

The Female Body Revamped: Beauty, Monstrosity and Body Transformation in the *Twilight* Saga

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Introduction: Of Swans

The body is one of the most recurrent topics in Stephenie Meyer's vampire romance *Twilight*, be it the sparkling, elegant vampire bodies of the Cullens or Bella Swan's clumsy, uncoordinated mess of a human body. Yet, surprisingly, the representation of the adolescent female body beyond the saga's sexual politics has so far only been explored by Danielle Dick McGeough¹, in spite of the fact that *Twilight*'s representation of gender has been analyzed repeatedly by feminists ever since the enormous success of the novel (and movie) series with mainly, though not exclusively, girls and young women². In her conclusion McGeough, referring to Cressida Heyes's analy-

¹ McGeough, Danielle Dick: Twilight and Transformations of Flesh: Reading the Body in Contemporary Culture, in: Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz, Melissa A. Click, Jennifer Stevens Aubrey (eds.): *Bitten by Twilight. Youth Culture, Media, and the Vampire Franchise*. New York 2010, p. 87-102.

² E.g. Mann, Bonnie: Vampire-Love: The Second Sex Negotiates the Twenty-first Century, in: Rebecca Housel, J. Jeremy Wisniewski (eds.): *Twilight and Philosophy. Vampires, Vegetarians and the Pursuit of Immortality*. New Jersey 2009, p. 131-146. Platt, Carrie Ann: Cullen Family Values: Gender and Sexual Politics in the Twilight Series, in: Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz, Melissa A. Click, Jennifer Stevens Aubrey (eds.): *Bitten by Twilight. Youth Culture, Media, and the Vampire Franchise*. New York 2010, p. 71-86. Stevens, Kirsten: Meet the Cullens: Family, Romance and Female Agency in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Twilight*, in: *Slayage. The Journal of the Whedon Studies Association* 8.1 (2010), issue 29, n. pag.

sis of narratives of self-transformation in contemporary American culture³, suggests that *Twilight's* body and gender politics need to be contextualized in a contemporary western culture that “desperately tries to contain the adolescent, female body through exercise, plastic surgery, cosmetic creams and other forms of discipline and control”⁴. Taking up this suggestion, we will argue that Meyer’s novels can be interpreted in the context of one of the central narratives constructing the body in contemporary American popular culture: Meyer’s *Twilight* saga, which tells the love-story of the human girl Bella Swan and the vampire boy Edward Cullen, can be read as a makeover narrative comparable to extreme makeovers⁵ as represented on television shows like Fox’s *The Swan*⁶. This reality television program follows a set of women who compete against each other in transforming from “ugly duckling” to “beautiful swan” through cosmetic surgery among other means. The representation of cosmetic surgery in this and similar programs can be and has been read as both a disciplinary mechanism that functions to transform female bodies in line with patriarchal heteronormative norms of gender and sexuality *and* an experience of female empowerment where the body becomes a project of absolute makeability, a means of self-realization for the female agent⁷. Correlating Meyer’s novel series with the makeover show *The Swan* will serve to pinpoint the questions about power and agency that are raised in *Twilight* with regards to the female body, particularly through the representation of Bella’s transformation into a vampire. In this interpretation Bella’s human body is the ‘before’ and her vampire self the ‘after’ of the

³ Heyes, Cressida J.: *Self-transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalized Bodies*, New York 2007.

⁴ McGeough, *Twilight and Transformations of Flesh*, p. 99.

⁵ For an analysis of extreme culture and extreme bodies see, for example, Kosut, Mary: *Extreme Bodies/Extreme Culture*, in: Lisa Jean Moore, Mary Kosut (eds.): *The Body Reader: Essential Social and Cultural Readings*. New York 2010, p. 184-200.

⁶ *The Swan*, Fox, 2004.

⁷ For cosmetic surgery as a practice of female oppression see, e.g. Wolf, Naomi: *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are used against Women*. New York 1992. For cosmetic surgery as a practice that is experienced by women as a form of self-care and self-expression see, e.g. Davis, Kathy: *Reshaping the Female Body: The Dilemma of Cosmetic Surgery*. New York 1995. For cosmetic surgery as an ambivalent technology of the self, see, e.g. Maasen, Sabine: *Schönheitschirurgie: Schnittflächen flexiblen Selbstmanagements*, in: Barbara Orland (ed). *Artifizielle Körper – lebendige Technik: Technische Modellierungen des Körpers in historischer Perspektive*. Zürich 2005, p. 239-260.

