

‘Breaking the Bonds of Beauty’: The Dark Side of Beauty between the World Wars

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Abstract

During the interwar period, a plethora of aggressive and abject images encroached upon the seemingly idealistic world of beauty. From fashion illustrations featuring severed heads, to tortuous devices used to measure ‘ideal’ beauty (in reality subjecting the face to a metal contraption, proliferated with sharp pins), to skincare advertisements that shared more with gory medical procedures than beauty practices: a startlingly violent aesthetic manifested itself within an area that is usually perceived as escapist and pure.

Despite the surprising frequency of such occurrences within this relatively early timeframe, they have never before been highlighted or studied. Taking as its starting point the devastating aftermath of the First World War - with the new, mechanized forms of death it had entailed - this paper will examine the dark underbelly of beauty that subsequently emerged during the 1920s. It will chart changing attitudes towards beauty and women through an examination of advertising, and by untangling the nuanced links with its context. How did the quickening onset of post-war modernity, the birth of psychoanalysis as we know it, and the shifting political scene impact women’s place within society, and how was this expressed in relation to their appearance?

Keywords: Art; Assault; Beauty; Defile; Destroy; Fashion; Interwar; Modernity; Psychoanalysis; Violence

In December 1920, Helena Rubenstein – a revolutionary makeup and skincare pioneer - published an advert in American *Vogue*, claiming that she had the power to be able to ‘break... the bonds of beauty.’ What did such ‘bonds’ entail? And why did a beauty advertisement in a women’s fashion magazine – typically dismissed as glossy and superficial – use such destructive language? Rubenstein’s advertisement itself points towards several possible reasons behind this incongruous infiltration. Amongst many claims are several illuminating phrases. One reason that she proffers for ‘mediocre complexion[s]’ is the ‘absorbing activity of the last few years.’ This quite clearly refers to the recent [First] World

War, which had ended less than two years previously. The most gruelling, destructive conflict experienced to date, and the first war to have made chilling use of modern, mechanical methods of warfare, it left its imprint across civilian society as well as the military. Her mention of ‘the new added political interest due to enfranchisement’, which apparently renders ‘woman... a very busy individual, indeed’ is also telling. That women experienced increased independence during the war is well known, fulfilling many work roles for the first time. While some opportunities dried up after the conflict ceased, the enfranchisement it ensued did not. Furthermore, Rubenstein brings up the idea of ‘indiscriminate, unproven, untutored “beauty-doctoring”’, which her own offerings are supposedly ‘worth pounds of.’ This references a growing trend towards a medical aesthetic in beauty advertisements produced in London, Paris, and New York alike in the years following the war and beyond, which the examples discussed within this paper represent. Finally, in seeming contradiction to this dismissal, she introduces her own ‘interesting selection’ of ‘beauty-preparations’ as being ‘scientific’. Again, this corresponds to a wider trend within beauty advertising, from the pre-war ideal of undetectable, natural beauty, to a growing projection of clinical, ‘unerring efficiency.’ This paper will take at its basis these core themes raised by Rubenstein’s example, and apply them to a selection of beauty advertisements taken from the London, New York and Paris editions of *Vogue* from the post-First World Years towards the late-1920s.

A young woman lies back on an immaculately made bed, with starched, white sheets. Her head is slightly raised, as she looks to another woman, who leans over whilst attending to her. This woman wears a smart, simple nurse’s uniform, complete with a regulation hat. She smiles kindly as she carries out her work, caring for the reclining woman, who appears to be her patient. This *mise-en-scène* appears in two photographs, which were each produced in 1922. However, whilst one is a photograph taken in The National Hospital for Diseases, of a nurse attaching electro-cardiograph wires to a patient, the other was in fact published as part of a beauty advertisement, for the skincare brand *Marinello*. Beneath the image lies bold, cursive text proclaiming: ‘Learn how to develop your beauty type to its full charm.’ It is revealed, then, that the caregiver is not a nurse, but in fact a ‘beauty specialist.’ The reclining young woman, therefore, is not a patient in the medical sense, but a client, seeking, as the advertisement put it, ‘complete loveliness.’

Within wartime imagery, women had been placed at the forefront of violence: whether actively assaulted, such as being mutilated by figures representing the enemy, or being presented as nurturing the men assaulted by the enemy, through both active involvement as nurses and supportive roles in the home and workplace. The aforementioned *Marinello* advertisement, on the other hand, places a woman under (as well as being the more traditional dispenser of) care. The medical relationship between the two women depicted is enhanced by its setting, which

includes a pristine sink, and a neat row of containers upon a sterile surface. This detail creates depth and a convincing sense of space. Yet, as an illustration inserted within an advertisement, rather than an image in itself, this sense of reality is confined. In this way, it is presented as a vision, a dreamlike image, enhanced by its undulating border. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Sigmund Freud presented dreams as the subconscious's way of fulfilling wishes, or resolving conflicts: 'the dream in its essence signifies the fulfillment of a wish.'

