'culture of upward (re)distribution' (Duggan 2003, xvii) that neoliberalism inaugurates rests on the pillar of privatization. While Duggan notes that the welfare state never provided for the egalitarianism desired by progressive political factions—indeed it often served as a regulatory and disciplinary apparatus—she also decries privatization and the notion that the market should become the locus of formerly socialized services" (2014, p. 34). In this context, self-investment and enhancement becomes a prominent ideology in the economy and sub-economies, one that compliments the neoliberal vision of the state.

Within such a context, where neoliberalism "engulfs life itself" (Mazzaschi, 2014, p. 35), cosmetic and plastic surgery emerge as necessities. "Neoliberalism is not simply the response to a crisis of accumulation and a readjustment of the relations between capital and labor following the formation of truly global markets. It is the ideology of the period in which capitalism deepened to embrace the production of social life itself, seeking to commoditize the most intimate of human relations and the production of identity and personhood (340)" (Mazzaschi, 2014, p. 35). David Harvey writes in *Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction* that for "the 'naturalization' of neoliberalism" to occur "it requires the articulation of fundamental concepts that become so deeply embedded in commonsense understandings that they are taken for granted and beyond question."<sup>30</sup> For this to occur, not any old concepts will do. A conceptual apparatus has to be constructed that appeals almost naturally to our intuitions and instincts, to our values and our desires, as well as to the possibilities that seem to inhere in the social world we inhabit."

Slowly but surely the culture of entrepreneurship has settled in Lebanon as the primary impetus behind the mushrooming of small to medium economic projects (including the beauty clinics mentioned earlier), also enabling an understanding of the body as a site of creative destruction and reconstruction.

As Mazzaschi writes, “not only does neoliberalism produce or intensify forms of self-surveillance, but those forms of surveillance can simultaneously function as means of self-transformation and enhancement” (2014, p. 2). Self-surveillance in the Lebanese context manifests in the constant monitoring of one’s weight, facial acne, general demeanor, clothing, and the routine contemplation of cosmetic and plastic surgery or beauty enhancements to “fix” one’s appearance or improve one’s self-esteem. “The project of health can become a project of self-invention (or self-repair).”

Investinlebanon.gov.lb provides further insight into the Lebanese government’s strategy to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) and redirect it towards startups. In its “Lebanon at a glance” section, the government-owned and BDL-funded site describes Lebanon as having an “official non-interventionist stance toward private investments” offering “one of the most liberal investment climates in the Middle East,” while praising “the absence of legal restrictions on the entry or exit of many firms, encouraging free market competition and furthering the development of the private sector,” and concluding that “liberal trade and investment policies have allowed foreign direct investments to account for a considerable share of Lebanese GDP”

Having the world’s third highest debt-to-GDP ratio and a restricted revenue,<sup>31</sup> the Lebanese government’s budget is crippled by debt and compound interest. To solve its lack of solvency and foreign investment, both infrastructural reforms (in the form of passing a budget in 2018, reforming the heavily subsidized electricity sector, raising fuel tax and improving tax collection) and improvements to the investment environment have been taken up by the Lebanese government, with Investinlebanon.gov.lb falling under the latter category.

Entrepreneurship has become, then, the unofficial order of the day for every person seeking upward social mobility in a constantly contracted economy where unemployment is on the rise, banking loans are readily available (as I will show in the next chapter) and the BDL is trying to solve its liquidity issue through more foreign direct investment.

What Akiko Takeyama in *Intimacy for Sale: Masculinity, Entrepreneurship, and Commodity Self in Japan’s Neoliberal Situation* says about masculinity in the Japanese context, can be applied to both genders in the Lebanese case: “This paradoxical – commodified, yet entrepreneurial– male subject is embedded in the new possibilities and constraints posed by Japan’s neoliberal restructuring and global economic trends. Hosts, who dream of earning fast cash and achieving upward class mobility, perceive the hosting business as a gateway to success, fame, and luxurious lifestyles” (2010, p. 231).<sup>32</sup>

