



**SAMPLE
CHAPTER**

Under the Skin

A PSYCHOANALYTIC STUDY OF BODY MODIFICATION

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Chapter 1

As you desire me

If I make the lashes dark
And the eyes more bright
And the lips more scarlet,
Or ask if all be right
From mirror to mirror
No vanity's displayed:
I'm looking for the face I had
Before the world was made
(Yeats 1865)

I am looking for the face I had . . . What exactly are we looking for? Yeats hints that it is *the face I had before the world was made*, that is, the face of a person who has not yet had to be an exteriority to itself (i.e. who has not yet assumed the position of observer to itself). It is the face of the 'I' who has not yet had to be separate and had to depend on the other's look. It is the face unblemished by reality, by what we have to bear in ourselves, and with others, as we develop. It is also, he says, the face I *had* – not just past, lost, but also that the self once *possessed*. Indeed what has to be relinquished – what is lost – and what we all keep trying to recreate, more or less compulsively, is the omnipotent state of mind in which one believes one is what one has (e.g. I have a small nose and hence I am 'good'/lovable) (Lemoine-Luccioni 1983), and in which what one has, is of one's own creation, that is, we are the artist *and* the canvas. This excess of narcissism conceals from us what actually defines us: an insufficiency, a lack. It is a state of mind that is inimical to the vicissitudes of desire, and therefore to relating with others because, in its more extreme form, its hallmark is the delusion that the other does not exist.

I am looking for the face I had . . . The past tense that Yeats deploys here is evocative: it speaks to a quality of being that is lost and that we yearn to recapture in the mirror. It evokes a longing for time to stand still. And yet we are what we become and that is always evolving, subject to internal and

external forces we are never completely in charge of. Nowhere are the inexorable changes we must all undergo more enduring and visible than through our changing bodies as we develop: the transition from the visceral togetherness of life inside the womb to adaptation outside the womb, or from the comforts of a child's carefree body to the assault of a pubertal body that runs faster than our mind can walk, or from a potent adult body to the gradual undoing of this body whose integrity breaks down into a series of malfunctioning parts with every passing moment.

How we integrate the biological changes that steadfastly and resolutely lead us towards death would be challenge enough, but our experience of our body is fundamentally shaped by the quality of our relationships with others and, more particularly, whether through our earliest exchanges with others we internalise an image of ourselves as lovable and desirable.

The object of desire

The face I had is the face that has not yet met the other's desire. We both yearn to be the object of desire and fear, or even hate, its inevitable ties. The existence of the other's desire, which is expressed and experienced most concretely through the earliest gaze–touch relationship with the 'object of desire' (Britton 1998), can be, for some people, an experience of being enslaved to, or consumed by, the other.

I am choosing the term *object of desire* as opposed to 'primary object' or 'significant other' to underline the sensory, sensual, bodily components of this earliest relationship and how critical it is to the establishment of a desiring and desirable body-self. This provides the foundation for the expectation that the self will be desirable and loved, and that it can desire and love.

In order to approach the experiential realm of being-in-a-body, it is essential to think about desire. The body, desire and sexuality were at the heart of Freud's account of development, but they appear to have lost currency in much contemporary analytic literature, and consequently analytic theory and practice are all the poorer for it (Fonagy 2006).

I am concerned here with 'desire' in relation to two related processes. First, in order to feel desirable we are dependent on the other's libidinal cathexis of our body self, most crucially in early development, that is, we are dependent on the other's desire for us. Second, and related to the latter, I consider it vital developmentally to have the experience of being able to arouse in the other – in the object of desire – an acknowledgement of the *necessity* of the self to the other as proof of the self's desirability. This, I am suggesting, is an experience that is originally mediated by the felt-to-be desirability of the body self in early development, and of the body self's perceived ability to both elicit and to satisfy the other's desire. I am not suggesting that the (m)other should make the child feel he is 'necessary' in a

way that impinges on his development as a person in his own right. Rather, what is important is to have the experience that it is possible for the self to satisfy the other's desire in an unconditional manner. Of course, these moments are temporary and illusory in one sense – a child cannot fulfil, and should not fulfil, the whole of the (m)other's desire. But feeling, at least some of the time, that we are the ideal for the other is as important developmentally as learning to bear one's limitations and imperfections.

