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The Chimera Manifesto. "The animalization of the female body"

An essay about aesthetic medicine

Visual Ethnography

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Abstract:
In Greek mythology, the Chimera is a monstrous creature composed of various animals. Etymologically related, "Chimeric" refers to something "fantastic or imaginary." This visual essay is dedicated to (de)constructing the modern Chimera. This fantastical female being comprises parts from rabbits, crows, turkeys, and bats. It carries bananas on the back of its thighs and sports saddlebags.
Incorporating Donna Haraway's Cyborg Manifesto, my focus extends beyond the
cyborg—an amalgam of machine and biology existing in both real and fictional
domains—to her adept utilization of irony. Recognizing that irony is humor but also a serious game, it functions as a rhetorical strategy and a political method. More than just a method, it becomes a manifesto.
Through years of feminist research on the construction, reinvention, commodification, and medicalization of the female body, I stumbled upon terms like 'bunny lines'; 'crow's feet', 'banana rolls', 'turkey neck', and 'bat wings', crafted to define unique conditions of the female body. In this provocative visual essay, using ethnographic data, social media research and AI-generated images, I intend to delve into how women's bodies are reconfigured in the realm of plastic surgery, à-la-carte aesthetic procedures and the liberal market. The aim is to be, more than anything, as Haraway encourages, blasphemous.

Keywords
Visual essay; medicalization; animalization; aesthetic medicine; feminist research

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Introduction

This marks my third ballet class—a childhood dream I've only recently realized at the age of almost forty. Instead of a pink tutu, I'm wearing a black bodysuit that hugs my curves. My instructor, a former Bolshoi dancer, directs her commands across the room, but they feel personally aimed at me: "Light, light. Wave your arms, keep your shoulders still." I strive to concentrate on immobilizing my shoulders while moving my arms gracefully. Yet, the image reflected at me from the mirrors that line the room tells a different story. My flabby arms quiver with self-doubt. I am not the graceful swan the Bolshoi instructor demands; instead, I feel like a bat desperately trying to escape the scrutiny of the mirrors that seem to observe me from all angles.

For years, I have delved into the realm of aesthetic transformations in women's bodies. Through interviews with women undergoing these changes and with aesthetic medical practitioners who perform them, I have sought to understand the motivations and experiences behind these transformations. While interviews remain my preferred method, I also utilize social media as an endless wellspring of research. Some time ago, while casually browsing through Instagram, I stumbled upon an advertisement from a beauty clinic that I followed. It caught my attention as it was promoting a treatment for something called 'bunny lines'. Intrigued, I paused and scrolled back to learn more. What exactly were bunny lines? As it turns out, 'bunny lines', also known as 'bunny noses', are subtle diagonal wrinkles that develop beside the nose, originating from the inner corner of the eye. These lines become more pronounced when individuals smile or speak, as the repetitive contraction of the nasal muscle leads to the formation of marks that, over time, deepen and become visible even without facial expression.

Initially, I dismissed the concept of bunny lines as a playful and harmless comparison to animal features. However, as my research progressed, I encountered numerous other terms that echoed this pattern. 'Bunny lines' (Image 1); 'bat wings' (Image 2); 'crow's feet' (Image 3); 'turkey neck' (Image 4) - these descriptors are commonly employed by practitioners of aesthetic medicine to designate various parts of a woman's body, drawing parallels to animals. It is noteworthy to observe the broader sociocultural impact of these expressions, as they transcend their original context within the medical sphere and infiltrate the vernacular of everyday discourse.

Maria, one of my research participants, consistently undergoes Botox injections to address her 'crow's feet'—the periorbital wrinkles that concern her. Throughout our conversations, she has consistently referred to them using this 'medicalized' term. Conversely, Sofia, another acquaintance, harbors disdain for her 'turkey neck', often opting to conceal it with turtlenecks and actively saving money for a laser treatment promising to rectify the perceived sagging of her neck. As for myself and my 'bat wings', the loose skin under my arms, I am opting to avoid surgery a brachioplasty—a surgical procedure known for its demanding nature and conspicuous scarring and instead focus actively on dedicated weightlifting at the gym.

One could argue that the use of animal characteristics as designations is somewhat simplistic, given that terms like 'periorbital wrinkles', 'submental skin laxity' (sagging skin), or 'excess fat and skin from the upper arms' are long and hard-to-say names. In contrast, the animal-inspired terms are visually striking and easily memorable. However, I contend that this phenomenon underscores the pervasive influence of aesthetic ideals and beauty standards, which not only shape medical terminology but also permeate popular culture and language. Such linguistic conventions serve as potent indicators of societal attitudes towards beauty, aging, and bodily aesthetics, reflecting and perpetuating existing norms and expectations surrounding femininity and the idealized female form.