Plastic surgery as an entrepreneurial project can help the Lebanese subject achieve the same goals. Takeyama concludes that, “As a result, they ‘voluntarily’ commodify themselves and feed into the club’s profit-making. They are also exploiting the consumer logic of desirability and the neoliberal values of

31 Barrington, L. (2017, August 30). Lebanon embarks on long-delayed reforms but debt problems mount. Reuters

32 Takeyama, A. (2010). *Intimacy for Sale: Masculinity, Entrepreneurship, and Commodity Self in Japan’s Neoliberal Situation*. Japanese Studies, 30 (2), pp. 231-246.

entrepreneurship. By doing so, they hope to better position themselves in contrast to the work ethic and status of Japan's conventionally hegemonic masculine icon, the Salaryman" (2010, p. 231).

The Salaryman, when applied as a figure for analysis in the Lebanese context, considering the meteoric rise to fame of many women through beauty pageants, reality shows and fashion-focused instagram accounts, can be reframed as the Prom Queen. What women who participate in beauty pageants and reality shows understand more than anybody else is that the Lebanese economy is not accommodating to women. According to the latest government reports, only 21% of women in Lebanon are economically active.<sup>33</sup> This is more than three times lower than men's economic activity rate of 66%.

With the growing availability of cosmetic plastic surgery through bank loans and the mushrooming of beauty clinics, the exemplary neoliberal entrepreneur is thus invited to reinvent, which is to self-invent or self-repair herself constantly.

Sobhiyyeh Najjar, a prominent TV reporter with LBCI, explained that contrary to popular belief, it is not the media that is purposefully promoting a particular image of beauty and femininity through its news anchors, reporters, and variety shows, but societal pressure that has, on the one hand, created a demand for a certain type of programming, and that has pressured women interested in working in television to present themselves a certain way. This, she explains, further reinforces norms of beauty and feminine comportment already hegemonic in society.

"There is no pressure from the industry," she told me. "It's on a personal level. People pressure themselves and each other. People outside of the industry tell me, look at your colleague – her cheeks, her eyebrows. You look too natural. The industry asks you to look presentable, yes. To lose a bit of weight because the camera adds pounds, or to cut your hair to look more serious for the news. But this has to do with society and what it expects. TV presenters are making decisions based on what their mothers and aunts tell them. People call up the TV station and say I want to know who does this girl's hair because I want to look like her. Who did her lips, which doctor does she use? Where did she get that dress? People think, wow, she is so lucky, she is on TV, but there is so much about it that is tiring and traumatizing. My hair is curly. I like to appear on screen with curly hair, but I can't. My hair is being burnt from straightening it. Why should I ruin my hair to appear on TV in a way that pleases people? This is exhausting psychologically. You can't satisfy yourself because you have to satisfy your audience. It's not wrong to care about yourself but you shouldn't have to overdo it for society. This isn't freedom."

Sobhiyyeh explained that being part of LBCI gave her the opportunity to critique the likes of Nader Saab, voicing to me that most people blamed his patient which made her indignant. "She died so I'm going to blame her and not the criminal? This culture of asking why did she go get work done is stupid.

There is a criminal who killed someone.” For Sobhiyyeh, cosmetic surgery should be a matter of personal freedom, but it shouldn’t be a practice a TV anchor, for example, is pushed towards because of an anxiety linked to satisfying her audience.

Sasha Elijah, a Lebanon-based transgender model who feels that her position as a self-proclaimed hybrid has attuned her to the unequal societal pressures experienced by women as compared to men, shared with me the observations she made after her transition, and explained to me the popularity of plastic surgery among the transgender community, where it is seen as a tool through which to be able to survive and work in the country.

Sasha told me that, as a woman who once existed as a man, she is very much attuned to the aesthetic pressure that is differentially imposed on women. On top of which, being a trans woman, aware of the kind of physical demands already made of cisgender women, she feels doubly pressured, forced to question whether she is “woman enough”. “I don’t understand why they oppress women by giving them all these chores that they don’t want to do and don’t need to do to be beautiful. We are living our lives through the standards of others.” Sasha’s use of the term “chores” in English is interesting, as it frames the maintenance of an aesthetic regiment as part of women’s work.

