Salon senses: A feminist's internal conflict

Daryl Lamb

ABSTRACT

Visiting the salon is a sensory experience, one that does not always end in the outcome we desire. Why are salons so visually appealing? Why do we put ourselves through these often painful procedures time and time again? Are these experiences adding value to our lives or stealing our time and self-worth? Why does salon gossip feel so good? These are some of the questions I explore in this essay where I navigate the boundaries of beauty expectations, feminism, and feelings of guilt from the auto-ethnographical perspective of a working-class woman in Scotland. Feminist literature on beauty is extensive and contradictory. I investigate if the beauty industry is inherently suppressive, whilst also exploring the idea of the body as a symbol and beauty a ritual, that creates and sustains social ties.

I can see through the glass panels on the shiny, black patent doors that mark the entrance to the salon. I press down the glossy lever handle and push the door with considerable strength to force it open. It creaks and thuds with the usual grunts that announce the entrance of a client, feeling like a harsh contrast against the serenity of the salon.

I catch Jamie-Lee's eye in the gorgeous floor-length mirror that sits opposite her. We exchange polite, customary greetings as she sits with another client. She creates nail art with outstanding precision and talent, and I'm still sporting the 3D cherry nails she did for my birthday. But I am not here to see her.

Everything in this salon is beautiful, including the artists who work here. The interior design has been executed to an incredibly high standard with a modern, sleek finish. Astonishing detail and consideration have been given to selecting the wooden flooring, neutral tones, and black detailing. The smooth surfaces and furnishings flow seamlessly.

I am given a drink of water in a rounded glass with a glass straw; they chime harmoniously against each other as I reach for a sip. The cold glass in my hand is soothing and feels smooth to the touch. As I sit down on the synthetic Sherpa-fur waiting chairs and take off my waterproof jacket, I become suddenly very conscious of the crunching noises it makes. I worry that I am drawing attention to myself. Being a little dishevelled from the weather, I feel like a disturbance to the flow of visual bliss that seems to be curated so well in the salon. The beauty here usually makes me feel safe and very relaxed, and the returns once I realise the other clients and beauty technicians are immersed in their own conversations. As I wait, I overhear some of the conversations. Mostly

about partners and children, these intricacies of daily life that make me reflect on my own personal relations. There are candles burning, and the scent – though I am not entirely sure – is most likely the combination of essential oils usually labelled as "cotton fresh". The faint, familiar smell of bleach travels from the back of the room, which is the hairdressing section. A step and slightly raised flooring towards the back marks the boundary between the two sections of the room.

Through the sensory experience of smell, we make judgements – often unconsciously – about our relations with others, deciding between acceptance or rejection. The dichotomies present in Western societies – beauty/ugliness, health/disease, morality/sin, purity/dirt and pleasant and unpleasant odours (Mojca Ramšak 2024:17) – account for why it feels so fitting that a salon dedicated to the upkeep of female appearances should also be so pleasantly scented. The women in the salon have managed to remove any sense of impurity from the experience, adding to the sensation of safety and serenity, far from the ails of society.

There is a door across from the waiting area that leads to another smaller room. A client opens the glass door and says her goodbyes before leaving. Gill shouts my name, asking how I am as I walk into the room and close the door. I respond that I am tired but well, and return the question. She doesn't seem herself and explains that she is experiencing painful menstrual cramps; my own stomach almost recoils in empathy. I lie down on the plush black bed; the ergonomics of the bed, having been aimed at women much shorter than me, mean that it always begins to hurt my lower back as I lie there for anything between 45 mins to an hour. Gill sits in a seat above my head, and the conversation never breaks as we go through the familiar pattern of movements.

First, I look upwards as she places masking tape over my bottom lashes to protect them from the eyelash glue she will use for the extensions. This part is always slightly uncomfortable, as the tape sometimes presses against the sensitive skin next to the tear ducts of my eye. Without exchanging any words, I know she has finished, so I close my eyes, and she begins to remove any lashes that have been on too long. Sometimes I feel a sharp sting as a single eyelash is accidentally pulled. Finally, she begins the careful process of gluing delicate fans of plastic lashes to each of my individual eyelashes.

As I lie there and we talk, private details of frustrations in my life come flooding out – even those I had made mental notes beforehand not to bring up, in an effort to convince myself these were problems I was over. The slight embarrassment of oversharing turns to relief, as I am consoled by her return of similar stories from her own life or from other clients, which help me analyse and position my own experiences within the world. The appointment always ends with looking in the mirror to see the finished result of fluffy lashes and my own reflection. Yet I don't feel the sensation that I desired, the one I had tried to purchase. I never do. I book in again for next week.