Using "The Cyborg Manifest" (1985) from Donna Haraway as an inspiration, I aim to explore in this essay/manifesto how the language of medicine,

coupled with the animalization of the female body, positions it as a prime locus for various forms of intervention and governance. For my argument, I integrate the concepts of medicalization, biomedicalization, and, when concatenated within the current economic paradigm, I suggest that the animalization of certain aspects of the ageing female body within the realm of medical practice is far from innocuous.

As a visual essay, my aim is not to formulate an exhaustive statement but to contribute to the debate on the medicalization of beauty in the female body, or, as Haraway suggests, it is a "call to unity for change" (45). For the images accompanying this essay, I employed OpenAI. ChatGPT (GPT-3.5) under my instructions to produce illustrations aimed at capturing the readers' full imagination.

Figure 1 © Women with 'bunny lines'. Generated by OpenAI. ChatGPT (GPT-3.5), 2024.

From the medicalization of the female body to the biomedicalization of society

Briefly, let's introduce the medicalization of the body. As a widely discussed topic (e.g. Foucault 2003; Scheper-Hugues 1986) it was first introduced by Irving Zola (1972), an American activist and writer in medical sociology and disability rights, to explain how medical practices expanded their authority and jurisdiction/control into various aspects of people's lives. Initially, medicalization was observed when certain social issues (such as alcoholism, homosexuality, abortion or drug addiction) were deemed morally problematic and fell within the domain of medicine. The medical sociologist Catherine Riess-

man (1983: 47-48) further elaborates that medicalization involves two interconnected processes: first, assigning medical meanings to certain conditions and behaviors, defining them in terms of health and illness; and second, using medical practices to manage or control experiences considered problematic or deviating from social norms.

The triumph of medicalization has been attributed to various factors: some argue for "medical imperialism," a concept of medico-legal expansion (Illich 1976), while others suggest that the increasing complexity of medical knowledge, facilitated by technological advancements, legitimizes this process (Zola 1972). In the same way, medicalization can occur at different levels, conceptually, when medical terminology defines a problem, and institutionally, when clinicians validate this issue (Conrad and Schneider 1980). It is the validation by healthcare practitioners that I am particularly interested in exploring further within the context of medicalization - while refraining from questioning the inherent problematic nature of sagging skin, given that pathologization predominantly occurs on an aesthetic plane, the evolution towards a moral dilemma within medical discourse emerges through the framing of this issue as one related to health.

In "Naissance de la clinique: Une Archéologie du regard médical," originally published in 1962, Michel Foucault analyzes the emergence of the clinical gaze and how medical knowledge and language shape and regulate both individual bodies and society. Foucault argues that medical knowledge, terminology, and practices are not neutral but imbued with power relations that construct reality, exerting influence over individuals and shaping society's norms and behaviors. As the biomedicine or modern medicine emerged towards the end of the 18th century, when medicine "...proposed a scientific discourse on the individual" (Foucault 2003: 10), this restructuring of knowledge is linked to two fundamental and inseparable foundations: a new perspective and a new medical language. The new language thus represents the transference of this new perspective into the expressible, and it is "the implicit work of language in the description that authorizes the transformation of the symptom into a sign, the transition from sickness to disease, and the individual's access to the conceptual" (*ibid* 129). In essence, this conception suggests that a problem only gains recognition and legitimacy when it receives scientific validation, by someone authorized to that. Conversely, when an issue is identified by someone with the same authority, it is effectively brought into existence.

The medicalization of the body, although not exclusive to women, is quite insidious in the female body, especially when it comes to issues exclusive to the female body, such as menopause (e.g. Martin 1988), menstruation (e.g. Martin 1988), pregnancy, and childbirth (e.g. Nisha 202). As Donna Haraway (2016: 52) positions: women "are excruciatingly conscious of what it means to have a historically constituted body."

However, in recent years, the nature of medicalization itself has undergone a transformation as techno-scientific innovations have begun to reshape medicine from the 'inside out' (Clark et al. 2010: 164). Within the context of the industrial revolution, 'Big Science' has evolved into 'Big Technology' within 'biomedicalization', a concept shaped to describe the increasingly intricate and multi-faceted processes of medicalization that are being reshaped by social practices emerging from an increasingly techno-scientific approach to medicine (Clark et al. 2010: 164). Advances in genetics, reproductive technologies, cell therapy, psychopharmacology, and other fields constitute a new health really that intersects with the consumer market (Rabinow 1992; Rose 2007).