In terms of careers, Sasha pointed out the inordinate attention paid to female job seekers’ looks rather than their skills, forcing women to invest financially in their appearance more so than men. “When I was a male, I didn’t have anything to worry about in terms of expenses on clothes and stuff. After I became a woman, I had to buy all of these things. I’m putting myself out there in public. I can’t just put on a blanket. It’s exhausting. When I became a woman my spending doubled. Makeup alone, I spend a hundred dollars [per] month. Hygiene. Outfits. Brands. Cosmetics for the hair and skin. The surgeries.”

Sasha had what she called a bridged nose before, which she did not pay much mind to. “But people would talk and talk and talk about it, saying like ‘no but for a woman though.’ Everything is perfect about you, just this little bone...It became a nightmare. I don’t regret doing it, my issue is with the voices. And after I got my nose done people started telling me to remove two bones from my ribs so my waist would be smaller. I’m the one going under the knives. The way they brainwash you, it’s too intense for one person to endure.” Sasha says it is common for trans persons in Lebanon to undergo over ten or fifteen surgeries “just to look like how we are supposed to look like. Nose, eyebrows, forehead, chin, cheeks, ears, Adam’s apple, shaving their shoulders, ribs, thighs, ass. Laser sessions, which never end and they are a pain from your forehead to your toe. And people wonder why most trans die from a drug overdose. You can’t handle this number of procedures. Some people told me to go take lessons to soften my voice.”



Many transwomen in Lebanon, Sasha told me, aim to resemble pop stars through these procedures, like Haifa Magic, for example, who underwent surgery to resemble Haifa Wehbe. “I ask them, when you take the makeup off and look at yourself in the mirror, do you recognize yourselves? Most of them say no. How can you live with the idea that you can’t identify your own face because you’re seeing the pop star in your reflection?” Faced with the pressure to pass as cisgendered women to avoid harassment, and in desperate need for income in a market that rejects them as potential employees in most fields beyond make-up and sex work, transwomen turn to the image of pop-stars whose aesthetics might not reflect their desires or preferences, assuming that this might make the transition into society easier for such a vulnerable community while also serving as a marketable look from which to profit by, for example, being paid to appear on television talk shows as has been the case with Haifa Magic and others.

Deposits from the non-financial private sector in Lebanon reached \$169bn at the end of September 2017, more than three times the country's GDP.<sup>34</sup> This has allowed the banking sector to continue lending to the private sector and households to the tune of \$59bn. This abundance of liquidity in the bank market has opened up an unprecedented opportunity for both personal and corporate loans, enabling the making of money from the loaning of money.

By issuing more loans, banks break the barrier between medicine and finance. As Mazzaschi explains, “cosmetic surgery illustrates the apex of medical neoliberalism because it is purely the exchange of money for medical service—no insurance middlemen intervene and the consumer uses the service purchased in an individualized attempt at self-improvement through the market. Arthur W. Frank sees cosmetic surgery as paradigmatic of commodification because it is premised on choice, one of the primary values of neoliberal market culture” (2014, p. 44).

I conducted interviews with thirteen of the most prominent banks in Lebanon (Bank Audi, Byblos Bank, Banque Misr Liban, Banque Saradar, BLOM Bank, LGB Bank, Banque Libano-Francaise, Bank of Beirut, Bankmed, Credit Libanais, FNB, Fransabank and IBL Bank), focusing on the role they play in aiding the cosmetic and plastic surgery industry.

