This paper explores the face as a site of biopower, examining the enactment of processes of self-care and self-surveillance. Specifically I will focus on acts of conformity and resistance displayed through visual presentation of the face. I use radicalised cosmetic surgery and the female beauty regime to demonstrate compliance to social norms. To reveal resistance strategies I discuss the work of performance artist Orlan and extreme facial modification. I argue that the panoptical gaze that permeates society, invoking process of self-surveillance, is not a neutral gaze. Rather disciplinary power stems from dominant ideology. In Western countries white, heterosexual male bodies are privileged and they become the norm upon which other bodies are judged. Consequently the gaze is a white, heterosexual male gaze.
From the colour of the skin to the shape of the eyes, the face is a main site of interpellation. It is a visible surface and a surface that must be visible; picture the unease invoked in Australia by a face covered by a balaclava or a burka. As visual presentation of the face influences others perceptions of us, the face becomes a surface to be managed. The face is subject to processes of self-care and self-surveillance as individuals internalise social norms of bodily acceptability and police themselves accordingly; the face is a site of biopower. In modern society, disciplinary power is implemented on individuals by themselves; “what better way to control bodies then to get those bodies to control, constitute and normalise themselves through the power of self-surveillance?” (Anderson 2008a: 10). To Foucault biopower was indiscriminate, but I argue that the pervasive panoptical gaze that provokes self-surveillance is a white, heterosexual male gaze reflective of the dominant ideology of whiteness, patriarchy and heteronormativity. The white, heterosexual male body is positioned as the norm from which others deviate. Conformity to this gaze is visible through cosmetic surgery to erase ‘racial’ features and the female beauty regime. But where there is power, there is resistance, subverting the same disciplinary techniques that are supposed to create ‘docile bodies’ (or ‘docile faces’). The face can becomes a site of resistance as exemplified by the performance art of Orlan and through extreme facial modification.

**Biopower, Self-Care and Self-Surveillance**

In modern society, bodies are a site of power. Bodies are governed through disciplinary techniques that produce conformity to institutional and social norms (Anderson 2008a, 10). Modern power is polymorphous, it “is everywhere and it is nowhere: the disciplinarian is everyone and yet no one in particular” (Bartky 1988: 74). Social control is achieved, not through external force, but through internalised ‘bodies of knowledge’; it is “the government of the self by the self” (Barcan 2008: 16). Self-surveillance is “a form of power which operates to extract time and labour from bodies to produce and constitute social norms” (Anderson 2008b: 53). Painstaking care is taken in the management of facial presentation to appear ‘normal’; a surprising amount of labour is required to achieve the ‘natural look’. Each time a woman plucks her eyebrows and applies her mascara, she is conforming to the disciplinary regime of patriarchal power. Power is thus productive, creating behaviours and individual subjectivity as bodies are discursively produced through disciplinary strategies. The careful attention paid to the face is an act of creating, shaping and maintaining our identities.
and our ‘selves’; “the individual is an effect of power” (Sullivan 2008: 83). Visual presentation of the face is managed to conform to, or resist, social norms.

Conformity to social norms should logically grant that body access to social privilege. However privilege is hierarchically structured by gender, ‘race’ and sexuality with the white, heterosexual male at the pinnacle. White, patriarchal, heteronormative ideology is dominant in our society, constructing people of colour, women and queers as inferior, thus relegating them to marginalised subject positions. It is assumed that gender, ‘race’ and even sexuality can be read from the face. Thus the face becomes a site of interpellation as we are hailed into a pre-existing role. Interpellation “invites you to recognise yourself as already there in the role the call offers you” (Thwaites, Davis & Mules 2002: 165). This is the enactment of hegemonic ideology that is not imposed on subjects but rather offered to them and taken up with consent. If society is saturated with white, patriarchal, heteronormative ideology then the gaze that produces self-surveillance cannot be neutral.