In this respect Lacan's incisive analysis of the dialectic of desire is profound, as he draws attention to the way in which it is not sufficient to be an object of love or of need; what is required, as he puts it, is 'to stand as the *cause* of desire' (Lacan 1977: 81, my italics). Lacan does not root this in the body, but I want to suggest that this 'requirement' is felt acutely at the level of the body self and can be discerned in our attempts to mould the body according to a physical form that we imagine will guarantee us a privileged, exclusive access, and control over the other. In order to more fully grasp the dialectics of desire we need to turn to the visual relationship between self and other.

The field of vision

Throughout life the body remains an exposed site. No matter how much we cover it up, conceal it, even change it, the body never escapes from the imprint of the other through the other's gaze. Sartre, (1943) argued that 'the look' (le regard) is the domain of domination and mastery. It both provides access to its object without requiring contact with the object, but it also, of course, allows the object to have mastery over us. In all these ways the body thus always bears the trace of the other. This fundamental psychic truth has to be somehow integrated into our image of ourselves. Facing the reality of the body thus involves a paradox: it means simultaneously taking ownership of the body, its desires and limitations, and integrating the fact that the body is the site where we meet the other, where we negotiate the meaning of sameness and difference, of dependency and separation.

Sartre (1943) captured very well the interpersonal tension we all have to manage in his discussion of 'the look'. He described two different kinds of looking: there is the me-who-looks (the voyeur), but this me-who-looks is inevitably also the me-who-is-on-view (the spectacle). The tables turn round – always. *The face I had* belongs to a self that omnipotently assumes that its own look is the point in relation to which the world is ordered. The realisation that the self assumes its coherence in relation to the other's perspective is deeply threatening, not least because this other perspective is inaccessible to us in so far as we cannot control in any absolute way the other's thoughts, feelings or perceptions. Being cognisant of our own specularity leads to the discovery that our foundations lie outside of oneself

or, as Sartre (1943) put it, that we ‘exist for the other’. This ‘existing for the other’ implies a state of dependency that, I am suggesting, is experienced first and foremost in the body.

Lacan’s field of vision introduces the central role of desire.¹ For Lacan, however, desire is a linguistic process, detached from any taint of bodily excitation. In this respect Julia Kristeva’s (1995) views – which are an elaboration of Lacan’s – retain what I consider to be an essential connection with the body, through her emphasis on the pre-symbolic dimension of experience.² She is referring here to the space in which meaning is semiotic, that is, below the surface of the speaking being (e.g. bodily energies, rhythm).³ Much of her work has concerned itself with the mind/body dichotomy, showing how bodily energies permeate our signifying practices, and hence how body and mind can never be separated. We will return to her ideas in more depth in Chapter 5. For now, however, it is helpful to stay with Lacan, despite the above caveat, because some of his ideas are nevertheless very pertinent to this discussion.

Lacan (1977) proposes that the other’s gaze, through which the voyeur becomes the spectacle for the other, strips him of his sense of illusory mastery. Lacan thus points out that at the core of human being is an exhibitionistic impulse: in order for us to see ourselves we must be seen. He compares this visual mediation to photography:

in the scopic field, the gaze is outside, I am looked at, that is to say, I am a picture. . . . what determines me, at the most profound level, in the visible, is the gaze that is outside. It is through the gaze that I enter life and it is from the gaze that I receive its effects . . . the gaze is the instrument through which light is embodied and through which. . . I am *photographed*.

(Lacan 1977: 106)

The problem with being a photograph for the other is that it can feel as if we become a still, imprisoned in someone else’s moment over which we have no control. No matter how we present ourselves, we cannot ultimately control what the other sees. This is so because the other’s perception of us is embedded in the shifting matrix of their own unconscious feelings, memories and phantasies, and it is filtered through projective mechanisms that make us either desirable, ‘bad’ or invisible to the other (Silverman 1996).

However desirable we feel, we will probably all nevertheless traverse moments in our lives when we feel dogged by an experience of insufficiency,⁴ of not being desirable *enough*. This subjective experience is rooted first and foremost in the body, and it is in our body that we continue to feel it most viscerally throughout life. We all have to find ways of managing this unsettling experience in ourselves, more or less successfully. We do so sometimes directly through the manipulation of the body, for example,

trying to make ourselves look attractive. This universal, core experience of insufficiency is predicated on an important, if painful, fact of life that shatters our omnipotent strivings: we cannot fulfil the mother's desire in any absolute sense (Freud 1924; Lacan 1977; Kristeva 1982). Indeed, when this phantasy is actualised (as when a child is 'used' by the mother to satisfy her desire), the functioning of the mind is compromised.