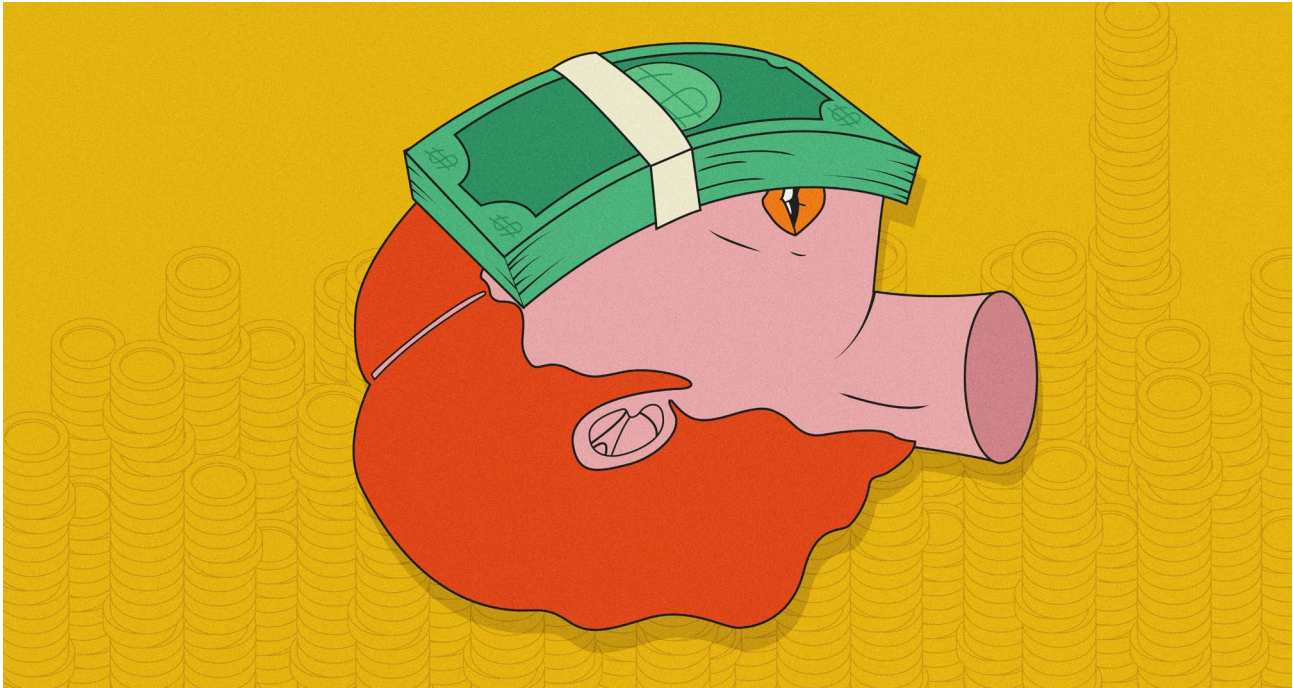
Of the thirteen banks, only Credit Libanais still offers a loan called the “surgery loan”, through which one can finance a cosmetic procedure. The other twelve banks categorize it as a personal loan. Although it was the first bank to start giving out loans for cosmetic procedures,<sup>35</sup> FNB (First National Bank) discontinued the practice having “received more than 200 calls a day about the loan since it was launched with a TV and poster campaign in 2007.” The reason for discontinuing the plastic surgery loan, according to my interviewee, was that BDL's (Banque du Liban) had decided to stop financing cosmetic and plastic surgeries, forcing banks to categorize them as personal loans more generally. The reason behind BDL's decision could be related to the slump in the plastic surgery market mentioned earlier, and BDL's continuously shifting strategies concerning liquidity and interest rates in Lebanon.

Concerning eligibility for personal or surgery loans, an applicant must have a fixed income, meaning that he/she has been at the same job for at least a year or year and a half. Additionally, the monthly payment cannot exceed 33% of the applicant's salary, and they should not be on the BDL's blacklist for not paying off other loans. Byblos Bank has a special offer that covers 14000\$ worth of cosmetic procedures over six years. Bank of Beirut grants loans worth 12 times one's salary if it exceeds 1000\$ per month.

Credit Libanais, the only bank that still offers a surgery loan directly, offers between 500\$ to 5000\$. According to a 2013 report by Beirut.com, which surveyed popular clinics to estimate the average costs of popular procedures, breast augmentation costs around 4000 USD, a breast lift costs around 4500, a face lift 6,000, rhinoplasty 2000, liposuction ranges between 1500 and

34 Ghobril, N. (2017, November 21). Durable Lebanese banks have earned trust. **Financial Times**

35 (2007, April 20). Nip 'n' tuck loans offer in Lebanon. **BBC News**.



4500 depending on the method, and botox injections around 300 USD.<sup>36</sup> With a minimum payment of 40\$ per month and a maximum of three years to pay back the loan, Credit Libanais' deal is considered to be very accessible, especially considering that it includes an offer of free life insurance.