¹ Does the vision-like image of medical attention within commercial beauty imagery suggest the fulfillment of a subconscious need for healing? That women had not fought on the frontline did not protect them from war trauma – or, to use its meaning from the original Greek – wounds. As Henry Seidel Canby remarked in 1919, 'millions of women... flung themselves into the conflict without incurring the passionate reactions of bloodshed, and [were] transformed.'² As Gary Cross has pointed out, 'ads [*sic.*] linked material goods to immaterial longings, blending social, psychological, and physical needs indivisibly.'³ Whilst the war rapidly advanced medicine and psychoanalysis, this was a result of unprecedented military (and therefore exclusively male) casualties, both physical and mental. Within the advertisement, medical care is presented as an enticing capitalist object to be consumed by women, suggesting that it belongs to a 'longing' or 'need', whether or not this was consciously recognised.

Beauty advertisements produced within each of the three cities specifically referred to healing. For example, the cosmetic brand *Viabella* claimed in a December 1924 advertisement within British *Vogue* that 'the care and cultivation of beauty is a specialist profession demanding expert knowledge of the ills to which beauty is heir and skill in corrective treatment.' In deeming correction to be necessary in this way, the advertisement works on the same assumption as *Marinello's* version, that there was a form of damage in need of restoration. Pertinently, the advertisement uses the term 'ills' to describe this. In this context, 'ills' can be read as referring to imperfections of the appearance; yet the term's wider usage connotes emphatic medical sickness. Furthermore, the 'expert knowledge of the ills' in order to administer 'corrective treatment' is in fact an apt description of the role of a medical doctor. It appears, then, that this advertisement is an example of the 'beauty-doctoring' that Rubenstein warned against.

Indeed, the same advertisement unhesitatingly used the term 'Beauty Doctor' in place of 'beauty specialist', and similarly equated beauty practitioners with their medical equivalent, cautioning: 'Choose your Beauty Doctor.... As you choose your medical attendant.' Using the phrase 'medical attendant' in place of the more traditional 'doctor' reserves the grandeur associated with the term 'doctor' exclusively for beauty. The *Marinello* example made a similar association, when it urged women: 'consult your beauty specialist as you would your physician.' This marks a distinct shift in references to medical practitioners within beauty advertising. As late as 1918, advertisements occasionally proffered quotes from

particular doctors to vindicate their products, such as the *Northam Warren Corporation's* advertisement for *American Vogue*, July 1918. The later examples, however, present themselves as replacing the very doctors whose advice they had previously showcased. Michel de Certeau, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, commented that 'the Expert is growing more common... to the point of becoming its generalized figure.'⁴ The way in which beauty advertisements donned the status of doctors presents the profession as a 'generalized figure.' Not only was it used in an increasingly common number of adverts, but the minimal description given reveals an assumption that it would conjure positive connotations, perhaps in association with recent war-time progress. De Certeau remarked that, in such cases, 'competence is exchanged for authority.'⁵ Whilst beauty practitioners were not medical specialists, they claimed to hold powers that in fact outreached their medical equivalents. The *Marinello* advertisement, for instance, claimed that 'Marinello... will make an expert diagnosis of your beauty needs and scientifically bestow the supreme gift of beauty upon you.' This accords with De Certeau's remark that the generalized expert 'abandons the competence he possesses as his authority is extended further and further.'⁶ Not only did beauty align its power with that of medical doctors, but it presented this power as omniscient and omnipotent - a claim that it could not fulfill in practice.

Florence Warden picked up upon this phenomenon in her 1920 novel, *Beauty Doctor*. It followed the experience of two young women who were recruited by a beauty practitioner. They were plucked off the street for their 'pretty face[s]', which their employer would claim had been 'perfect wreck[s]' until having been 'treated' by her. The protagonists were explicit in terming this 'nonsense', and continually marvelled at the deceptive fraudulence of beauty treatments, remarking, for example, that 'hair washing seemed... oddly like hair dyeing.'⁷ One therapist, when asked by a knowing client's husband, 'you are a fraud, of course?'⁸ answered 'well yes, I suppose I am.'⁹ Yet despite this awareness, they continued to practice as 'beauty doctors'.