For an analysis of the ambivalent processes and representational politics of the televisual cosmetic surgery makeover see, for instance Weber, Brenda: *Makeover TV: Selfhood, Citizenship, and Celebrity*. Durham 2009. Heyes, Cressida J.: *Cosmetic Surgery and the Televisual Makeover: A Foucauldian feminist reading*, *Feminist Media Studies* (2007) Vol. 7 No. 1, p. 17-32. Seier, Andrea, Hanna Surma: *Schnitt-Stellen – Mediale Subjektivierungsprozesse in The Swan*, in: Paula-Irene Villa (ed.): *Schön Normal: Manipulationen am Körper als Technologien des Selbst*. Bielefeld 2008.

makeover. The analysis will show that the same combination of female compliance and empowerment that characterizes makeover programs⁸ can also be found in *Twilight*.

From Boys to Men – The Adolescent Male Body in Teen Vampire Movies

In order to understand the specificity of the transforming female body in *Twilight*, one first needs to consider the saga's place within the genre of teen vampire fiction. During the boom of teen vampire movies in the late 1980s the vampire body already was desirable and glamorous, though it did not reach that squeaky-clean perfection of *Twilight's* vampires. A large part of the power of *Near Dark's*⁹ Mae and *The Lost Boys*¹⁰ David and Star resides in their youthful attractiveness, but it is a raunchy, dirty look, the scruffy glamor of outlaws, gypsies and punk-rock stars¹¹, those who rebel against order and who live outside of it, "offering the promise of adult sexual license and the allure of rock music, all night parties, and unchecked troublemaking in comic book shops and dumpy roadhouses"¹². In these films the monstrous transformation of the human teenage protagonists Caleb and Michael into vampires is a metaphor of the pubescent body, similarly as in teen werewolf films¹³, for instance. Cursed with a body that suddenly no longer follows their will, these male teens fight their unruly body, unsuccessfully trying to suppress its powerful drives and urges. Being turned stands for the loss of innocence which means, on the physical level, entering the world of sex and violence, of physical pleasure and pain. The human body in transformation is

⁸ See, e.g. Heyes's reading of the cosmetic surgery makeover as a process of normalization in the Foucauldian sense: Heyes, *Cosmetic Surgery and the Televisual Makeover*, p. 17-32.

⁹ *Near Dark*. Dir. Kathryn Bigelow. Perf. Adrian Pasdar, Jenny Wright, Lance Henriksen. F/M, Near Dark Joint Venture, 1987.

¹⁰ *The Lost Boys*. Dir. Joel Schumacher. Perf. Jason Patric, Corey Haim, Diane Wiest. Warner Brothers, 1987.

¹¹ Nixon, Nicola: When Hollywood Sucks, or, Hungry Girls, Lost Boys, and Vampirism in the Age of Reagan, in: Joan Gordon, Veronica Hollinger (eds.): *Blood Read: The Vampire as Metaphor in Contemporary Culture*. Pennsylvania 1997, p. 115-128, here p. 120.

¹² Nixon, When Hollywood Sucks, p. 122.

¹³ For the werewolf-transformation as a metaphor of puberty see, e.g., Carroll, Noel: Nightmare and the Horror Film: The Symbolic Biology of Fantastic Beings, in: *Film Quarterly* 34 (1981), p. 16-25, here p. 168. Miller April: The Hair that wasn't there before. Demystifying Monstrosity and Menstruation in *Ginger Snaps* and *Ginger Snaps Unleashed*, in: *Western Folklore* 64 (2005), issue 3&4, p. 281-303, here p. 289. See also: Lawrence, Elizabeth A.: Werewolves in Psyche and Cinema: Man-Beast Transformation and Paradox, in: *Journal of American Culture* 19 (1996), p. 103-112.

a body in crisis: powerful, but uncontrollable, or weak and useless like the body of a junkie¹⁴.

From this undesirable state of gothic, monstrous in-betweenness between human and vampiric existence, or metaphorically speaking, between childhood and adulthood¹⁵, Caleb and Michael can eventually be rescued. They turn completely human again, their bodies unstained, healthy and under control. Hence, in these stories, boys becoming men are confronted with a body that is momentarily threatening to override the mind. This danger of losing control is translated into the danger of vampiric transformation. Growing up in the healthy, normative manner means regaining control over the body and its drives and that means expelling the vampire in oneself¹⁶.

