

Research Article

Plasticizing Bodies: Rape Fantasy and Autocannibalism in *You'll Be Happier*

Suchismita Karmakar

Independent Researcher, Kolkata, West Bengal, India;
ksuchismita77@gmail.com

Accepted version published on 5 April 2026

DOI <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19427245>

Abstract: Through the literary and theoretical frameworks of Plastic studies, Medical Humanities, Foucauldian biopolitics, biopower, anatomo-politics, panopticon and heterotopia, feminism, ableism, neoliberal patriarchal capitalism and the Posthuman discourse of the cyborg, this paper aims to examine two aspects in the documentary *You'll Be Happier*. (a) evaluate the clinically-sanctioned, plasticized, aesthetic reconstruction of bodies legitimised by the ableist, neoliberal patriarchal capitalist system in its attempt at body standardisation and (b) analyse the different camera angles that generate a scopophilic voyeurism and a voyeuristic penetrative gaze. This study reveals the aesthetic reconstruction of the body as a cyborgian spectacle of autocannibalism fixed by a reverse panopticon. The autocannibalism is synthetically constructed and technologically assisted, and not executed via natural physiological means. The plastic reconstruction of the body exemplifies the neoliberal culture of disposability and incessant self-upgradation. At the same time, it also satiates the rape fantasy of the penetrative gaze via epistemic and intellectual means.

Keywords: plasticised bodies; autocannibalism; rape fantasy; penetrative gaze; spectacle

Introduction

The documentary documents the perils and aspirations of plastic surgery in general and the Brazilian butt lift procedure in particular, specifically focusing on Jennifer Aceituno's surgery. This paper adopts a revisionist approach against the neoliberal semiotics of medically constructing an ideal body as purportedly being body autonomy by tracing not only the violence of the surgery but also the violence of the digital penetration. The paper aims to show how plasticizing her body as a synthetic cyborg aesthetically reconstructs her anatomy via autocannibalism. At the same time, the digital plasticity establishes her as a spectacle for the epistemic satiation of the penetrative gaze's rape fantasy.

Methodology involves a close, revisionist narrative analysis and an interpretation of the camera angles vis-à-vis the protagonist, Jennifer Aceituno, primarily through the literary theoretical frameworks of Plastic studies, Medical Humanities, Foucauldian panopticon, heterotopia, biopolitics, biopower and anatomopolitics, feminism, and the posthuman discourse of the cyborg.

Analysis & Discussion

Anybody who deviates from the body ideal is labeled as a disabled corporeality. Towards the beginning of the documentary, the protagonist, Jennifer Aceituno, explains childhood parental bullying as the beginning of her body dysmorphia, body stigmatizing, and body othering. When her parents called her a "fat cow," it not only revealed the ableist structures of thought but also catalyzed her tripartite displacement from the power nucleus as possessing a deviant body type, a physically dehumanized animal, and a creature devoid of the intellectual capital required to be human, thereby rendering her a liability. The bourgeois, neoliberal, sexist capitalist socio-economy markets plastic surgery as a way to humanize her to be assimilated into the ableist folds of society. For her, hence, the medical procedure is a resistance against parental bullying and dehumanization. However, the resistance strategy is equally adulterated by the same neoliberal, patriarchal, capitalist, mercantile socioeconomic structures that had dehumanized her in the first place. Later in the documentary, she says she wants to sculpt her body the way she wants to, an artistic and aesthetic construction of her body that is, as per her choice, but the co-optation of her choice by the patriarchal capitalist regime blurs whose agency is actually being exercised. This confusion of agency is manifested in the medium shot, where the plastic surgeon is chalking out her body cartography in accordance with the clinical and aesthetic demands of perfection and quality. This sculpting is not exactly decided by her but requires medical intervention and the image of body standardization popularised by the patriarchal neoliberal socioeconomic structures to assimilate her Othered body. Later, after the surgery, the medium shot captures the principal plastic surgeon and Jennifer's sculpted rump in the foreground—but Jennifer's face is not visible, thereby withholding subject status from her and conferring an object state onto her, for it is only her sculpted body that is visible, which establishes the artist with 'his' art. An aspect of proprietorship is established as the other surgeons applaud the principal surgeon for meeting the quality and aesthetic

standards of the cartographic rearrangement of Jennifer's body. The surgeon represents the medical-patriarchal-capitalist continuum as the sculptor seizes Jennifer's subjectivity of sculpting (verb), restricting her to the status of the art that has been sculpted (passive recipient), thereby imposing an object status on her.