FNB, the first bank to have offered the plastic surgery loan back in 2007, accepts even lower standards concerning monthly salary, and considers a salary of 600\$ per month eligible for an applicant to receive the now rebranded personal loan.

Fransabank is the only bank that doesn't require applicants to open or shift their accounts to the bank for loan approval, although they require applicants to be covered by social security for a minimum of two years, to have a salary of 1000\$ or more, and they provide a grace period for repaying the loan of 3-4 years.

All in all, we can conclude that securing a personal loan with all of the banks surveyed is relatively easy for most employed citizens who have been working for more than a year. Additionally, the grace period and the interest rates involved are not insurmountable, and make the process relatively smooth and straightforward for those interested in undergoing cosmetic or plastic surgery without burdening them with hefty debt.

If personal loans for cosmetic procedures that usually cost between 500\$ and 4000\$ are so accessible, and the link between aesthetics and success has been heightened by a neoliberal economy that encourages entrepreneurship and self-investment, it becomes, perhaps, understandable why so many are turning to the knife. To borrow a quote from William Gibson's *Neuromancer* which Taussig used in his own work, "the bartender's smile widened. His ugliness was the stuff of legend. In an age of affordable beauty, there was something heraldic about his lack of it."

<sup>36</sup> Dalal, M. (2013, September 3). A look at the cost of plastic surgery in Lebanon. [Beirut.com](http://Beirut.com)

Drawing on Michel Feher, Mazzaschi notes that “the conception of human capital operative within neoliberalism is not simply about producing the self as a consumer but also about enhancing one’s own human capital as a practice of ‘self-appreciation or self-esteem’ and ‘self-valuation’: “neoliberalism in fact treats people not as consumers but as producers, as entrepreneurs of themselves or, more precisely, as investors in themselves” (2014, p. 45).

Mazzaschi expands Feher’s argument to show that plastic surgery is both “historically intertwined with economic and market forces and contemporarily functions as a technology that promotes forms of medicalized self-entrepreneurship. This means that plastic surgery must be seen as a force driving the application of a market model to medicine, encouraging a view of the body as a project to be enacted through purchasing services and technologies in the market” (p. 9).

Until now, this paper has argued that people consume cosmetic and plastic surgery in order to enhance themselves. Mazzaschi seems to suggest that not only do people under neoliberalism seek to invest in themselves, but that they consider this investment worthy because of the yield. Drawing on Feher’s work, Mazzaschi takes this investment beyond the self, locating it in a more comprehensive understanding of production. The commodification of the self is then not a finality in itself, “I want to undergo plastic surgery to feel confident or to fix my nose” is not the end goal, rather plastic surgery is merely an investment and the yield will come in the form of social and economic capital. When Feher suggests that individuals are not merely consumers but investors, he means that people who undergo plastic surgery do not only commodify themselves but consider their bodies commodity vessels that can not only further their chances of upward social mobility but, because the logic of neoliberalism, can be productive of value.

Ilana Gershon, in her article *Neoliberal Agency*, provides further insight into this issue,<sup>37</sup> blurring the boundaries separating consumers, investors, and businesses, describing “a move from the liberal vision of people owning themselves as though they were property to a neoliberal vision of people owning themselves as though they were a business...by seeing people as businesses, a neoliberal perspective presumes that people own their skills and traits, that they are a collection of assets that must be continually invested in, nurtured, managed, and developed” (2011, p. 539).

Gershon describes the neoliberal self as “never in the moment” but “always faced with one’s self as a project that must be consciously steered through various possible alliances and obstacles” (p. 539). As mentioned earlier, Lebanese women are encouraged to invest in their own bodies in order to succeed in the market, given high unemployment rates and minimal job opportunities. This investment is facilitated through bank loans, beauty clinics, hair salons, and nail salons, and deployed in beauty pageants, reality shows, and instagram accounts. Their obstacle is the traditional, neoliberal-patriarchal job market, and they have to break their way into it by literally using their

Gershon, I. (2011).  
*Neoliberal agency.*  
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37 (4): pp. 537-555.



bodies as tools and weapons. This is why they have to be inventive and innovative, to create opportunities for themselves. This is why their bodies are not only bodies of value but productive of values. It is through them that they navigate the precarity of the market. As Gershon remarks “neoliberal markets require participants to be reflexive managers of their abilities and alliances” (p. 539). Their body parts become subsites of investment – “when one becomes a bundle of ill-defined but highly flexible skills, one becomes a fragmented self of usable traits” (p. 539).