In *Twilight*, we find a reversal of this paradigm, which is in part due to the fact that it is told from a female perspective. In contrast to the male characters in *Near Dark* and *The Lost Boys*, the female protagonist does not start out with a normative body. As feminist critics such as Elizabeth Grosz¹⁷ and Margrit Shildrick have pointed out, women, and especially female bodies, have a long history of being associated with the monstrous and the grotesque. Shildrick writes: "[...] insofar as their difference is specified, women are the non-subject other, the excluded, the embodied, the monstrous"¹⁸. The female body is a body that has to be abjected to uphold patriarchy, especially because of its enticing and fear-inspiring generative power, as Barbara Creed suggests in her analysis of the representation of the female body in horror movies with reference to Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection¹⁹. Bella's transformation into a vampire can be read as such a narrative of monstrous femininity, a tale of an abject body that is eventually erased or mastered and replaced by a normative one.

¹⁴ Auerbach, Nina: *Our Vampires, Ourselves*. Chicago 1995, p. 168-169, here p. 167. Nixon, When Hollywood Sucks, p. 126. Latham, Robert: *Consuming Youth: Vampires, Cyborg, and the Culture of Consumption*. Chicago 2002. p. 62ff.

¹⁵ Waltje, Jörg: *Blood Obsession. Vampires, Serial Murder, and the Popular Imagination*. New York 2005, p. 98f.

¹⁶ Nixon, When Hollywood Sucks, p. 126.

¹⁷ Grosz, Elizabeth: *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington 1994, p. 13-14.

¹⁸ Shildrick, Margrit: "Posthumanism and the Monstrous Body", in: *Body & Society* 2 (1996), issue 1, p. 1-15, here p. 1.

¹⁹ Creed, Barbara: *The Monstrous-Feminine. Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. London 1993, p. 57.

Bella 'Before'

Although Bella is already a beautiful swan according to her telling name, this is not how she sees herself. When Bella first describes her body to the reader in the very beginning of the first book, she says,

“Maybe, if I looked like a girl from Phoenix should, I could work this to my advantage. But physically, I’d never fit in anywhere. I *should* be tan, sporty, blond – a volleyball player, or a cheerleader, perhaps [...]. I had always been slender, but soft somehow, obviously not an athlete; I didn’t have the necessary hand-eye coordination to play sports without humiliating myself – and harming both myself and anyone else who stood too close.”²⁰

From this passage onwards we follow Bella as she stumbles through the story, barely avoiding to trip over her own feet, whenever her self-described dysfunctional body is not carried around like a baby’s by the superpowerful men around her, or whenever she does not miss the story because her body has given up working completely and she has fainted again.

Thus, Bella’s body is presented as abject. As Deborah Covinov argues, referring to Kristeva, “The abject body repeatedly violates its own borders, and disrupts the wish for physical self-control and social propriety”²¹. Bella’s body is such an unruly body. Her body is soft, potentially dangerous to everyone around, and a source of humiliation for the subject. In her analysis of the ideal of the firm slender body in contemporary American culture Susan Bordo argues that images of the soft body, of “unwanted bulges” and “erupting stomachs”, function as

“a metaphor for an anxiety about internal processes out of control – uncontained desire, unrestrained hunger, uncontrolled impulse. Images of bodily eruption frequently function symbolically in this way in contemporary horror movies and werewolf films [...].”²²

Bella’s body is introduced as abject similarly to the bodies of the contestants of *The Swan*, which represents the female bodies as abject, in need of fixing, reconstruction and (self-) control. In accordance with the structure of a

²⁰ Meyer, Stephenie: *Twilight*. London 2005, p. 8.

²¹ Caslav Covino, Deborah: *Amending the Abject Body: Aesthetic Makeovers in Medicine and Culture*. Albany 2004, p.17.