"[M]edicine and medical education alike regress to treating their worlds as closed, linear systems that can be engineered." (Bleakly 33) The documentary begins with an endotracheal breathing tube being inserted into Jennifer's mouth to assist in breathing during the surgery. The mouth has the primary function of ingestion, which is altered to a respiratory function in a clinical construction of a cyborg. It is a close-up shot, albeit oblique, which, paired with the next cutaway shot of her etherized and inert on the operating table, withholds subject status from her. The opening shots establish her as an object. Though she speaks through her voiceover, it is a feeble attempt at subjectivity, since the voice is visually represented as disembodied and fragmented from the body we see, silent and passive, in the operating theatre. The hospital space and operating theatre, by virtue of being "counter-sites" that "simultaneously represent[s], contest[s], and invert[s]" (Foucault 24), are a heterotopia of deviation. The Foucauldian operation theatre legitimizes anatomical violence in terms of clinically sanctioned dissections, incisions, penetrations, stitches, etc., that aesthetically craft the body as a spectacle and legitimizes epidermal and anatomical penetration into the otherwise sacrosanct body contour. This spectacle is a cyborg, part organism, part medical and technological apparatus that reconstitutes the physiological processes of ingestion, egestion, and respiration, leading to autocannibalism by reorganizing physiological functions and the body hierarchy. During the operation scene, the fat is pumped out of the waist and arms and injected into the rump. Hence, the trunk, which is supposed to contain all bodily components, is punctured just as the site of egestion is transformed into the site of ingestion through transcorporeality. It entails autocannibalism, since the ingested nutrient, fat, in one's own body undergoes egestion and re-ingestion, not through usual physiological processes but through the clinical-technological construction of the cyborg. Heather Davis explains Hannah Landecker's understanding of integration as an articulation of the animal's ability to turn the environment into itself through nutrition, and how the organism contains the entirety of life within it in a co-constitutive rather than hierarchical way. Plasticizing the body through autocannibalism involves a non-metabolic, synthetic, and clinical dislocation and relocation of an already metabolically deposited nutrient, and by extension, the environment. Hence, autocannibalism involves a synthetic excretion and consumption without nutrition. Hence, the original metabolic process is synthetically deconstructed, where nutrition, which was an objective correlative of the natural environment, is artificially manipulated and controlled by anthropogenic agency that enacts the white imperial capitalist colonizing ideology.

The cyborg compromises anatomical performativity of the body, where egestion and ingestion occur not via physiological biological processes but via artificially constructed penetrative procedures, so that the body's integrity is challenged and permanently warped by clinically sanctioned violence legitimized with the aid of the heterotopic hospital space. Hence, the body sheds its aura, contingent on its unique

spatiotemporal location, and adopts an exhibition value contingent on the external (penetrating) gaze, enabling meaning and value to be crafted into a better-performing asset from a liability. Just as the immense, immutable potential of the plastic lies in its plasticized body, engendered by the neoliberal capitalist order, so too does the plasticized body have immense potential to upgrade itself as a transcorporeal entity. This mutability, as Heather Davis argues, renders the plastic “without ontology” (50), and so does the neoliberal plasticized body. The essence of this plasticized body is to be antithetical to itself. This is the philosophical crux of autocannibalism or, in other words, a philosophical and existential autocannibalism. The essence of plasticized bodies is to consume itself. The cyborg in Haraway’s discourse though an “illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism” and “state socialism”(151) aspires to be unfaithful to its origins, its “inessential fathers”(151) because Haraway’s cyborg skips the Western humanist “myth of original unity” of origin from a “phallic mother from whom all humans must separate”, “out of which difference must be produced and enlisted in a drama of escalating domination of woman/nature.”(151) However, the bourgeois neoliberal cyborg legitimises this illegitimate offspring to be exploited by its inessential fathers in order to market a strict differential gender-coded schema, a prescriptive differentiation out of the original unity plot brought into effect by anatomical totalitarianism prescribing the ideal curves and parameters of the female body. From the Foucauldian lens, this disciplining of the body is an amalgamation of the anatomopolitics that is centered on the body as a machine, “optimizing its capabilities” and increasing its utility and “docility”(139), and biopolitics that involves discipline and control of entire populations, here, particularly the bourgeois and petit bourgeois Western/Eurocentric women. Since the body is also a spatiotemporal archive, this reconstitution of the body consumes space and time, regurgitating an artificial, synthetic spatiotemporal construction of a plasticized body and an altered materiality. This betrays how technology violently unmakes time itself and redistributes it through spatial maneuvers.