I feel a conflict within myself in participating in these beauty practices, unsure how much agency I really have, and aware that I have been highly influenced by the cultural gendered norms I grew up with in working-class Britain. *The Beauty Myth* by Naomi Wolf (1991) started a contentious discourse in the 90s amongst many feminists. Wolf brings to light the control exerted over women by the beauty industry and patriarchy, as well as the unattainable ideals of feminine beauty. As

Erica Reischer and Kathryn Koo (2004: 301) expressed, "Our market economy requires that we participate in regular cycles of control and release [···] Control is required by capitalism so that production continues, and release is necessary so that the endless stream of products produced in a capitalist society is ultimately consumed." Working Monday to Friday and enjoying the weekend, dieting and indulging: women are the ideal consumers in the multimillion-pound beauty industry.

However, alternative feminist views emphasise a women's agency and creativity in participating in certain beauty practices (Liebelt 2022: 210). Kathy Davis (2003: 80) contests that many "feminists have tended to view such women [those who engage in aesthetic body modification] as the duped and manipulated victims of the feminine beauty culture". Rather than structural oppression, (post-)feminist thought in the early 2000s linked beauty with female self-expression, self-care, and active investment in sexual identity (Liebelt 2022: 210).

Mary Douglas' *Natural Symbols* (1970) highlights the cultural implications of the body as a symbol. John Berger's (2003: 7) *Ways of Seeing* emphasises that sight is the first sense we use to understand the world. The importance of appearance in most cultures is an extremely relevant way of creating and maintaining social relations. It is understandable, then, that body alterations are a method of changing how we are viewed and hence, our status within society.

> "Our bodies transmit a dizzying array of complex information about ourselves, with or without our intention, and we and other members of our culture tend to be expert at reading those culturally specific meanings almost Instantaneously" (Reischer & Koo 2004: 300).

In modern society, it is easier to view body modifications such as tattoos, piercings and alternative hairstyles as a form of artistic self-expression. However, it is slightly more difficult to view an industry such as eyelash extensions or plastic surgery as simply creativity when it is so gendered towards women, with the intention of attaining female beauty ideals that are increasingly becoming a globally homogenous, celebrity 'Instagram face'. A woman is seen to be doing well if she appears to look well. Reischer & Koo (2004: 300) highlight that due to extreme procedures or dieting, women become consumed by the pursuit of this ideal, and less time is spent on other "socially relevant projects [···] Thus, the ideal gendered body does not merely remain in the realm of the symbolic; its power lies in its ability to directly influence behaviour within the social domain." (300)

A constantly evolving vocabulary to label certain human 'imperfections' – such as my own 'hooded eyelids' – further enforces a growing market of 'fixes' for these flaws, such as eyelash extensions or fox-eye surgery. "We are all affected by the forceful images of beauty. They make us dream and they haunt us, even if we consider ourselves unaffected by or opposed to them." (Liebelt 2022: 211) Following Sander Gilman's (1998: xi) argument, aesthetic procedures being more socially accepted and popular convey that these surgeries not only alter bodily imperfections but also heal or fix the psyche – a psyche harmed by societal stigma that surrounds the body. Thus, aesthetic procedures have two dimensions: improving the imperfections of the physical body while also fixing the damaged psyche. As a result, these beauty practices can be viewed as a kind of psychotherapy.

Moreover, there is no doubt that the gossiping or talk therapy that beauty technicians engage in with their clients fosters a sense of community and builds relations and trust. In a world with decreasing human interactions – for instance, shopkeepers being replaced with machines – the act of going to the salon and interacting with other women feels incredibly valuable. As Emma Dabiri (2019) highlighted in D*on't Touch My Hair*, for many Black women, the process of hair braiding can be an important part of cultivating social connections that are increasingly reduced to transactional, rushed experiences under neoliberalism. Although transactional and inherently gendered, beauty practices do also offer relief for the psyche under the intense cultural beauty expectations. Above all, building relationships with our 'salon girlies' and spending an hour with the same lash artist every other week in a safe, female environment feels special, and can also be a powerful act of defiance and community against a system that depersonalises everything.

References

BERGER, J. (2003) Ways of seeing. London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books.

DABIRI, E. (2019) Don't touch my hair. London: Penguin Books.

DAVIS, K. (2003) Dubious equalities and embodied differences: Cultural studies on cosmetic surgery. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

DOUGLAS, M. (1970) Natural symbols: Explorations in cosmology. New York: Pantheon Books.

GILMAN, S. (1998) Creating beauty to cure the soul. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

LIEBELT, C. (2022) Beauty: What makes us dream, what haunts us. Feminist Anthropology 3: 206–213.

RAMŠAK, M. (2024) The anthropology of smell. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland AG.

REISCHER, E. & K.S. KOO (2004) The body beautiful: Symbolism and agency in the social world. Annual Review of Anthropology 33: 297–317.

WOLF, N. (1991) The beauty myth: How images of women are used against women. New York: William Morrow & Co.