Since the publication of "The Biomedicalization of Aging: Dangers and Dilemmas" by Carroll L. Estes and Elizabeth A. Binney in 1989, the rapid advancements in biomedical sciences and geriatric medical care have continued to influence perceptions of the aging body and expectations regarding medical interventions in old age. This seminal article brought attention the portrayal of aging as a medical issue or 'pathology'. Since then, we have observed

a substantial endeavor within the medical field to address, prevent, delay, conceal, and ultimately manage aging. Within this context, aesthetic medicine, as a discipline where the enhancement of appearance intersects with medical practices, has seen the introduction of various technologies aimed at mitigating the visible manifestations of the aging process on the body. As my friend Sofia explains, her dermatologist recommended undergoing a 'laser' treatment. By heating the deeper layers of the skin, which stimulates collagen production, the laser procedure aims to enhance skin density, firmness, and visibly tighten the skin, resulting in a more youthful appearance.

Let's take a moment to contemplate the concept of the 'laser' and its scientific apparatus. LASER stands for "light amplification by stimulated emission of radiation" it operates through resonance effects, resulting in a coherent electromagnetic field (TechTarget n.d.). The term 'laser' encompasses various types, including those utilizing crystals, glass, semiconductors, gases, liquids, high-energy electron beams, and even gelatin doped with suitable materials to generate laser beams. Today, lasers find applications in diverse fields, ranging from drilling holes in hard materials and alignment in tunnel boring to long-distance measurement, compact disk readers, microsurgery, or permanent hair removal.

Laser technology serves as a prime example of how 'big technology' has become pervasive. Utilizing lasers for procedures like treating sagging skin or removing unwanted hair no longer evokes surprise or excitement; instead, it represents the trivialization of everyday consumption. Sofia is contemplating undergoing the treatment as soon as she can afford it. At no point does she question the safety of the technology or consider its long-term consequences. Instead, her primary concern is whether the treatment will prove effective enough to justify spending a portion of her savings. These technologies are increasingly integrated into various facets of daily life and the experience of health and illness, shaping new subjectivities, identities, and biosocialities—new social formations constructed around and through these identities (Rabinow 1992).

Another noteworthy aspect of biomedicalization is the extension of medical authority beyond health itself—beyond illness or unfavorable social conditions—and how its commodification intersects with moral and ethical responsibilities.

Maria, my other interlocutor, regularly undergoes Botox injections for her peri orbicular wrinkles—the infamous 'crow's feet'. Despite the significant expense, she views it not as a frivolous expenditure but as an investment. As a mother of two children and with a demanding job as a real estate agent, Maria feels the need to always look her best. She feels compelled not only to fulfill her role as a mother but also to present herself as a successful executive who can effectively balance family, work, social life, and self-care. She also cannot bear to witness her face aging, wrinkling, and *"succumbing to the passage of time"*. As she does not perceive herself as an old woman because she does not feel like one, Maria's subjective construction is rooted not only in how she presents herself to others but in her self-perception, her body, and her image of herself.

As anthropologist David Le Breton (2006) emphasizes, the body is not only shaped by the social and cultural context in which individuals exist but also serves as the foundation for their relationship with the world. From the body, intricate and essential meanings emerge, guiding individuals through their collective experiences. By intertwining the concept of individuality with vision, Le Breton positions sight as the foremost sense, imbued with personality. Thus, appearance becomes the individual's visual representation, perceived by others through sight.

It acquires a fundamental significance by fostering a distinction between the self and the other, delineating individual boundaries based on each person's image and its associated attributes, qualities, and characteristics (Le

Breton 2006; 2016). Consequently, an individual's relationship with the world is imbued and influenced by their identity and corporeality, both integral components of their overall identity. For Maria, concealing wrinkles around her eyes signifies avoiding the outward manifestation of aging, both to herself and to others, to dissociate from this natural process. Only those who look old can be considered old?

Figure 2 © Women with 'bat wings'. Generated by OpenAI. ChatGPT (GPT-3.5), 2024.

The body under [moral] construction

The gaze of others holds considerable power in shaping perceptions of the self. Whether intentional or subconscious, the way others look at us carries implicit judgments and evaluations. This gaze can influence how individuals perceive themselves and how they navigate social interactions, as it underscores the importance of social context and interpersonal dynamics in shaping self-perception and identity formation. Sofia, however, looks at her neck in the opposite way to Maria. For Maria, removing wrinkles is a way of seeing - or not seeing - herself grow old, for Sofia, the presence of a sagging neck evokes feelings of shame. Concealing it with a scarf or turtleneck serves as a shield against external scrutiny, she explains her rationale: *"Others shouldn't witness my neck trembling with every word I speak. It's repugnant."* Sofia, a 49-year-old single woman without children also concerns about how her slightly sagging neck, a sign of decline of age, might affect her appeal to men. This association of her aging body with a perceived loss of femininity reflects a broader societal narrative where the female body's waning reproductive capacity is equated with diminished heterosexual attractiveness.