With dwindling opportunities for education and work in the west and the gulf for many expats, and an already saturated local job market (especially for women), self-investment in the form of cosmetic or plastic surgery has become a new form of human capital that can be deployed competitively.

The concept of the creative self as an investment vehicle, which I am borrowing from Laleh Khalili, is crucial to understanding the phenomenon of cosmetic and plastic surgery and how market enforced standards, practices, and conditions (mainly precarity) impact notions of the self. Beauty, and more generally, aesthetics, in Taussig’s words, become “as much infrastructure as are highways and bridges” (2012, p. 5), they are embedded in a system “in which magic and the aesthetic are inseparable from the economic” (p. 6).<sup>38</sup> The aesthetic becomes a building block of the economy, and the body its site. This framework is especially relevant in Lebanon, where reconstruction, privatization, and gentrification have been key components of the economic order of the post-civil war period. If reconstruction is the cathartic process the nation must undergo, then cosmetic surgery is the therapy its subjects will most likely vie for.

There is much to gain from Taussig’s concept of beauty as dépense. Taussig expands George Bataille’s concept of dépense and applies it to the beauty industry in Colombia. Depense, he explains, “is usually translated as “expenditure,” or “profitless expenditure,” but this does not seem nearly strong enough for what Bataille means, which is the big Game- out, the passion within the gik, going for broke, living in the fast lane, burning your bridges, etc. Excess is another word that looms large here: excessive wanting, excessive spending, excessive consuming and the devil take the hindmost” (p. 7).

Taussig historicizes how spending was perceived in the pre-World War II era. “Spending when one should have invested was what working-class people (and, even more, the lumpen proletariat) supposedly did because they didn’t have the middle-class ethic of saving for a rainy day...these Great Spenders and Wasters plagued the Western imagination until the end of World War II, when spending, meaning “consumerism,” became a wonderfully good and ennobling thing, a civilizing uplik like a new religion” (p. 29).

In this context, dépense in times of crisis becomes synonymous with resilient consumption as a national duty. There is a certain religious faith in the market – the market that is at the root of our precarity is also our eternal salvation.

The more precarious the market renders us, the more belief we invest in it, rendering it a sort of ever expanding, always regenerating hydra that feeds upon precarity by inciting resilience as the only mode of resistance, justifying the libidinal belief that *dépense* in times of crisis is the only way out of a crisis. This is reminiscent of Greece's minister of finance in 2015, who when facing an uphill battle against the European Central Bank a couple of months before Syriza's final capitulation, claimed that we "must try to save European capitalism from itself", echoing a similar belief in Lebanon that it is easier to imagine the disintegration of Lebanon than the end of neoliberal policies.<sup>39</sup>

Throughout this paper, I hope to have dispelled most misconceptions, imposed binaries and prejudgements about cosmetic and plastic surgery in Lebanon and the people who undergo these procedures. I have aimed to ground my analysis in a more material understanding of where and why this industry has flourished in Lebanon without reverting to superficial arguments.

I also hope to have shed more light on medicine's imbrication with the market, and how the unique position of plastic surgery has allowed it to become the first of its products to be commodified since it circumvents any insurance (public or private) policy scheme and links the bank, consumer, and medical doctor directly.

If it is true that, as Taussig quoting William Burroughs writes, "beauty is always doomed", either because of how it is represented in the literature or because of how it is constantly imposed by the market, but notably, we are also bound to be doomed trying to save it from itself.

39 Varoufakis, Y. (2015, February 18). How I became an erratic Marxist.  
The Guardian

Beauty and the Yield:  
Cosmetic Surgery as Facet of  
Neoliberal Entrepreneurship in  
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