We are then faced with a central paradox: we cannot fulfil the mother's desire, yet we bear the imprint of her desire (or lack of) on our body. Throughout life it is the experience of feeling desired by the other that softens the blow to our omnipotence, that gives us respite from an otherwise relentless confrontation with our insufficiency. We replace the lost, early omnipotence through recreating it in the moment we feel desired, when we can feel ourselves to be the ideal for the other as they desire us. We thus search for an ideal image of ourselves in the other. The urgency with which we may seek this is powerfully expressed in Pirandello's play *As You Desire Me* (1930). In a moving exchange between its main protagonist, L'Ignota, whose identity is in question, and Bruno, the husband, whose wife she may or may not be, she implores him to 'look' at her:

Look at me, Bruno, look at me. I have been here for four months. . . .
 Look at me. . . . Let me see myself in your eyes. Look at me, look at me!
 I've created myself in that image, the image I see gazing back at me
 in your eyes. That is now me – as you desire me.

(Pirandello 2005: 47–48)

It can be difficult to reconcile oneself to the fact that it is ultimately only through the other that we can discover and/or rediscover an image of ourselves as ideal. This realisation inevitably confronts the self with the separate existence of the other such that the very person who can bestow on us an image of ourselves as ideal, is the same person who can withdraw it. The inevitable dependency that this discloses may be felt to be deeply threatening for some people. Moreover, if what the (m)other-as-mirror reflects back to us is a blank, or if the image is laced with envy or hatred, then the integrity of the self may be challenged.

Although an idealised image of the body – the body we want to have – is likely to be partly shaped by broad cultural standards, the individual meanings ascribed to the body by significant others play an important role (see Chapters 2 and 3). If we think about idealisation, we need to also consider identificatory processes. Through idealisation, the person invests an other with the power to make the self perfect, which immediately places the self in an identificatory relation to the other. In *On Narcissism* Freud (1914) reminded us that: 'What man projects before him as his ideal is the substitute for the lost narcissism of his childhood' (Freud 1914: 94). The vicissitudes of identification are such that the fate of the idealised other can

be uncertain depending on the self's capacity to grant the other its separateness and autonomy. A healthy identification is inspired, as it were, by the perceived ideal form of the other, but it is not equated with it. Rather it involves 'forming an imaginary alignment' (Silverman 1996: 71) in our minds, acknowledging its source (the object of identification), and then making it our own.

A young woman with profound anxiety about her appearance came for her session one day dressed in exactly the same dress I had worn the previous week. Some years later, when the therapy was ending, and she had made considerable progress, she reflected on this phase of the therapy and observed, laughing: 'Now I would never do that and yet I feel that I do dress a bit like you'. It was her capacity to draw a clear distinction between 'a bit like you' and her early projection of herself into my body such that she had to 'be me', that evidenced the change that had taken place.

If the other is perceived to possess the wholeness or unity of which the self feels deprived, then envy may be mobilised. This particular dynamic has been present in a number of cases of women who have undergone cosmetic surgery where the pursuit of surgery was an enactment of the wish to appropriate the maternal, creative body – what I call the *self-made phantasy* – and so circumvent any dependency on the object of desire (see Chapters 6 and 7). Envy may also be mobilised if the (m)other's own felt insufficiency is projected into the baby's body self.

Even when all is proceeding relatively well in development, narcissistic fragility is inscribed in the body self: the experience of shame is rooted in the body. This is why we are all susceptible, to varying degrees, to the lure of changing the surface of the body, if only through clothes or make up, to make ourselves feel better or to ensure our appeal to the other. The more we are deprived of the experience of being the ideal for the other at least some of the time – and most crucially if this deprivation occurs in the early months – the more difficult it becomes to live in an 'ordinary' (i.e. a body rooted in the reality of its inevitable limitations) body. Idealisation then becomes more urgent, more rigid and uncompromising. Being beautiful can then become a dominant, unyielding organising feature in the internal world – a kind of psychic retreat (Steiner 1993) which is fuelled by the *perfect match phantasy*, that is, the phantasy that through beautifying the surface of the body, the self and the object will be tied together in a mutually admiring gaze. One of the important functions of the good-enough mother, we might say, is to help her baby to live in an ordinary body that *sometimes* can do extraordinary things. Too little libidinal investment by the mother and the body self feels neglected and unloved; too much and it may feel colonised and usurped by the mother's needs and projections.