Modern disciplinary power comes from a panoptical gaze instilling a sense of permanent visibility in the population. The panopticon is a circular prison in where the cells face a central tower, granting guards full visibility. The prisoners cannot see the guards but are aware that surveillance could occur at any moment. Consequently the inmates govern their own behaviour to conform to acceptable norms. The panoptical gaze is constant, subtle, ubiquitous and becomes internalised. The panoptical gaze is a template for disciplinary power as everyone is aware of this gaze and develops a state of consciousness of permanent visibility; “the gaze is alert everywhere” (Foucault 1977: 195). This causes perpetual self-surveillance and management of the body. Foucault treats biopower as universal regardless of gender, ‘race’ or sexuality. However Bartky argues that bodily experiences of biopower differ for men and women and in a patriarchal society a “panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women, they stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgement” (Bartky 1988: 72).

I argue that it is a white, heterosexual male gaze which bodies are expected to conform to. One cannot exist outside of a gendered, raced and sexualised body as these subject positions are sustained through power relations. The male gaze is implicitly heterosexual as appropriate gender positioning requires heterosexuality as “it is for him that these eyes are limpid pools, this cheek baby soft” (Bartky 1988: 72). Further, white people have
privilege over those marked as racially different. Self-surveillance is a form of obedience to whiteness, heteronormativity and patriarchy. Racism, sexism and heterosexism operate not (only) through invisibility but through visibility as a marker of deviance.

The White-Man Face

Racism operates on the premise of corporeal racial makers or the assumption that race is visible on the body. Caluya (2003: 8) argues that “attempting to counter racism with visibility fails to recognise that visibility can be a precondition of racism in the first place”. For racism to occur a person must first be ‘read’ as differently raced. Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 178) argue that “racism operates by determination of degrees of deviance in relation to the White-Man face” and it is the crime of others to deviate. This theory only explains racist ideation in white people, failing to account for the incidence of racism between people of colour, however it is useful in explaining racism in Western countries. Racial markers have been read from the surface of the face since the era of physiognomy. Eden Warick writes in 1852:

“the most highly-organised and intellectual races possess the highest forms of Noses, and those which are more barbarous and uncivilised possess Noses proportionally snub and depressed” (in Caluya 2003: 27)

The White-Man face became the norm upon which others were judged through a multitude of theories including the shape of the nose, the shape of the eyes, the colour of the skin, Camper’s ‘facial angle rule’ to measure intellect or Blumenbach’s ‘vertical rule’ to order races. All theories served to position the White-Man face as superior through subsequent character associations. Thus race is a pseudo-scientific construction employed to justify colonisation; “racism is not so much the product of the concept of race as the very reason for its existence” (Ashcroft, Griffins & Tiffin 2007: 181). Nonetheless the face became the site of racial interpellation.

Racism works as a method of ‘facialisation’ constructing a culturally intelligible, inferior, body. The act of perception produces the very object it is assumed to process (Alcoff 2006). In discussing racism in the gay scene Caluya (2003) argues that the Asian does not face racism, rather the scene of racism ‘faces’ the Asian. A person is reduced to an Asian face and the racists associations inherent with this:

“a man does not have a man face like the Asian has an Asian face, for the face is always the White-Man’s face. A man simply has a face, the Asian is given one” (Caluya 2003: 24).
The White-Man face is positioned as the ‘unraced’ norm, as Dyer observes, in the racial imaginary of white people “other people are raced, we are just people” (Dyer 1997: 1). As the face is the catalyst for much racism, some people are trying to construct a whiter face.

Cosmetic surgery to erase ‘racial’ markers is becoming increasingly common in Western countries under the white gaze. As everyone is judged by the ‘standard’ white face, through the white, heterosexual, male gaze, people are resorting to surgical ‘passing’ to escape the subordination and oppression of their position. Racist ideation equates facial features with behavioural and intellectual characteristics. Consequently Jewish noses, Asian eyes, African-American lips and noses are being altered to minimise or eradicate markers of ‘racial difference’ (Davis 2003: 75). Cosmetic surgery becomes an intervention into identity and furthers the position of white people as the ‘unraced’ norm. bell hooks argues the desire for light skin and Anglo features is part of the racist imagination, a manifest of self-hate in the ‘colonized black mind set’ (in Davis 2003: 80). Fanon (1967: 160) describes how “there are times the black man is locked in his body” and thus locked into an oppressed position. Cosmetic surgery constructs a ‘white mask’, an escape from that visible body/face. I find it very disturbing that racism is entrenched and normalised to such a degree that the only conceivable option to alleviate suffering is to create your face in the image of your oppressor.