In attempting to create this aura of omniscience and omnipotence, these advertisements in fact fell into a fallacy of modernity, which Michel Foucault outlined in *The Birth of the Clinic*. Here, he discussed society's expectation, and belief, in doctors being able to 'totally and definitively cure'¹⁰ all. Foucault dismissed this idea as mere 'day-dreaming.'¹¹ Instead, he argued, this view is merely one of the many false myths perpetuated by modernity. The beauty advertisements discussed fall into this trap. Their self-imposed powers, in order to promote their services, link them to modernity, yet whilst this brought positive and progressive connotations, it was inherently erroneous. Nevertheless, the trope of the doctor offered the enticing combination of hope, cures, and proven, extensive knowledge with which to administer them. This constructed a concept of seductively achievable beauty, and an impression of certainty and safety, which

was crucial in comparison to the instability, violence, and dangerous uncertainty of the recent war.

However, as hinted by Rubenstein's references, the chaos of the war did not end with it. Rather, women's increased independence thrust them into further uncertainty and under increased scrutiny. While newfound enfranchisement allowed them to explore the metropolitan cities of London, New York and Paris, it simultaneously increased their exposure. Not only was their uncompromised presence in the city relatively new, but the particular demands of 1920s beauty heightened feelings of exposure: fashion revealed more natural bodily contours, and exposed more flesh, than ever before. And cosmetics, which were only recently available on a mass-produced, easily obtained level, had been associated with prostitution up until the First World War.¹² Subsequently (as insinuated by Rubenstein's mention of 'busyness'), the experience of modernity within the post-war, metropolitan city could be chaotic. Fashion magazines frequently referred to this. For example, in 1920, American *Vogue* described modern life in Paris and New York: '...like New York, [Paris's] image is the image of ultra-modern civilization, luxurious, careless, violent, and not a little decadent.'¹³ This phrase shares with Rubenstein's advert both its publication date and its violent language.

Conveniently, Rubenstein asserted her own products as quick, efficient antidotes to this chaotic existence. She was not the only beauty manufacturer to align herself with modernity, and use projections of clinical efficiency in order to advertise. For example, fig. 8 singled out the 'modern resources and modern equipment' apparently needed in order to achieve beauty, and a 1924 *Elizabeth Arden* advertisement, fig. 9, reproduced in Britain, France and America, enthused that 'the modern science of Elizabeth Arden brings sure and natural beauty to every woman.' Its use of both 'modern science' and nature to entice women is somewhat oxymoronic, and reveals a conflict between previous methods of advertising beauty, which appealed to nature and natural beauty,¹⁴ and the giving way to a more modern, post-war approach. A Parisian example produced by Madame Theux in 1926 even referred to the 'études biologiques' apparently undertaken in the development and production of her hair care products, and fig. 10 shows the way in which the brand presented an advertisement in the style of a scientific research report.

This appears to be the first time in which this definitively modern (and now widespread) phenomenon appeared to any significant extent. Moreover, De Certeau has described the way in which '...scientific work (*scientificté*) has given itself its own proper and appropriate places through rational projects capable of determining their procedures.'¹⁵ The notion of scientific work appointing its own importance is an apt description of the technique used by these beauty advertisements. He connected this strongly with modernity, arguing that the 'remainder'¹⁶ of anything non-scientific 'has become what we call culture. This cleavage organizes modernity.'¹⁷ Not only is science inextricably bound with

modernity, but, according to de Certeau, it brought about a rupture between the two divisions of modern society. Traditionally, beauty would fall under the ‘remainder’, in the category of culture. However, by aligning itself with science, it created its own credibility and entered modernity. This contributed to the advertisements’ restorative attempts to address women’s underlying wounds, enabling them to portray a sense of comfort, and to advance away from the violence of the war, and the chaos of the modern cities of London, Paris and New York that they were subsequently thrown into.

However, this was not wholly positive. Not only did Rubenstein fall into the very trap that she warned against – advertising scientific, clinical products with no evidential basis – but in offering such bold, clinical treatments, the advertisements suggested that women required correction. The independent, *Vogue*-reading women for whom city life was at once dizzying and horrifying were perceived with alarm by wider society. Mary Louise Roberts has attributed such fears to wartime anxiety. In relation to France, she has written: ‘the modern woman provided a way of talking about the war’s more general trauma’,¹⁸ becoming ‘a “privileged symbol” of postwar... anxiety.’¹⁹ The kinds of women buying newly-available beauty consumables correlate with those feared as the ‘New Woman’: young, single, supposedly seeking hedonism above marriage and motherhood.