The colour of desire

Je fais souvent ce rêve étrange et pénétrant
 D'une femme inconnue et que j'aime et qui m'aime
 Et qui n'est chaque fois ni tout a fait la même
 Ni tout a fait une autre, et m'aime et me comprend.

('I often have this strange, affecting dream of an unknown woman, who loves me and whom I love, and who each time is neither quite the same nor quite other, and she loves me and understands me').

Paul Verlaine's (1962) words have always moved me because they speak so directly to the phantasy of finding the mother we have not yet encountered (Olivier 1989), that is, a phantasised mother who will surely love us. Verlaine poignantly captures the notion of repetition in mental life: he understands that this is not the mother we know, and yet she is profoundly connected with the original object of desire. My work with individuals for whom the body has become a problematic site, or the only felt to be possible site for the transformation of the self, has led me to speculate about some possible gender differences, not in the use made of the body, but in the unconscious function of body modification.

The early physical exchanges between mother and baby are vitally important for the establishment of attachment (see Chapters 2 and 3), but they are also central to shaping our experience of ourselves as desirable. This experience is, first and foremost, a bodily experience. For the rest of our lives, our bodies mediate desire. The quality of parental love and of the libidinal cathexis of the body in early life will partly determine how comfortable we feel in our body. Indeed as Schilder (1950) grasped in his landmark, timeless study on the body image, the body is profoundly shaped by the desires (or lack of) that are projected into it by others.⁵

The impact on the self of the (m)other's gaze and touch is one of the primary trajectories through which subjectivity is routed. Through her gaze and her touch the mother invests her baby's body self with her libido. I want to suggest that, for both genders, the too-desiring or the not-desiring-enough mother of early childhood can compromise the development of the body self. Desire lies at the heart of the earliest relationship, which is why I have been emphasising that the baby relates to an object of desire. In turn, he needs to secure his own position as the object of desire for the mother,⁶ and hence he has to manage *her* desire. As Stimmel (2004) reminds us through her reading of the story of the Oedipus myth that foregrounds Jocasta's experience, the mother is faced with the need to separate from her child. Maternal longings and desire have to give way to the necessity of separation and loss. Yet, Stimmel (2004: 1176) contends, that 'a mother's wishes for reunion with her child are not inherently pathological, only potentially so'. Indeed, depending on how desiring she is, and on the

quality of her desire, the mother plays a very significant role in helping the child to feel more or less loved, more or less desirable. Whether she knows it or not, Freud was clear that it is the mother who sets off all the baby's bodily sensations and intense pleasures – she is the 'first seducer':

A child's intercourse with anyone responsible for his care affords him an unending source of sexual excitation and satisfaction from his erotogenic zones. This is so especially since the person who is in charge of him, who, after all, is as a rule his mother, herself regards him with feelings that are derived from her own sexual life. . . . A mother would probably be horrified if she were made aware that all the marks of affection were rousing the children's sexual instinct and preparing for its future intensity . . . moreover if the mother understood more of the high importance of the part played by instincts in mental life as a whole . . . she would spare herself any self-reproaches even after her enlightenment. She is only fulfilling her task in teaching the child to love.

(Freud 1940: 185)

In his mother's arms the baby thus experiences the earliest 'psychic blueprint (and perhaps a corporeal imprint?) of sexual and love relationships to come' (McDougall 1995: 10).

Of course, the baby does not yet possess the means to understand, or to act upon, the inevitable sexual messages emitted by the mother (Laplanche 1989) as she takes care of his bodily hygiene. As Freud (1940) suggests, she inevitably establishes certain parts of his body as erotogenic zones. But the mother's own unconscious mediates her physical gestures and relationship to the baby's body:

Without negating the conscious motivation of the mother's solicitude, her unconscious fantasies are also at work here. In other words, the mother's sexuality is always something in excess of the satisfaction of the infant's need – *an excess* which cannot be accommodated within an infantile psychosomatic structure that is still predominantly situated at the level of need.