²² Bordo, Susan: *Unbearable Weight. Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Berkeley 1993, p. 189.

therapeutic narrative, the women on *The Swan* are introduced as deficient, problem-ridden and often traumatized individuals. This notion is created via various devices: home-video imagery focuses on their ostensibly 'imperfect' bodies, confession-like statements tell of lives of self-neglect and abuse, a voice-over emphasizes traumatic experiences, and an animated graphic visually fragments their bodies by showing isolated parts in close-up. Via aesthetics that are reminiscent of mug shots, the candidates' bodies are turned into an object of the experts' and audiences' critical gazes. Excessive body parts are highlighted and the representation suggests that these result from a lack of self-discipline, manifested, for instance, in overeating. In both cases, *The Swan* and *Twilight*, the soft body has meaning beyond itself – it stands in for particular behaviors, lifestyles and a particular type of self, all of which are out of bounds. Therefore, the ensuing transformation depicted in these texts has not only got to do with beauty, but is also represented as a narrative of personal growth, empowerment, strength and discipline.

Strikingly, the premise of Bella's body being an unruly body flips the conventional plot structure of the teen vampire story around: Now, the vampire body is no longer the site of the abject or of monstrosity, but in contrast it is represented as the ideal body that the ugly duckling strives for. In the words of McGeough,

"Edward manages bodily excesses and, with great effort, contains sexual desire. Bella, on the other hand, is wildly out of control. [...] Bella is in a constant state of *becoming*. No wonder she not only wants Edward; she wants to *be* him."²³

The marble-hard, statuesque, unchanging bodies of the Cullens are the antipole to Bella's softness; they thus have the desired body beautiful that is "absolutely tight, contained, 'bolted down', firm: in other words, a body that is protected against eruption from within, whose internal processes are under control"²⁴. As a cultural sign, the firm body "means that one 'cares' about oneself and how one appears to others, suggesting willpower, energy, control over infantile impulse, the ability to 'shape your life'" as Bordo puts it²⁵. The issue of corporeal control thus stretches further in *Twilight* then just to

²³ McGeough, *Twilight and Transformations of Flesh*, p. 100.

²⁴ Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, p. 190.

²⁵ Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, p. 195.

the often-discussed abstinence from pre-marital sex. The vampire body in *Twilight* is, in diametrical opposition to earlier teen vampire fictions, the perfect realization of a body that is under control; it is the clean and proper body.

In accordance with the Cinderella-inspired fairy tale structure of the makeover narrative, after the constitution of the female character as 'deficient' and out of control, the fairy-godmother would now enter to transform the ugly duckling. In extreme makeover shows such as *The Swan* this role is split and distributed across a group of medical experts, whereas in other television shows and in teen movies such as *The Princess Diaries*²⁶, the fairy godmother is either a more knowing female or a gay or desexualized man. While the latter turn the ugly duckling into a beautiful swan through teaching her to perform normative femininity with the help of a beautiful dress, a new hairdo and an expertly applied layer of make-up, the experts on *The Swan* work with scalpels, dental drills and psychotherapy. In *Twilight*, Alice Cullen can be said to take over the role of the fairy godmother, transforming Bella with the help of designer clothes, hairstyling and make-up. Though the result is always effectively beautiful, Bella is only made over for singular occasions like a school ball or a birthday party, but never transformed in a way that would permanently change her subject position. The success of the conventional female makeover – not the extreme makeover – is thus denied in *Twilight*. It is not sufficient for containing the female body on the loose.

Monstrous Femininity

The true deviant potential of the human female body unfolds during the course of Bella's pregnancy in *Breaking Dawn*, the last part of the saga. Significantly, Bella first realizes that she may be pregnant when coming across a box of tampons that she had packed for the honeymoon but never needed. As McGeough points out, this is the first and only time that this vampire romance that is so focused on the topic of blood ever makes a reference to female menstruation. She argues that "the [preceding] absence of menstruation in *Twilight* reestablishes its taboo status and devalues female bodily processes" thus reaffirming a discourse of the menstruating woman as dirty, "uncontrollable" and "at the mercy of hormonal and reproductive func-

²⁶ *The Princess Diaries*. Dir.: Garry Marshall. Perfs.: Anne Hathaway, Heather Matarazzo, Julie Andrews. Walt Disney Pictures, 2001.

tions”²⁷. The reference to menstruation and Bella’s binge eating at the beginning of the pregnancy plot signal that the horrific threat of the female body out of control that had before only been implicit will now become explicit.