Cosmetic surgery is an extreme disciplinary technique, reconfiguring the face to conform to social norms. Davis (1999) states that cosmetic surgery is a matter of politics not aesthetics as the beauty system renders women’s bodies inferior. She argues undergoing cosmetic surgery results after years of suffering because one’s body (or parts thereof) are too different or abnormal to be endured. As a white woman, who has never experienced racism, I may be too critical of racialised cosmetic surgery and perhaps my outrage stems from guilt. Perhaps rejecting racial markers is a consequence of too much pain suffered. Michael Jackson’s face becomes the site of these discussions as he has been criticised for ‘becoming white’ to achieve fame and described as “a deracialising sell-out, the morbid symptom of a psychologically mutilated black consciousness” (Mercer 1994: 98). As race is socially constructed then perceptions can be altered and maybe Jackson is a post-modern artist recreating his face. Cosmetic surgery destabilises racial categories, as Orlan asks “what happens to the notion of ‘race’ if I shed my white skin for a black one?” (in Davis 1999: 459). However markers of ‘whiteness’ are not being erased.
White ideals of beauty are now permeating national borders; whiteness is circulating as a transnational marker of beauty. Historically in Euro-American countries only white women could be read as markers of ‘world’ beauty (Osuri 2008: 197). This is reflective of the belief that white people represent the human norm, the human race (Dyer 1997). Whiteness has become a cultural commodity, a state that is achievable through beauty regimes of skin whitening. Whitening creams are described as “giving flawless skin, lightening the skin tone, clearing dark spots” (Buzzle 2009 italics added). Product names include ‘Skin Bright’, ‘White Perfect’ and ‘Fair and Flawless’. White skin is not only being equated with beauty but moralistic discourses emerge associating whiteness with perfection and righteousness. Ideologies of ‘the beautiful’ are defined against black people and black faces (Mercer 1994: 97). Women using these products are conforming to the white, heterosexual gaze. The whitening of the face increases the chance of interpellation into a white subject position that grants privilege. Fanon writes that in white imagination beauty and virtue have never been black and that for the black man to become [hu]man he must become white; “for the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white” (Fanon 1967: 9). White women do not have to contend with these race issue but we are still oppressed by hegemonic patriarchal ideology.

**Women as ‘Defective’ Faces**

The female beauty regime is a disciplinary technique which produces a ‘modality of embodiment’ that is distinctively female (Bartky 1988). The female face should be free of all hair; the skin should be smooth and show no signs of age, wear or wisdom. Good skincare habits include cleansing lotions, astringents, toners, make-up remover, night cream, day cream, moisturiser, eye cream and facial masks. All must be applied according to precise rules and require specialised knowledge of a range of instruments. Self-surveillance is assisted through mirrors in bathrooms and handbags. Women describe ‘putting my face on’ and many will not leave the home without make-up. The (facial) surface is not an object, it is a process of becoming (Probyn 1996: 12). A properly made-up face is a badge of acceptability, a performance of appropriate female embodiment. But the beauty regime produces a body with an inferior status inscribed; “the art of make-up is an art of disguise, but this presupposes that a woman’s face, unpainted, is defective” (Bartky 1988: 71). For men it is acceptable only to shower and shave but this is not sufficient for women. Poor body image results from unachievable internalised patriarchal standards of bodily acceptability. But these are also white standards imbued with compulsory heterosexuality. In Australia advertising for beauty products
is exclusively white, as beauty is equated to whiteness. The face work that women undertake stems from the perception of permanent visibility.

There is a contradiction between the amount of care and maintenance required of the female face and the objectification of women’s bodies. In the media there exists a male ‘face-ism’ bias in which men’s heads and faces are shown far more often then women’s (Aubrey 2006: 368). Whereas women’s faceless bodies are continually objectified for the (heterosexual) male gaze. When faces are present, facial expressions are expected to be controlled, trained to expressions of deference under male scrutiny. Further women are trained to smile more often then men; in the ‘political economy’ of smiles women give more then they receive (Bartky 1988). Women learn to inhibit facial expression as “the very expression of her face can subvert the disciplinary project of bodily perfection” (Bartky 1988: 66). As a woman I am aware of the pressure to conform to feminine standards, but as a feminist I challenge the patriarchal social norms.