(Pacteau 1994: 115; my italics)

The problem posed by this 'excess' of the mother's sexuality is interestingly developed in Lacan's (1982) reading of *Hamlet* as he locates Hamlet's problem as his mother's (Gertrude) desire, placing Gertrude as the 'Other of demand' (Lacan 1982).

Too much desire and the child will recoil, feeling his body to be colonised by the mother's 'demand'. But the absence of a mother's desire can be just as problematic. A mother's inhibitions as she handles the baby's body will

also be indelibly inscribed in the body. The legacy of not being desired is as insidious as the pressure to meet the mother's demand. This may lead to a need to alter the given body in search for a bodily form that will elicit desire. The good-enough mother's task is therefore a challenging one: she has to strike the right level of libidinal investment in the child's body so that the baby feels desired, but not intruded upon.

Importantly, at the intersection of the first stirrings of desire, the little boy and the little girl have an asymmetrical experience in relation to the mother. The little boy is, at birth, exposed to the opposite sex. In this sense desire may flow more easily in the dyad, which is not to say that this is a less complicated path, since for him the challenge lies in how to extricate himself from his Oedipal entanglement. By contrast the little girl, who is not an Oedipal object for her mother, may feel that she simply cannot get enough positive investment in her bodily self,⁷ that she cannot elicit the mother's desire enough, if at all, to shore up her quota of desirability. Instead she has to wait for her turn when, and if, her relationship with her father is more accessible to her. Whereas for men the risk lies in feeling imprisoned by the mother's desire, for the little girl, she may feel that from the start she yearns for another sort of body, the sort of body that elicits the mother's desire (Olivier 1989).

If I were called upon to speculate on gender differences in relation to the underlying experiences of male and female body modifiers I would venture to suggest that in male body modifiers the experience of the mother was more often a stifling one. The body modification serves the function of rescuing the body from the maternal takeover by concretely marking it as separate. I am thus suggesting that the male body modifier perhaps more often carries the burden of excessive and intrusive desire.

In the female body modifier, the experience tends to be more frequently that her body was simply not desired (enough) by the mother and hence she feels compelled to modify it so as to get the 'right' body that will elicit her desire, or she attacks her body, under the guise of making it more beautiful, as a way of signalling her bodily grievance to her mother (i.e. 'You have not given me enough'). Here, I am thus suggesting, that for the woman the body carries the burden of an absence, of a deficit of desire.

Of course, in practice, these distinctions are never so rigid. Moreover, I can think of female patients who share the goal of the male body modifier and vice versa. I am therefore only tentatively suggesting here that there may be interesting trends that distinguish the majority of male and female body modifiers – a hypothesis requiring further investigation.

The body then never ceases to signal the relationship to the mother. The psychic impact of an excess of desire or too little desire may be felt by some very concretely at the level of the body self. Problems arise when the object of desire uncannily merges with the maternal figure of demand or with a more absent, rejecting maternal figure. When body modification is felt to

provide a solution to internal conflicts, we invariably find that the object of desire partakes of the insistent, nagging character of demand, becoming an impossible-to-satisfy internal object in neurosis, and a more terrifying one in psychosis.

In search of the mother's desire: the perfect match phantasy

As I mentioned earlier, the search for an ideal, desirable image of ourselves in the other's eyes can acquire a frantic, manic quality. If Frankenstein's creature had been born in the twenty-first century he might have been tempted to heal his deep narcissistic wounds by taking part in a reality TV makeover show. With its emphasis on metamorphosis and transformation RTV takes on the function of the archaic fairy godmother who can make the *impossible* happen. This is why such shows have widespread appeal: stories of this kind promise us (the viewer) change too.

If these shows promise to realise the 'impossible', we might well wonder who or what is felt to be *impossible*? As I have been suggesting, this impossible thing is the satisfaction of the mother's desire. I am wary of generalisations, but I would like nevertheless to share some observations from work – other than my clinical work – that have led me to speculate about one possible pathway to the use of body modification as the solution to psychic problems. I will use this example specifically to illustrate the enactment of the *perfect match phantasy*. Here the body modification serves the function of creating a perfect, ideal body that will guarantee the mother's love and desire. The subjective experience is of a painful, humiliating insufficiency and this narcissistic wound cures itself by manic flight into changing the body's surface. The perfect match phantasy therefore concerns the *fusion* of an idealised self (very concretely felt to be an idealised body) with an idealised object/body.