Plastic is not just a marker of the Anthropocene but also of the Capitalocene for it underscores the ideal kind of matter for matter “is there to be manipulated; it can and should be bent and made pliable; and its potential for manipulation is endless”(Davis 1) for which matter like plastic must have a semiotic to be “universal, placeless”, “designed to be divorced from a specific location”, possessing a “globali[s]ed unlocality” and “synthetic universality”(5). This deliberate alienation aids the material to enact its violence through dislocation from the earth. The plasticized body is similarly designed to be divorced from its local culture, body individuality, and anatomical uniqueness; instead, the neoliberal bourgeois ideal image homogenizes all bodies under a prescriptive rubric of anatomical fascism. The hegemonic neoliberal ideology markets only a single definition of fitness, youth, and beauty as the unitary ideal, while the fitness and fashion aesthetic advocates medicalizing health and wellbeing to construct plasticized bodies in order to market the body ideal as body autonomy. This bourgeois cishet capitalist structure enacts a quid pro quo: it guarantees upward social mobility and empowerment to women instead of adherence to the body ideal. In contrast, the profit accrued for the patriarchal neoliberal capitalist structure is the body

standardization that has been implicitly legitimized. This generates an external surveillance as well as a self-surveillance—reminding one of Margaret Atwood's line of how everything is a male fantasy and that a woman is a man inside watching the woman, of how the woman becomes her own voyeur—the former is best represented through the reverse panopticon as Jennifer, an etherised passive inert object is fixed by the surveillance apparatus that comprises not only the plastic surgeons and the medical technology but also the camera shooting the documentary and the audience's penetrative gaze. The panopticon, hence, is also a cyborg. The surveillance circuit, hence, “sees everything without ever being seen” (202) by virtue of Jennifer being anesthetized while Jennifer is “totally seen, without ever seeing” (202). The self-surveillance mechanism is betrayed when Jennifer, while watching the documentary of her medical procedure with her sister, is unable to decide her positionality vis-à-vis her body as either a centripetal or centrifugal force.

The neoliberal patriarchal system attempts to impose the materiality of plastic on all forms of matter to render them “pliable, disposable, and consumable”, foregrounding materiality within the “post-Enlightenment Western project” where “matter is subservient and dichotomous to the wills and whims of the human mind”(9), establishing plastics as “circulating commodities” and “plasticity as a myth of eternal and limitless transformation.”(12) This is the neoliberal logic of late-stage capitalism that promotes a culture of incessant self-upgradation and self-optimisation where the previous self or body can be disposed off as a liability instead of a new unskilled body functioning as a better-performing asset. The neoliberal economy promotes the undervaluation of the existing human anatomy, which can be corrected and cured through medical procedures that add value to the body by constructing it as a cyborg. Post-procedure, the cyborg continues to exist, for instance, the technological assistance Jennifer requires for urinary egestion, which suggests that the plasticized body is a memorialization of the older organic anatomy.

A film, by virtue of its medium, is a scopophilic discourse. The documentary coalesces the dual scopophilia of the cinematic genre and the everyday worldly reality, which is also a scopophilic medium we inhabit. The conflation of the two underscores the increased interdependence on performativity, self-fashioning, and self-optimization that pervades both the cinematic genre and everyday reality. A film/documentary is based on images. These images are another aspect of the self whose gaze' others' the perceived image. Hence, the representative image of the audience differs from the image of the spatially, clinically, and digitally reconstructed cyborgian plasticized body. To know the other, one must trespass into the inferiority of the image and the body, thereby coalescing intellectual epistemic acquisition and the rape fantasy residing in the collective unconscious of the neoliberal patriarchal system. The subservience of the matter to the will of the human mind not only exemplifies the myth of plasticity but also underscores the transgressive and controlling rape fantasy. The juxtaposition of the doctor underlining facts of the fatality of the Brazilian butt lift procedure that how one in 3000 women die from it and yet it is the fastest growing plastic surgery industry not only underscores the disposability culture at the expense of existential annihilation but also its juxtaposition with the medium full shot camera angle that captures a patient