The image of medical attention, with its projections of scientific infallibility, can be seen as soothing such fears. In the years immediately following the war, medicinal, scientific, and modern qualities within advertising can be associated with the major advances in medicine (and psychoanalysis) as a result of the war, riding on the subsequent positive connotations, and addressing women’s lingering and unacknowledged war trauma. However, as the 1920s progressed, such depictions intensified. *Contouré Laboratories*, for instance, published an advertisement in American *Vogue*, 1928, which comprised a photograph of a woman, with her head wrapped in bandage-like cloth, sinking back onto a white bed. Her face is expressionless, whilst an unidentified stranger’s hand holds a syringe-like appliance to her face. Disquietingly, it is larger in length than her head. This aesthetic was followed closely by a contemporaneous *Elizabeth Arden* advertisement, published in multiple issues of French *Vogue*, 1927-1928. The image, barring the model’s makeup, would not appear conspicuous as an illustration of a hospital operation. Indeed, the woman’s modest, oversized and simply cut clothing is more akin to a hospital gown than contemporary fashion, jarring with her fashionably applied cosmetics. Here, the model’s face is also bound with white, bandage-like cloth, as she lies back on a bed, which could feasibly be either a beauty treatment bed or a hospital equivalent. A pair of hands comes towards her. One hand grips the model’s head, in a firmer manner than typically associated with beauty treatments. Even more alarmingly, the other grips a thin, sharp implement, which she holds to the model’s face, as if the photograph had been taken just prior to using it. The depicted scenes progressed, therefore,

from light, smiling, healing medical care, to full-blown operative, surgical, invasive treatment. Femininity was placed under the knife. And the knife, so to speak, was in the hands of non-trained, non-medical practitioners – here, the images are cropped so as to disallow us from seeing who administers the treatment, and its beauty context brings associations of the fraudulence exposed by Warden’s novel. This situation is therefore wrought with potential violence.

One of the ‘legacies of the First World War’²⁰ was the rise of fascism in Europe: an ideology that perpetrated and celebrated violence. One way it did so was to transform it from a destructive force into a healing one. Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini came into power in Italy in 1922, and immediately made connections between violence and surgery, declaring in 1925, for example, that ‘violence must be generous, chivalric and surgical.’²¹ By using the medical metaphor of surgery, violence is justified as necessary, healing, efficient, and implausibly clean. The disquieting nature of fig. 12 is created in large part by the scalpel-like tool hovering ominously closely to the model’s face. In 1922, Mussolini had asserted ‘it is necessary ... to use the scalpel inexorably to take away everything parasitic, harmful and suffocating...’²² Whilst he was referring to Italian governmental offices, this unnerving use of metaphor is indicative of building tension due to the rise of Fascism within the Western political scene. The tool’s presence within a seemingly incongruous beauty advertisement suggests that something equally ‘parasitic, harmful and suffocating’ still lingered within women by 1928. On one level, constructing surgical scenes within advertisements continued beauty’s increasing engagement with modernity, implying efficiency and productivity. Yet paradoxically, its very necessity discloses lurking, ‘parasitic’ trauma, both in terms of unresolved war wounds, the further onslaught of modern life for women. Whilst the First World War was over, anxiety was not, and the rise of fascist regimes was a seed of violence that would only grow.²³

Notes

¹ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*. New York: Macmillan, 1913, 107.

² *Ibid.*, 232.

³ Gary Cross, *An All-Consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won in Modern America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000, 38.

⁴ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. trans. Steven Rendall, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2011, 7.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Florence Warden, *The Beauty Doctor*. London: Robert Hayes Ltd., 1920, 15.

⁸ Ibid., 25.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*. London: Routledge, 2003, 38.

¹¹ Ibid., 39.

¹² As pointed out, for example, by Sally Alexander, *Becoming a Woman: And Other Essays in 19th and 20th Century Feminist History*. New York: New York University Press, 1995, 219.

¹³ *American Vogue*, 1st October, 1920, 85.

¹⁴ See, for one of a vast number of examples, Yardley's perfume advertising c. 1910-19.

¹⁵ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 6.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Mary Louise Roberts, *Civilization without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Postwar France, 1917-1927*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, 9.

¹⁹ Roberts, 9-10.

²⁰ Philip Morgan, *Fascism in Europe, 1919-1945*. Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2007, 29.

²¹ Margherita Sarfatti, *Dux*, p. 250, cited by David Forgacs, 'Fascism, Violence and Modernity' in Jana Howlett and Rod Mengham. eds., *The Violent Muse: Violence and the Artistic Imagination in Europe, 1910-1939*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, p. 6.

²² Mussolini, cited Ibid.

²³ For example, Benito Mussolini came to power in 1922 in Italy, and seized total power as dictator in 1926. Adolf Hitler had joined the German Workers' Party in 1919, from whence it developed over the 1920s party into the Nazi party it is known as. Hitler took governmental control when he was appointed chancellor in 1933.

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