Over many years, in my capacity in advising television production companies, and in assessing contestants for RTV shows, I have assessed over two hundred people. I would like to focus here on my detailed assessment of sixteen young girls, aged sixteen years upwards⁸, who had elected to take part in a RTV show that involved a number of interventions to improve their overall presentation, several of which were directly aimed at altering the body (without, however, using any surgery).⁹

I assessed each girl for approximately two hours and made notes during the interviews such that I have a reliable record of what they told me. Of the sixteen girls, thirteen had overtly difficult relationships with their mothers. Eight of these had 'absent' mothers: two mothers had died during early childhood (one shortly after giving birth), two mothers had left the home and not taken the daughter with them, and four had physically present mothers who were, however, absent emotionally (typically depressed).

On meeting these girls it was quickly apparent that they did not inhabit their bodies comfortably – the distinguishing feature being that they seemed more like a caricature of a person. They were either reacting against any hint of femininity, and so presented as masculine both in their physical posture and attire (one young girl arrived in mechanic's overalls) and in their exploits ('I can down a pint quicker than any bloke I know', said one), or they presented as overly sexualised and recounted stories of quite extensive promiscuity, wearing the one-night-stand as an emblem of their adeptness at avoiding any semblance of intimacy and dependency.

Behind the carefully constructed tough veneer (which was concretely expressed through the presentation of their bodily self: tattoos, piercings, choice of clothing, posture) these girls nevertheless revealed considerable fragility. Two of them were in fact excluded from taking part in the programme. The others were well enough (psychiatrically speaking, that is) to take part, yet determined to play out their search for the mother's loving gaze on the screen.

As their stories unfolded, two recurring themes emerged. The first concerned the mostly conscious fantasy of how being seen on TV would enhance popularity, mostly among their peers. Only one girl was explicit in her wish to pursue a career in TV and viewed the programme as a way of securing this. Interestingly, this was not a strong motivation in the other girls.

The second and, I think, by far more powerful motivation concerned the wish to 'prove' their desirability. For the two girls I have chosen to focus on here by way of illustration, I understood this to reflect the mostly unconscious phantasy of finding a desirable physical form that was anticipated to guarantee the mother's loving gaze.

One girl, Ms E., whose mother had abandoned her at a very young age, and who presented as very masculine, put it thus when I asked her why she was keen to take part in the programme:

well . . . I don't know why I want to take part in this really . . . I guess I think it could be a good laugh . . . dressing up . . . I've never had a bra fitting [laughs]. You know, my dad never met anyone else . . . so I guess I had none of the girly stuff – shopping for clothes, make up, that kind of thing . . . like some of my friends had with their mothers.

After I asked her whether she had ever tried to find her mother, she replied:

I don't know where she is now. I don't want to know. I got a letter from her when I was ten and she asked me to send her a picture of me. She

said she wanted to see me and would come to visit. She never did. I don't want her to find out where I am now. What's the point?

I observed that by appearing on TV she was, in a way, making it more likely that her mother might see her. This made her pause for several minutes and then she became tearful:

Damn [punches herself very hard on the leg]. I didn't want to cry!

I asked her why she thought she was now crying:

I hate thinking about her. It always upsets me . . . I guess I have thought at times about why she left, why she did not take me with her. My dad's not good at talking about these things and I think he prefers not to think about the past. So I don't really know why she left. . . . When I was little I used to think it was because of me . . . she was a really pretty woman . . . a bit of a 'loose' woman, my dad said, but I don't know if that's right . . . just as well she can't see me now [looks down at her stained overalls].

The quality of the exchange with Ms E. stood out and the interview was especially moving; she was able to be quite reflective in the end and to think with me about her longing for her mother to see her 'looking at my best'. Although most of the other girls were not as accessible as she was, some of their stories were similarly moving variations on this theme: a longing to be looked at with admiring, loving eyes. One of the striking features was the way in which all but one of the girls excitedly anticipated 'dressing up' with a very childlike quality, imagining the nice clothes they would wear. As I listened to them the image that was conjured in my mind was of them diving into an idealised version of an opulent wardrobe/maternal body and dressing up in mother's clothes. The two girls I am concentrating on here highlighted the opportunity to wear clothes 'made of nice materials' or 'made of expensive stuff'. The clothes were anticipated to provide a kind of second skin (Lemoine-Luccioni 1983; Anzieu 1989). Most interestingly, *all* made spontaneous reference to the bra fitting sessions that were a staple part of the show, giving voice, I thought, to a yearning for the touch and libidinal cathexis of the bodily self by a mother who could 'support' the development of their femininity.