In her renowned work "The Beauty Myth" (1991), Naomi Wolf presents the concept of a modern form of discrimination against women, revolving around the pervasive influence of beauty standards. According to Wolf, female identity is increasingly expected to be centered on beauty, creating a societal framework where women feel compelled to conform to these standards. She argues that the concept of female beauty, historically constructed to uphold male and patriarchal dominance, has evolved into a powerful currency system akin to the "gold standard" (*ibid* 12). In a similar vein, Sandra Bartky (1988) claims that while individuals are born male or female, the attributes of masculinity and femininity are socially constructed rather than inherent traits. Bartky suggests that disciplinary techniques are employed to mold the body into a form that conforms to culturally defined standards of femininity. According to her, "gestures and appearances are carefully crafted to align with societal expectations of femininity" (*ibid* 132). At the same time, Susan Bordo, in her collection of essays titled "Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body" (1993), delves into ideologies surrounding the modern female body and its commodification. Bordo highlights the relentless cultural pressures for physical perfection, which result in the cultivation of compliant and self-disciplined bodies. These bodies, valued by society, are seen as commodities that women must attain to cater to the male gaze and gain societal acceptance.

Feminist thinkers like Wolf, Bartky, and Bordo, who draw from Foucauldian theory, offer perspectives on how society constructs, manipulates, and theorizes about the female body. However, it is crucial to comprehend these perspectives within the broader contemporary social context. Sociologists like Mike Featherstone (1991), Shilling (1993) and Giddens (1991) have shed light on the notion that the body is regarded as a project requiring ongoing refinement and transformation, serving as a fundamental component of self-identity and functioning as a medium for self-expression. The body, viewed as an ongoing project subject to continual human intervention and revision (Giddens, 1991:218), stands as a cornerstone of late modernity. Maria, reducing wrinkles on her face, Sofia hiding her neck, or myself lifting heavier weights at the gym, perceive ourselves as individuals tasked with caring for our bodies through both aesthetic techniques and deliberate choices. Within this framework, the modern conception of the body aligns with the notion that it should be actively shaped and cultivated rather than passively accepted (Grosz, 1994; Budgeon, 2003; Coleman, 2008, 2009; Colebrook, 2000).

In "Throwing Like a Girl" (1980), Iris Marion Young asserts that women are socialized to perceive and interact with their bodies in distinct ways from men. She argues that the difference in how men and women typically move and perceive their bodies is not biological but socially constructed. This socialization influences women's self-image, limiting their perceptions of their own capabilities and reinforcing the dichotomy between body and mind, as the same time different socializations contributes to the perpetuation of gender inequalities and restricts women's potential in various areas of life. While women are encouraged to favor delicacy and grace over strength and physical prowess, athletic abilities are often associated with masculinity. Indeed, terms like 'crow's feet', 'bat wings', and 'turkey neck' are not exclusive to the female body, as evidenced by various references on plastic surgeons' and aesthetic doctors' websites. Nevertheless, as women's appearances tend to be more meticulously scripted and scrutinized compared to men's (Jackson 1992; Weitz 2001), and as an illustration of the neoliberal subject, women are urged to be mindful of their bodies and to conform them to the prevailing aesthetic norms of society.

The higher incidence of decaying physical features on the female body is often attributed to 'hormonal issues'. Yet, this explanation reflects the uneven medicalization of gendered bodily experiences. Rather than solely focusing on the biological aspects of hormonal influences, it's essential to examine how such explanations serve to naturalize and normalize gendered bodily changes.

The assertion that 'women, due to hormonal changes, are more prone to sagging skin' places the burden on women as individuals to address and resolve these issues, thereby perpetuating gendered expectations and inequalities.

The concept of moralization, which I briefly mentioned earlier, warrants further elaboration. While medicalization pertains to the legal and juridical decisions made by doctors regarding bodily processes, biomedicalization takes this a step further by emphasizing individual moral responsibilities related to health management. This includes actions such as accessing knowledge, self-surveillance, preventive measures, and risk assessment (Clark et al. 2010). Social theorist Nikolas Rose (2007) highlights the emergence of 'somatic ethics', where values surrounding life are centered on the body and interventions upon it. Continuous efforts to enhance the body's functionality, longevity, and vitality provide individuals with greater autonomy to actively shape their lives through informed choices infused with hope. Within this framework, individuals become 'somatic subjects', whose self-perception and decision-making are influenced by biomedical discourse and practices.

Figure 3 © Women with 'crow's feet' Generated by OpenAI. ChatGPT (GPT-3.5), 2024.