When Bella grows rapidly big with child, the potential monstrousness of her body that had always been lurking on the margins moves into the center of the story. Though it is framed by a pro-life narrative²⁸ that idealizes the relation between the embryo and the mother and thus romanticizes pregnancy, the text still invokes images reminiscent of various horror movie pregnancies. The unnaturally speedy growth of the child inside her which mutilates the mother’s body, breaking her ribs and spine so that Bella has to be driven around in a wheelchair or the scene in which she has to drink blood in order to feed the vampire baby inside her belong to the most gruesome moments in an otherwise harmless novel series²⁹.

The climax of the horror of Bella’s extending body whose boundaries threaten to dissolve is the moment of giving birth. According to McGeough “Bella’s birthing body is a body in danger, perpetually flirting with death. Her body becomes increasingly unbounded during childbirth, blood gushing from multiple orifices”³⁰; it is “unstable[...] and out of control”. Though she struggles to give birth, the baby eventually has to be freed from her “broken, bled-out, mangled corpse”³¹ by Edward biting his way through Bella’s womb. In McGeough’s reading *Twilight* depicts giving birth as “risky, scary, anxiety-ridden, and far from natural”³². Bella giving birth is a scene in which the implicit threat of the abject female body has become explicit – fears of blurring boundaries, of a fluid, boundless, out of control body where death and birth coincide have been spelled out. This scenario is what the soft, undisciplined, uncontrolled body ultimately stands for. In the terminology of Bakhtin Bella’s pregnant and birthing body is grotesque. Barbara Creed explains her reading of the pregnant body in horror movies with reference to Bakhtin thus:

²⁷ McGeough, *Twilight and Transformations of Flesh*, p. 94.

²⁸ Platt, *Cullen Family Values*, p. 82.

²⁹ McGeough, *Twilight and Transformations of Flesh*, p. 97.

³⁰ McGeough, *Twilight and Transformations of Flesh*, p. 95.

³¹ Meyer, p. 355 qtd. in McGeough, *Transformations of Flesh*, p. 96.

³² McGeough, *Twilight and Transformations of Flesh*, p. 96.

"[...] Mikhail Bakhtin isolated three instances/examples of the grotesque body; they are 'sexual intercourse, death throes [...] and the act of birth' (Bakhtin, 1984, 353). According to Bakhtin the 'artistic logic of the grotesque image ignores the closed, smooth, and impenetrable surface of the body and retains only its excrescences (sprouts, buds) and orifices, only that which leads beyond the body's limited space or into the body's depth' (ibid., 318). [...] the act of birth is grotesque because the body's surface is no longer closed, smooth and intact – rather the body looks as if it may tear apart, open out, reveal its innermost depths. It is this aspect of the pregnant body – loss of boundaries – that the horror film emphasizes in its representation of the monstrous."³³

The depiction of Bella's body as a grotesque body in *Breaking Dawn's* birth scene can be compared to *The Swan's* excessive marking of its contestants as deviant since the function of both is creating an abject body. In the audio-visual representation (voice-over, talking-heads, images) of the participants in their 'before' – state moments and aspects of bodily 'transgression' and 'deviance' such as pregnancy/motherhood, disability, illness and gender non-conformative appearance or behavior are emphasized. These representations perpetuate a cultural and representational tradition that connects femininity not only with the body (rather than the mind – which in western culture is traditionally encoded as masculine), but also with monstrosity. Peri Bradley suggests that makeover shows like *The Swan* actually utilize the very same signifiers as horror movies to construct their contestants as "monsters" in need of normalization³⁴. Likewise, *Breaking Dawn's* birth scene is the closest to horror that the *Twilight* saga ever gets. From this perspective, the human protagonist of the *Twilight* saga is a monster already before her vampiric transformation, which turns the conventions of the teen-vampire genre necessarily upside down. What immediately follows the birth scene is Bella's transformation, or rather makeover into a vampire. The cultural function of this is to contain the horror of the unruly grotesque female body that has just been unleashed in the text through the normalizing procedure of the makeover.

³³ Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, p. 57f.

³⁴ Bradley, Peri: *Monstrous Makeovers: Transforming Monsters into Beauty Queens*, in: Sorcha Ni Flahinn (ed.): *Dark Reflecitons, Monstrous Reflections. Essays on the Monster in Culture*. Oxford 2008. p. 23-32.