The girl whose mother had abandoned her early on in life, Ms E., mentioned that she hated her breasts and had read in a magazine that 'a good bra can make a lot of difference'. I mused aloud that what might make a difference

was perhaps not just the bra itself, but the fact that someone would be taking an interest in her appearance. At first she dismissed what I said, but what followed in our exchange was striking. She spontaneously told me that as a little girl she used to stroke her body with her older cousin's silk slip that she surreptitiously took from her drawer whenever she visited her house. She then laughed, embarrassed, and said she was not sure why she had mentioned this to me. I found this especially moving, as if she was letting me know something of how deprived she had felt of mother's loving touch, and of how she now needed to provide this for herself. Ferenczi indeed noted how bodily self-stimulation could be understood as a substitute 'on one's own body for the lost object' (Ferenczi 1938: 23–24).

The second girl – Ms Y. – a bright but very brittle young girl, looked physically downtrodden. Her clothes were ripped, her hair was cropped short and her nails were bitten back. She described growing up in a very depressed family: her father had been long-term unemployed and her mother has seemingly never overcome the death of her own mother when Ms Y. was barely one year old. When I asked Ms Y. why she had applied to take part in the programme, she replied:

Why not? Sounds like fun. Plus I will get to stay in a nice place, not the shit hole I live in.

I observed that she seemed to want to get away from something quite depressing:

I like having fun. Better than being at home . . .

I said that home seemed to be the last place she wanted to be in:

My mum is depressed, my dad's given up – it's not much fun.

I asked her to then tell me about her mother:

I hate talking about her. . . . I saw a counsellor years ago because the school was worried about me and that's all she wanted to talk about . . . she's . . . I don't know . . . I can't think of anything to say about her. We barely talk to each other. Not that she talks to anyone really.

I observed that it seemed very difficult to even approach her mother in her own mind. At this point she relaxed a bit:

I don't really know her. . . . She's always been there I guess, but not really – do you know what I mean. . . . She's never been like my best friend's mum. She's always out there, getting involved, taking X shopping, buying clothes and stuff. . . . My mum doesn't care about things like that.

I said that her best friend's mum seemed to be the kind of mum she wished she had. Ms Y's eyes lit up and a spark of life was injected into our exchange as if she was, in that moment, relating to an enlivening object:

Yeah . . . I mean, my mum doesn't even care if I do this [the TV show]. She probably won't even watch it, but X's mum is really into this and she has really wanted me to do it. I see her everyday, like . . . it's a bit like a second family

I said she seemed to feel that it was hard to get her mother to even *look* at her. Ms Y. responded to this very concretely, but her answer is nevertheless striking:

She's as blind as a bat! She can only really see out of one eye.

This was a powerful communication and reflected the way that Ms Y. related internally to a blind object – one that could not see her and help her, in turn, to see herself.

If the mother-mirror is absent or hostile in her relationship to the baby's body, the individual will later most likely search for the loving gaze in whatever mirrors are available. Encouraged by her 'surrogate' mother (her best friend's mother) Ms Y. could take comfort from the knowledge that at least one (m)other would be looking at her with admiring, supporting eyes. Being the object of the camera's gaze, and then the object of the audience's gaze, was compellingly tempting for several of the young girls I assessed. For them the TV programme promised to transform them into desirable and lovable girls whose mothers would surely not turn their eyes away from them.¹⁰

In Ms Y. there was, perhaps inevitably given the extent to which she had felt her mother had turned away from her into her own melancholic state, a more aggressive psychic backdrop to her desire to be admired, namely the wish to triumph over the mother. When I asked her what she thought her

mother would think if she did manage to see the show, Ms Y. succinctly replied:

I hope it makes her realise what a slob she's become.