Considering the body functions not as simply a natural foundation or a passive surface upon which meanings are inscribed by systems of signification, not as object but an *event* (Budgeon 2003:36), this perspective invites us to consider the fluidity of the body and how the self is intimately intertwined with embodied experiences. In this context, the notion of self-reflexivity emerges, suggesting that the body can be intentionally shaped to convey narratives of self-awareness and introspection. Considering the question "only

those who look old can be considered old?" through this lens implies that the markers of aging, typically evident on the body, can be altered through increasingly sophisticated techniques. It is through these transformations—and perhaps more significantly, the willingness to undergo them—that individuals signal their refusal to be defined by age alone. Aging becomes not merely a biological process, but an attitude—one that embraces ongoing change and the perpetual state of becoming.

Sociologists such as Mike Featherstone and Hepworth (1991) have argued that the process of ageing in contemporary society encourages individuals to devise "flexible biographical" narratives. That means the "modernization of ageing", a construction, a maintenance of a new identity that "evolves a distancing from deep old age – a distancing which is achieved through flexible adjustments to the gradually blurring boundaries of adult life" (1991:385). "Flexible" emerges as a pivotal term within the neoliberal discourse surrounding the body, reflecting the notion that contemporary societies are defined by their capacity for change and adaptability (Martin, 1994). This concept of "becoming" underscores the continuous process of self-performativity, wherein individuals actively construct and redefine their identities over time (Shillling 1993: 5). It suggests that individuals are engaged in a perpetual project of self-formation that extends beyond the physical body, encompassing various aspects of personal identity. Consumer culture (Slater, 1997) further reinforces the centrality of the body in self-expression, promoting the consumption of techniques and body disciplines as means of shaping and enhancing one's physical appearance.

Beauty work is hard work

In her book "Skintight: An Anatomy of Cosmetic Surgery" (2008), Meredith Jones examines the phenomenon of "makeover culture" through the lens of cosmetic surgery. Jones explores how cosmetic surgery has become increasingly normalized and commodified within contemporary society, shaping notions of beauty, identity, and self-improvement. As she argues that makeover culture promotes ideals of physical perfection and consumerism, it also encourages individuals to seek surgical interventions in pursuit of an idealized appearance. So imbricated in the consumer culture, it configures the socio-cultural canon that values the "constant renewals of the self" (*ibid* 2).

'Becoming' entails a renegotiation of individual identities, characterized by both fluidity and a sense of permanence. Despite its mutable nature, 'becoming' is far from effortless. It demands significant investment in terms of time, money, personal energy, predisposition and taking risks. A considerable portion of this investment is directed towards shaping our outward appearance. Whether it's for personal satisfaction, social acceptance, or adherence to prevailing aesthetic norms, attaining a desirable appearance takes on paramount importance within this context, determining one's social acceptability.

Beauty practices and self-presentation play a significant role in shaping contemporary notions of femininity, especially within the context of market-driven ideologies that have reshaped notions of women's empowerment. In today's consumer culture, beauty is often commodified and marketed as a means of self-enhancement and empowerment, perpetuating certain ideals of femininity that align with market values (e.g. McRobbie 2008; Gill 2017; Banet-Weiser 2012). From cosmetics and skincare products to fashion and plastic surgery, there is a vast industry dedicated to promoting beauty ideals and products that promise to enhance one's appearance. This commodification of beauty reinforces the idea that femininity is closely tied to physical attractiveness and appearance. Market-driven ideologies, particularly within neoliberal capitalism, emphasize individualism, self-improvement, and consumer choice, encouraging women to invest in beauty practices and products as a form of self-care and self-expression, with the promise of empowerment through personal transformation.

From the notion that physically attractive individuals are perceived as happier or more successful (Dion et al. 1972) to being associated with talent (Landy and Sigall 1974), attractiveness today is often viewed as a marker of status—social, economic, and moral. Studies have demonstrated that appearance plays a pivotal role in self-perception and achievement, particularly for women, whose bodies and appearance are intricately intertwined with their self-definition and self-esteem (e.g. Tiggemann 1994). The proliferation of aesthetic medicine parallels the overemphasis on physical appearance, evident in the increasing array of available procedures, the rising number of practitioners, and the growing financial accessibility to such treatments. The discourse promoting conformity to beauty standards is often rationalized through the medicalization of the body. Here, variations in physical appearance are appropriated by biomedical rationality, which not only lends a veneer of scientific legitimacy to the discourse but also suggests remedies—techniques exclusive to its practitioners—for correcting perceived flaws.