The Transformation

So far the abjectness of Bella's 'before' body has been most explicitly laid out, showing us that this body urgently needs a makeover. Bella's final transformation from human to vampire can be read according to the pattern of an extreme makeover narrative involving cosmetic surgery in several ways: while Bella is unconscious, two men, one of them a medical doctor, perform a transforming procedure on her that results in an improved, a revamped body, similarly to the predominantly male surgeons who operate the contestants of *The Swan*. This process is accompanied by immense physical pain for Bella, which is not even slightly numbed by the painkillers she has received. The detailed description of her excruciating ordeal stands in contrast to the way in which invasions into human flesh that are part of any surgical procedure are often silenced and compressed in time in *The Swan*. Her suffering could rather be compared to the post-surgery moments on the program that show bandaged women in pain. First and foremost, the account of Bella's ordeal has the same aim as the specific rhetoric used in this makeover program: to show that the transformation is the respective woman's project, that she has to put in work in order to acquire the perfect body. Emphasizing that it is not necessarily the most beautiful, but the most devoted, hard-working and radically transformed woman who wins, *The Swan* frames the candidate's transformation in a neoliberal and post-feminist rhetoric of female empowerment, self-improvement and self-care. Plastic surgery is not depicted as a process passively endured by the candidate. Conversely, surgical procedures, bloody recovery and emotional set-backs are all represented as indicators of hard work, courage, and self-control. As Brenda Weber puts it in her analysis of the representation of cosmetic surgery in *Extreme Makeover*, "It's a modern-day Pilgrim's Progress where worthy subjects must undergo humiliation and endure multiple tests in order to arrive at a better place"³⁵. Cosmetic surgery makeover shows draw on the long-standing tradition of specifically American myths of reinvention and transformation³⁶, and at the same time fuses them with a neoliberal rhetoric ac-

³⁵ Weber, Brenda R.: Beauty, Desire, and Anxiety: The Economy of Sameness in ABC's *Extreme Makeover*. *Genders* 51 (2005), n. pag.

³⁶ See also Heller, Dana: Before: "Things Just Keep Getting Better...", in: *The Great American Makeover: Television, History, Nation*. New York, 2006. Weber, Brenda: *Makeover TV*, p. 37-80.

ording to which subjects are asked to live life as if making a project of themselves³⁷.

Bella's pain is her effort, her sacrifice in order to attain that ideal hard body of a vampire: "I could remember the reason why I'd committed to enduring this unendurable agony. I could remember that, though it felt impossible now, there was something that would be worth this torture"³⁸, she says. Looking back on the many times Bella has urged Edward to transform her, on her persistent determination to become a vampire, one could read her transformation as an act of female empowerment. Such argues Bonnie Mann, offering a set of quotes from the first *Twilight* book to underline this:

"A man and a woman have to be somewhat equal. [...] one of them can't always be swooping in and saving the other one. They have to save each other equally [...]. I can't always be Lois Lane, [...] I want to be Superman too. [...] I want to be fierce and deadly, [...]. Just wait 'til I'm a vampire! I'm not going to be sitting on the sidelines next time."³⁹

Thus, in acquiring the vampire body Bella frees herself of the prescribed role of powerlessness and passivity that her soft, uncoordinated female human body has confined her to. The vampire body is in one way a utopian one, because it enables an equality of the sexes.⁴⁰ When Bella ascends from her underworld of pain, darkness and isolation, she finds herself in a new body not only stunningly beautiful, but also stronger than that of anyone around her, giving her a new range of agency. Her transformation, just like that of the women on *The Swan* program, is also a rite of passage, a narrative of symbolic – or, in her case, literal death and rebirth. Where her old body was not controllable, her new one follows her orders as she thinks them. While before she was clumsier than anyone around her, she is now admired for having more self-control than any other vampire her age.

Contradicting this narrative of empowerment is the fact that she has to ask for this process to be carried out on her. She cannot do it herself, but is, like the plastic surgeon's patient, dependent on the expert to carry out the opera-

³⁷ For this notion of the neoliberal subject see e.g. Rose, Nikolas. *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood*. Cambridge 1998.

³⁸ Meyer, Stephenie: *Breaking Dawn*, London 2008, p. 349.

³⁹ Mann, Vampire Love, p. 141.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

tion on her body. We find here the same paradox of an active/passive subject as in *The Swan*, where the female body is dissected and re-assembled in line with heteronormative ideals of beauty and gender and often appears as a medium to showcase and advertise medical knowledge, technological procedures and male competence.