**Resistance**

Foucault argues that biopower produces ‘docile bodies’ conforming to social norms, but he also acknowledges where there is power, there is resistance. Identity is formed through position to hegemonic ideology, as self-stylization is a marker of identity the face encapsulates resistance strategies. Women who leave the house without make-up and men who leave without shaving are already showing simple resistance to gendered bodily standards. Resistance in seen in hair style, rebellious make-up, facial modification and facial accessories. These acts may be an overt political statements, or merely inherently political in their resistance. As the penetrating gaze stems from the white, heterosexual men in authority they have the power to pathologise resistance. For example, facial emotions that do not conform to expected reactions are labelled ‘inappropriate affect’ and constitute one of the symptoms of schizophrenia. Deviant social behaviour is believed to manifest in the materiality of the body (Terry & Ur-la 1995), so rebellious faces become the embodiment of deviance.

An extreme example of resistance is the face of French performance artist Orlan. Through cosmetic surgery her face was sculpted into the ‘epitome’ of female beauty, with “the forehead of Da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*, the chin of Botticelli’s *Venus*, the nose of Fontainebleau’s *Diana* and the mouth of Boucher’s *Europa*” (Davis 1999: 457). The ‘grotesque’ made Orlan an ‘abject’ body, a site of revulsion (see Smith 2007). Thus she is positioned as deviant through
her resistance. Orlan’s performance demonstrates that ideal standards of beauty are unachievable and tied to consumerism as one is never going to be good enough or able to maintain that standard. In a further subversion of masculine ideals of perfection Orlan had the ‘biggest nose possible’ constructed. New technologies are challenging our bodily ontology and Orlan destabilises the disciplinary techniques of cosmetic surgery by demonstrating the transformative potential of this technology in creating new and different bodies.

Extreme facial tattooing and piercing is an enactment of resistance. The surface of the face becomes a canvas as resistance is literally inscribed into the skin (Sullivan 2008: 81). Small, subtle tattoos and piercings are generally becoming more socially accepted but radical facial modification is considered the sign of a deviant body. Women body modifiers described their body art as a way to ‘reclaim’ their bodies from the victimisation and objectification rampant in patriarchal society. Karen describes the dragon tattoo on her breast as “a way of claiming my body, claiming my breasts” after a sexually abusive childhood. (Pitts 2003: 59). Women’s body art violates beauty norms and subverts the social control imposed on women and their bodies. This resistance requires painstaking care, and the taking of pain, to achieve an oppositional subject position.

Resistance to the white, heterosexual gaze still requires self-care and self-surveillance. As self-stylization is a process of identification many lesbians resist the male defined norms of beauty in a rejection of compulsory heterosexuality. ‘Lesbian’ as a subject position rejects the (heterosexual) male gaze by definition. Some lesbians do conform to traditional notions of femininity as social acceptance relies on those norms. Self-surveillance becomes an active process through resistance, as gender non-conforming lesbians must police appearance and behaviour to create the desired social meaning. Within the lesbian community there exists another regulatory gaze based on the social and political construction of the lesbian subject position. To conform to the lesbian gaze is to resist the heterosexual, male gaze. But the white gaze still manifests in the overarching, visible whiteness of the queer movement. Lesbians of colour speak of the racism within lesbian communities (see Yue 1996). As a lesbian myself, I have noticed the lack of non-white women at community events. I reject the belief that sexual orientation can be read from the face but the question remains, for whom do lesbians ‘put on their face’?
Conclusion

A white, heterosexual, male gaze permeates our society creating a sense of permanent visibility. Labour and care goes into the face to make it appear ‘normal’, but ‘normal’ is an exclusive categories and visual markers of ‘deviance’ disrupt access to relative privilege. The gaze is an embodiment of Western social norms that privilege the white, heterosexual male body. Further discussion is needed of how heterosexual males, and white people, negotiate this gaze. It seems “not all bodies are subject to the same degree of scrutiny or the same repercussions if they fail” (Urla & Swedlund in Pitts 2003: 50). The face is a surface that must be visible and the careful attention paid to presentation is a way of creating and maintaining our identities. Our appearance conveys social meanings and influences processes of interpellation that may grant, or restrict, access to power. Visual presentation of the face is not simple a matter of aesthetics, it is a matter of politics. In your face, off your face, what is on your face, it all has political and social implications.
Reference List