Eugenia Kaw (1993) pioneered the examination of the medicalization of racial features and cosmetic surgery, focusing on Asian-American women as her subjects of study. She posits that women opting for cosmetic surgery procedures such as eyelid reconstruction or nose bridge augmentation have internalized gender and racial ideologies that advocate for body modification. Through the legitimizing lens of scientific rationality, medical practitioners reinforce gender and racial stereotypes, contributing to the perpetuation of a consumer-driven culture. The use of terms like 'small' or 'flat' to describe facial features, coupled with the association of these features with negative behavioral characteristics such as 'dullness', 'passivity', or 'lack of emotion', reflects a perpetuation of racial and gender prejudice within the medical field. This phenomenon underscores the persistence of beauty standards that prescribe specific facial features as ideal, while simultaneously promoting the notion that beauty should be a universal goal for all women (Kaw 1993: 75). This perpetuation of narrow beauty ideals not only reinforces societal biases but also marginalizes individuals who do not conform to these standards, contributing to the perpetuation of systemic inequalities. Such biases can have detrimental effects on individuals' self-esteem, mental health, and overall well-being. However, it is important to underline, as I note elsewhere (Pires, in press), both women and aesthetic doctors, albeit with different degrees of influence and outcomes, collectively contribute to the formulation and perpetuation of perceived physical distinctions that contribute to the naturalization of cultural aesthetic norms.

The medicalization of beauty underscores a complex interaction between medical practices, cultural norms, and the construction of individual identity. It is crucial to recognize that, as a dynamic process, what is deemed "normal" or "acceptable" within the context of aesthetic medicine does not necessarily imply conformity to what is most prevalent or typical in a population. Instead, it entails adherence to a specific predetermined standard of beauty that is shaped and influenced by cultural ideals, social factors, media representations, and commercial interests. As Foucault reminds us, power should be perceived not merely as a repressive force but also as a productive one, namely the capacity to produce bodies (Ahmed 2002).

Aesthetic interventions, such as cosmetic surgery or dermatological procedures, play a significant role in shaping beauty standards by offering individuals the means to modify their appearance to align with these predetermined ideals. Through these interventions, individuals seek to attain a body that conforms to the socially constructed norms of attractiveness and desirability. In this way, aesthetic medicine contributes to the normalization of certain physical traits or features that are deemed desirable within a particular cultural context. Images of surgically enhanced bodies, often portrayed as aspirational or ideal, become normalized through their frequent depiction in advertising, fashion magazines, and social media platforms. As a result, these images come to represent the standard of beauty against which individuals,

frequently women, measure themselves, further reinforcing the normalization of aesthetic interventions as a means of achieving beauty ideals. At the same way, the portrayal of bodies in the media serves not as unattainable ideals but as potentials for "becoming." Bodies are negotiated in relation to exposure to these images, fostering a continuously open process that allows for "new experiences" (Budgeon 2003). The body represents a "dynamic and shifting boundary ... a threshold across which the subject's lived experience of the world is realized" (McNay 1999: 98). The body as an object is inherently intertwined with the self as a subject: if embodied identity is culturally constructed, it is individually negotiated.

While I have previously examined the medicalization of beauty, it is essential to refocus this discussion on the transformative shift from describing female physical traits as 'dull' or 'flat' to likening them to animal characteristics and integrate this narrative in the contemporary biopolitics.

From medicalization to animalization

After my ballet class, on the way home, I found myself wondering why I linked my flabby arms specifically to those of a bat and not to another animal. Are bats the only creatures with floppy limbs? What about the delicate, airy feathers of a hummingbird, for instance? Why resort to using a bat, turkey, or crow in a derogatory manner to depict female body parts?

This issue arises from a broader discourse on female objectification. Academics Barbara Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts (1997), in their examination of social discourses surrounding the construction of the female body as objects for visual consumption, assert that Western societies treat women's bodies differently from men's bodies. Women are often regarded as bodies existing solely for the use or consumption of others, stripped of their individuality and personality. The authors argue that women's bodies, perceived as inactive and primarily passive objects for the male gaze and societal consumption, give rise to a dual effect known as self-objectification, encompassing both external and internal objectification. Through their daily experiences, the constant objectification of women poses significant risks to well-being and mental health, as evidenced by studies linking it to issues such as eating disorders, depression, and sexual dysfunction (e.g. Calogero et al. 2005; Tiggemann, 2011).

As objectification pertains to reducing individuals to objects or commodities for consumption, it is intrinsically linked to mechanistic dehumanization. Dehumanization, on the other hand, involves the perception of others as less than fully human. In feminist literature, dehumanization is frequently discussed in the context of the representation of women in pornography (LeMoncheck 1985; MacKinnon 1987), aligning with Fredrickson and Roberts' (1997) argument that the sexual objectification of women extends beyond specific instances to permeate broader cultural norms. Further, the American psychologist Herbert Kelmar (1976) examines the intersection of dehumanization with moral dimensions. By depriving individuals of their 'identity', defined as the capacity to be recognized as an "individual, autonomous being, distinguishable from others, capable of making choices" (*ibid* 301), individuals are reduced to a state of amorality, rendering them incapable of eliciting compassion or empathy. This form of dehumanization is commonly observed in attitudes towards immigrants or racial stereotypes, as depicted by psychologist Nick Haslam (2006), wherein individuals are attributed characteristics such as a lack of control, civility, or refinement. Although dehumanization is undoubtedly most often mentioned in relation to ethnicity or race (Haslam 2006), it represents a hierarchy created between humans: the other "barbarians who lack culture, self-control, moral sensitivity and cognitive capacity (*ibid* 252).