Bella 'After'

While the first part of this analysis has laid out how the unruliness of Bella's human body can be read as specifically feminine, the next part will focus on Bella revamped in order to investigate how her vampire body can be read in terms of gender. As mentioned before, the vampire body is represented as the beautiful body that is opposed to the grotesque female human body. It is sleek with a smooth, closed, hard surface, a static body. In many ways it is a body that connotes masculinity. In the case of the most idealized vampires in the novels, Edward and his father Carlisle – significantly males – the vampire body is always under control of the mind, even though its drives are immensely stronger than human ones. In addition, the vampire body has no motherly generative power. The female vampire's body has no monthly cycle as it is static and thus can neither conceive nor give birth.

The resulting conflicts of a female vampire identity are stressed in the text itself through the portrayal of Edward's sister Rosalie Cullen and her reactions towards Bella's wish to become a vampire: Rosalie would like to have a child of her own, but is no longer able to since she has become a vampire. This was by no means an optional matter: like all other vampires of the Cullen clan she had only been turned into a vampire because she otherwise would have died. Initially, Rosalie is extremely hostile towards Bella, because she cannot understand how Bella can wish to become a vampire and give up her ability to conceive, already when her further existence did not depend upon it. When Bella becomes pregnant, Rosalie overcomes her previous animosities with her and helps her fight for the baby's life in an act not only of female solidarity, but mainly of compensation for her own incapacity by participating in Bella's motherhood.

The character portrayal of Rosalie hints at the tug-of-war that the female body and female identity is trapped in: on the one hand, contemporary women are confronted with beauty ideals that prescribe a youthful, unchanging body, a body that does not grow big with child, that does not carry

stretch marks or any other traces of a pregnancy, whilst on the other hand, being able to give birth is still often represented as one of the main differences between men and women in a culture that is suffused with notions of natural sexual difference.⁴¹ What complicates this dilemma even further is a question lurking on a macro-level and that is what role the female body plays in constituting female identity. According to Rosalind Gill in contemporary post-feminist media culture “femininity is primarily defined as a bodily property, rather than a social, structural or psychological one”⁴². The rhetoric of makeover programs such as *The Swan* clearly testifies to this. In such a context where a woman’s identity is constructed as conflating with her body, it is highly contradictory that in order to become more feminine women should be encouraged to remove traces of having given birth. It is similarly paradoxical that a text like *Twilight* that celebrates family values and particularly the role of the mother, the ideal female body, though it may surpass the ideals of female beauty, is at the same time a neutered body. Anna Silver, who finds the *Twilight* saga “a series very much concerned with the practice of mothering” writes:

“In the final book of the series, *Breaking Dawn*, Meyer allows Bella to become the kind of mother that she never had, the apotheosis of the self-sacrificial, selfless mother, who is willing to die for the good of her unborn vampire child, and the warrior-mother who successfully protects the integrity and survival of her family. Meyer thus proposes that marriage and motherhood provide women with equality that they do not possess as single women. Motherhood becomes a location not only of pleasure and satisfaction but also of power.”⁴³

However, this attempt to depict motherhood as a form of empowerment seems at odds with *Twilight*’s negative representation of the birthing female body as a scene of horror and its idealization of an unchanging youthful body without monthly cycles.

⁴¹ According to Rosalind Gill, “after for a short time in the 1970s and 1980s, notions of male and female equality and the basic similarity of men and women took hold in popular culture”, since the 1990s there “has been a resurgence of ideas of natural sexual difference across all media”. Gill, Rosalind: Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility, in: *European Journal of Cultural Studies* (2007) Vol. 10, No. 2, p. 147-166, here p. 158.

⁴² Gill, Postfeminist Media Culture, p. 149.

⁴³ Silver, Anna: *Twilight* is Not Good for Maidens: Gender, Sexuality and the Family in Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight* Series, in: *Studies in the Novel* 42 (2010), issue 1&2, p. 121-138, here p. 123.

Cracks in the Mirror

So far, *Twilight* and the makeover have been compared to explore *Twilight's* gender and body politics. While much of the plot feeds into reaffirming the narrative of the makeover as a process of empowerment and self-realization, one can also find moments that challenge this narrative in the text.