surrounded by surgeons in an operation theatre from the threshold of a door foregrounds two aspects— an epistemic desire of our penetrative gaze, that is, to know what actually goes on inside the operation theatre and, a simultaneous realisation that the operation theatre's spatial politics is entrenched in privacy and secrecy. This prohibitive instruction further whets our curiosity. Similarly, one of the establishing shots shows a hip shot of Jennifer, unclothed and bare-breasted, atop the operating table. The camera angles are not an aerial overview or a below-the-hip perspective; hence, there is no overt sexualization. However, it leaves off at a tantalizing cusp just as the plastic surgeon recording for a video for the camera, after having used violent, aggressive and controlling terms like “squeeze”, “bite”, “ pull” to speak of silicone breast implants—that inevitably betray the politics of domination that a rape fantasy is about—leaves off with a tantalizing question whether the audience wants to know what’s “inside.” Though the camera angle withholds overt sexualisation, the erotic rape fantasy is unmade into a mechanical, inquisitive, and utilitarian one; a rape motive for epistemic and archival purposes, which generates an intellectual pleasure. The camera rewards the penetrative gaze of the audience by crafting the clinically sanctioned violence as a spectacle, aestheticizing the medical procedure just as the body of the woman is anesthetized surgically and culturally by her manufactured consent, which is a result of internalizing neoliberal ideology. The digital plasticity of livestreaming a surgery also involves a quid pro quo: rewarding the voyeuristic penetrative gaze with a vicarious pleasure that is not so much sexual or sensual as much aesthetic, due to the clinical construction of a spectacle that willingly risks her own life, engages in autocannibalism, and sanctions epidermal and anatomical violence on her body for a reconstruction of the same; the pleasure is also intellectual and epistemic since it sensationalised and monetises knowledge itself for knowledge acquired is power which is livestreamed in exchange of algorithmic validation through digital currency of likes and followings. The clinical procedure, when revealed as an elusive knowledge, is marketed digitally as exotic, and this strategy makes a spectacle out of the elusive medical knowledge itself. “Everything that was directly lived was moved away into a representation”(Debord 2).

Firstly, the ideal body image is materially constructed through surgery. This material reconstruction is then digitally reproduced as a commodity, which is bartered to the penetrative gaze; thereby, the spectacle as commodity becomes spectacle as capital, since this reconstructed image is socioeconomic capital ideologically disseminated to the public for internalization via the ideological apparatus of social media. This capital, hence, further consolidates the ideal image, thereby continuing the cycle of alienation, since the neoliberal ideal image first alienated the self from the body, promising to redress it, but then further alienates the self from the body through the clinically sanctioned construction of the cyborg. The rape fantasy is further manifested by the long, phallic, stick-like tubes that are incessantly pushed into her body first to eject feces and then to inject it. The medium close-up shot of where the fat pushes out of the epidermal incision and later post-surgery when Jennifer vomits, are two instances of anatomical resistance against technological plasticized cyborgian restructuring of the

body, the latter a physiological response where physiologically the site of ingestion, the mouth, becomes a site of egestion.

Conclusion

The manufactured spatiality of the cyborgian body, an aesthetic construction of how the body occupies and layers space, also alters the semiotics of body spatiality. The panopticon becomes an objective correlative of the neoliberal patriarchal capitalist system as the body is crafted into a spectacle of autocannibalism and willing existential disposability. The body is dislocated from space and time, becoming a floating signifier of itself.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The data sharing policy does not apply to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Works cited

Bleakley, Alan. *Medical Humanities: Ethics, Aesthetics, Politics*. Routledge, 2024.

Debird, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Translated and annotated by Ken Knabb. Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014.

Davis, Heather. *Plastic Matter*. Duke University Press, 2022.

Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces." *Diacritics*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1986, pp. 22–27.

— *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Vintage Books, 1977.

— *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1: An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley. Pantheon Books, 1978.

Harrawya, Donna. *Simians Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. Routledge, 1991.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions, and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of Magnus Publishing and/or the editor(s). Magnus Publishing and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions, or products referred to in the content.