Further, Haslam (2006) has expanded on the concept of dehumanization, delineating between two distinct forms: animalistic dehumanization, which involves the denial of uniquely human attributes that distinguish humans from animals, such as civility and refinement, and mechanistic dehu-

manization, which entails the denial of fundamental aspects of human nature, such as emotionality, openness, and depth.

As mechanistic dehumanization involves denying essentially human attributes to individuals perceived as psychologically or socially distant, and often accompanied by indifference, a lack of empathy, or a stereotyped and abstract view of the other, the animalistic dehumanization entails singular concepts. This form of dehumanization occurs when individuals are stripped of uniquely human attributes and instead characterized as "unrefined, uncouth, and driven by instinctual motives" (Morris et al. 2018). Haslam et al. (2007) further emphasize that these two forms of dehumanization—animalistic and mechanistic—are not entirely distinct and may overlap.

The female body appears to be particularly susceptible to various forms of dehumanization. When women are sexualized, they are often denied uniquely human traits and instead associated with animalistic dehumanization (Morris et al. 2018; Vaes et al. 2011). On the other hand, appearance-focused objectification is theorized to involve dehumanization through associations with objects rather than animals (Morris et al. 2018). As sex and human animality share a reciprocal link (Gondenderg et al. 2002), the last hypothesis seems to encompass a contradiction. Morris and colleagues (2016) highlight that when a woman emphasizes her appearance, particularly beauty that is not primarily sexual in nature, she is not animalized but rather mechanistically dehumanized. In this context, she is treated as a decorative object valued for her beauty, existing primarily to be seen and enjoyed. However, the example drawn from the field of aesthetic medicine illustrates how the distinction between the two forms of dehumanization is frequently blurred (although the boundaries between beauty and sexuality are as unstable as their highly subjective criteria).

As animalistic dehumanization refers to the perception of the other as more 'animal-like' and less human, is not only derogatory but infers the moral inferiority and instrumentalization that they suffer. In essence, by likening certain parts of a woman's body to those of an animal, it becomes apparent how she is positioned to be consumed, reflecting a dynamic similar of our treatment of most animals.

Beyond being merely an object, female beauty, whether sexualized or not, functions to be consumed and, through the realm of aesthetic medicine, crafted, altered, and enhanced. This, I stand, underscores the overarching objective of animalistic dehumanization.

Feminist theory, particularly ecofeminist theory, offers valuable insights into this discourse. Ecofeminism represents a theoretical and activist movement that delves into the intersection of feminism and environmentalism. By examining the interconnected oppressions faced by women and the natural world, ecofeminism contends that both are subjected to domination under patriarchal and capitalist systems. Notable ecofeminist intellectuals such as Carolyn Merchant, Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies, Greta Gaard and Val Plumwood emphasize the parallels between the subjugation of women and the exploitation of the environment. They argue that these phenomena stem from a shared worldview that prioritizes domination, control, and hierarchical power structures. These perspectives align with the notion that the dehumanization of women serves to perpetuate gender inequality through the propagation of hostile ideologies. Furthermore, ecofeminism underscores the conception of women, in contrast to men, as inherently connected to nature rather than being exclusively situated within cultural constructs (Ortner 1972).

It is through processes of dehumanization that women are relegated to a lower status than men, and in accordance with this, the belief that nature is fragile and in need of protection reinforces the association between nature and womanhood (Salmen & Dhont 2021). By parallel, the interconnectedness among patriarchal gender structures and systems of animal exploitation is also rooted in the belief that meat consumption symbolizes strength, masculinity, and ultimately, power (Adams 1990).

Therefore, when a part of a woman's body is likened to nature, therefore to an animal, it serves as an indicator that she must undergo mediation. In other words, she must be remodel or enhancement to meet the desired expectations in order to be consumed. Notably, it's not the woman as a "whole" who is compared to an animal, as that would be deemed offensive. Instead, by focusing on specific body parts—such as her arms, neck, or eyes—the same objective is achieved in a more insidious manner, that is, to provoke repulsion to prompt action. It's noteworthy that the animals used for comparison are not typically seen as seductive: bats, turkeys, or crows. Upon reflecting on this phenomenon, it becomes palpable that abjection is necessary. Abjection, as anticipated by Julia Kristeva (1982): the visceral reaction of horror, disgust, and repulsion that individuals experience when confronted with something that threatens the boundaries of the self or identity. After all, a turkey, bat, or crow are animals that instinctively repel us, both due to their physical appearance and the characteristics we attribute to them. It is this felling of abjection that compels the woman to feel horror toward that aspect of her body and motivates her to change it. "*It's repugnant*", remember Sofia's word towards her own neck, her dermatologist stated, 'turkey neck'.