Bella's new body is revealed to her in a typical makeover mirror scene. Though vampires remarkably do not have a reflection in the genre's tradition, Alice brings forth a mirror to disclose Bella's new vampire self to her⁴⁴. Makeover stories are often marked by a narrative of individual authenticity that frames cosmetic surgery and other modifying techniques as a way to bring the subject's "true self" and "inner beauty" to the surface.⁴⁵ At the same time, these narratives are characterized by a postmodern notion of malleable and flexible selves.⁴⁶ Pivotal in this paradoxical process in *The Swan* is the mirror moment. When the contestants are exposed to their new self, they often have difficulty identifying with the person in the mirror. In a scene reminiscent of Lacan's mirror stage⁴⁷, they have to newly construct their identity. The mirror moment thus highlights the constructedness of identity and can be read as a denaturalizing and destabilizing moment. A similar denaturalizing potential surfaces in *Twilight* when Bella initially struggles to accept the stranger in the mirror as her new self. Bella's first experience with her transformed body is one of two-ness: while she describes the person in the mirror, she never realizes that this person is her new, vampirized self, but describes the beautiful woman as a stranger in the room⁴⁸. This moment lies at the same paradoxical crossroad of essentialist and constructivist notions of identity as *The Swan's* mirror moment and is thus open for multiple readings.

Furthermore, other moments in the novel hint at the "unnaturalness" or "artificiality" of beauty ideals in contemporary makeover culture. For instance, in the very first appearance of the Cullens, Bella describes them as

⁴⁴ Meyer, *Breaking Dawn*, p. 370f.

⁴⁵ See Heyes, *Cosmetic Surgery and the Televisual Makeover*, p. 17-32, and Marvick, Alice: There's a Beautiful Girl Under All of This: Performing Hegemonic Femininity in Reality Television, in: *Critical Studies in Media Communication* (2010) Vol. 27, No. 3, p. 251-266.

⁴⁶ See Jones, Meredith. *Skintight: An Anatomy of Cosmetic Surgery*. Oxford 2008, p. 57.

⁴⁷ Lacan, Jacques: *Écrits. The First Complete Edition in English*. New York 2007.

⁴⁸ Meyer, *Breaking Dawn*, p. 370ff.

“devastatingly, inhumanly beautiful. They were faces you never expected to see except perhaps on the airbrushed pages of a fashion magazine. Or painted by an old master as the face of an angel”⁴⁹. By not just comparing, but equaling them to pieces of art, the unnaturalness, even inhumanness of their beauty is underlined and the unattainability of such beauty outside the world of fantastic fiction is hinted at. The images of beautiful people in fashion magazines, pictures that young women cut out to take to their appointment with a plastic surgeon in order to show them what kind of face or body they want to have, are exposed as simulations that are inscribed onto real bodies by surgeons. In text passages like these, *Twilight* briefly disrupts the naturalization of the notions of beauty, transformation and true self that we find in makeover programs like *The Swan*.

Conclusion

The question has often been raised: “Where is the horror, where are the monsters in *Twilight*?”⁵⁰ Through the reading just presented, Bella emerges as *Twilight*'s monster that needs to be contained. The female body in *Twilight* is constructed similarly to the bodies of the women participating in the TV format *The Swan* as an abject body.

A reading of *Twilight* against the narrative structure of extreme makeover shows elucidates the gendered power structures in the text. Like the transformations presented on the TV program *The Swan*, Bella's makeover is both playing into the hands of patriarchy and at the same time constitutes a moment of female empowerment – sought out, accomplished and enjoyed by the female subject herself. The female body is presented as out of control, soft, weak, dysfunctional, dangerous and stained in the text. It is made over into a strong, beautiful, firm and functional body. In this context, Bella is both empowered and ‘tamed’. The latter is particularly expressed by the removal of the most threatening feature of her unruly female body – its power to give birth. That the ideal female body presented in the text is a body that cannot conceive stands in sharp contrast to the saga's focus on family values and its celebration of motherhood and sheds light on the contradictory

⁴⁹ Meyer, *Twilight*, p. 16f.

⁵⁰ See, e.g., Molinaro, Megan: Are We Perfect Yet? Consumption in *Twilight*, in: *The Common Room* 13 (2010), issue 1, n. pag.

hegemonic demands women are faced with in contemporary western culture.

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