As neoliberalism promotes individual responsibility, self-improvement, and market-driven solutions to social issues, plastic surgery and aesthetic medicine serve as tools of improvement but also to self-governance and regulation. As Maria, Sofia, and I are socialized to perceive enhancing our body's attractiveness to value ourselves, not for others but for our own sake. This is believed to elevate our self-esteem, satisfaction, and overall well-being. In this way, individuals are encouraged to govern themselves in accordance with norms of beauty and productivity, thereby internalizing and embodying forms of control over their bodies and lives. Anthropologist Carmen Alvaro Jarrín has usefully introduced the concept of "plastic governmentality" (2017), which offers a framework for comprehending how plastic surgery intersects with neoliberal governance, biopolitical control, and social inequality. While plastic surgery may present opportunities for self-enhancement and social advancement, it also perpetuates disparities and exclusions: access to cosmetic procedures is often restricted to those who can afford them, thus reinforcing existing hierarchies based on race, class, and gender.

It is also imperative to notice that female bodies are not animalized in the same way. As I am writing from my perspective, as a white, cisgender, middle-class heterosexual woman (the same as my friends Sofia and Maria), I am aware that what may seem brutalized to me is a daily reality for other women. Bodies of Black women, bodies of Indigenous women, bodies of Asian women, queer bodies, non-conforming bodies, bodies with disabilities, and so on, are placed in animistic states. Although these bodies are often likened to animals such as gazelles, giraffes, or panthers (Pussetti 2020) it is important to recognize that this comparison serves to perpetuate stereotypical notions about their physical attributes and behaviors. This perpetuation of labels is not merely a coincidental occurrence but rather reflects a broader societal trend influenced by androcentric market forces. In this context, the portrayal of certain bodies as exotic or hypersexualized (as the black female bodies usually are) aligns with the prevailing preferences and desires within consumer markets that are predominantly shaped by patriarchal norms and values. Thus, while seemingly innocuous, these comparisons contribute to the objectification and marginalization of individuals whose bodies do not conform to narrow beauty standards.

Meanwhile, the female body is not exclusively depicted using animal metaphors. Alongside terms like 'bunny lines'; 'crow's feet'; 'bat wings', and 'turkey neck', there are also references to 'love handles'; 'banana rolls (a type of excess bum fat that accumulates just below the buttock area); 'saddle bags' (the accumulation of fat deposits on the outer thighs; 'marionette lines'. While the former may suggest endearing affection, reminiscent of the handles where

love might cling (referring to the sides of the hips), the latter are perhaps more disconcerting, as no one would willingly identify with being compared to a puppet, stripped of life, agency, and autonomy.

Figure 4 © Women with 'turkey neck'. Generated by OpenAI. ChatGPT (GPT-3.5), 2024.

Chimeric Thoughts

Like Haraway's' Cyborg, where the animal/human frontier is blurred, I propose to think the Chimera, as a mythological being, embodying parts of animals - such as a lion's head, a goat's body, and a serpent's – to encompass not only physical characteristics but also the social, cultural, and technological dimensions that today contribute to the construction of femininity. As it can be linked to the notion of and the reshaping of the human experience in the contemporary era, in the context of contemporary aesthetics, it endorses the representation of the diverse and fluid aspects of 'uncanny' female identity.

Abjection, closely intertwined with the Freudian notion of the uncanny, denotes something that is simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar, eliciting feelings of discomfort or unease. The "Uncanny Aesthetics," as proposed by Carmen Alvaro Jarrín and Chiara Pussetti (2021), contemplate the ways in which we are reshaping the human experience in the contemporary era. As they invite us to explore the myriad ways in which these changes manifest in our cultural productions, artistic expressions, and everyday experiences - from the rise of humanoid robots to the manipulation of digital identities, from the emergence of bioart to the commodification of genetic modification, our encounters with the uncanny in contemporary aesthetics compel us to reconsider traditional understandings of humanity, identity, and existence.

I propose to embrace the Chimera, in a way to reconsider traditional understandings of femininity and to embrace the complexities and contradictions inherent in contemporary representations of women. This instigates us to engage with the uncanny aspects of female identity and to navigate the ever-evolving landscape of gender and technology with curiosity but also with critical reflection.

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