Where there has been an undercathexis of the bodily self by the mother, as was the case for Ms Y., there may be not just the yearning for an idealised mother who will look at the self with admiring, loving eyes, but also an accompanying sense of grievance about the felt deprivation and hence a need to attack the object. In some of the patients I have worked with, this grievance takes on a more pernicious quality in their minds. The body modification then becomes the means through which all ties to the object of desire are severed and the body self is omnipotently reinvented (what I call the self-made phantasy). We will return to these themes in later chapters.

Looking and being looked at

As we have seen, there is a fundamental asymmetry in vision: the unpalatable truth is that the other never looks at the self from the place from which we see ourselves. Put another way, the mother's gaze is not isomorphic with the child's own image. The body is so fundamental developmentally because it becomes the organising site of perspective, but it is also, simultaneously 'an object available to others from their perspectives – in other words, it is both subject and object' (Grosz 1990: 38).

In his work on beauty, Meltzer (1988) draws attention to another inherent paradox in human relations – another unpalatable asymmetry. He notes that as the baby apprehends the mother's beauty, he is simultaneously exposed to a knowledge withheld.¹¹ Meltzer's (1988) notion of 'aesthetic conflict' is helpful in understanding the experience of uncertainty in relation to the object of desire. Meltzer highlights a core, and according to him universal, conflict faced by the baby at the breast, looking at his mother. He refers to the aesthetic impact on the baby of the 'beautiful mother', which he considers to be the primal representation of the beauty of the world. He writes evocatively of 'aesthetic reciprocity' to capture the meeting of the mutually admiring gaze of both mother and baby. He specifies how this blissful experience simultaneously exposes the baby to the mother's 'enigmatic inside', that is, to what he cannot see or know. This is another way of describing how the present mother always contains the shadow of the absent mother – of the (m)other who is beyond our omnipotent control. At the core of each of us there exists a painful yearning to know the inside of the other who, by virtue of its separateness, can never be fully apprehended and possessed by the self. Proust beautifully captures this elusive nature of the other:

I might caress her, pass my hand slowly over her, but, just as if I had been handling a stone which encloses the salt of immemorial oceans or the light of a star, I felt that I was touching no more than the sealed envelope of a person who inwardly reached to infinity.

(Proust 1972: 248–249)

This is the challenge that we all face in coming to terms with otherness: as the baby looks at the mother, searching for himself in her, he is confronted with something that is hidden – ‘sealed’ away (and in some cases ‘sealed-off’) – behind her appearance. Even when all is going well, looking and being looked at thus exposes us to uncertainty.

The apprehension of beauty therefore makes a heavy demand on the baby: it evokes the oceanic feeling of oneness – the fusion with the maternal breast – while also exposing the baby to the reality of the object’s separateness. Indeed Milner (1985) argued that the artistic form reactivates and synthesises these two experiences. The appreciation of beauty is thus both about an experience of symmetry (Matte Blanco 1975), while requiring an ongoing dialectic with the awareness of otherness, or if we stay with Matte Blanco’s bi-logic frame of reference, we could say that it requires maintaining awareness of asymmetrical relations that discriminate and recognise difference (see Chapter 2).

From the outset, Meltzer (1988) thus suggests, we are all confronted with a painful state of uncertainty. We find more or less adaptive ways of reconciling ourselves to what we cannot see and can never know with any certainty about those we are closest to and hence, too, about what they see in us. If this experience is, however, reinforced in actuality by a mother who holds up an opaque, one-way mirror, the task of bearing what Meltzer (1988) refers to as her unknowable ‘enigmatic interior’ may expose the baby to tormenting doubt about what it is that the mother sees in him. This predicament, and its potentially tormenting quality, was well captured by Sartre:

The other looks at me and as such holds the secret of my being, he knows what I am. *Thus the profound meaning of my being is outside of me, imprisoned in an absence.*

(Sartre 1943: 207, my italics)

We never grow out of the search for the (m)other’s loving and desiring gaze. In more or less compulsive ways we go on searching for it, sometimes using the manipulation of the body to capture it, or to create the illusion that this is possible. If we are lucky we find it, or re-find it, at particular points in our more intimate relationships, only to lose it again because that is all it can be; we can never possess the other’s desire, which would be tantamount to being the other for oneself. We can enjoy the other’s desire

for us, be inspired by it, but it can never be ours for the keeping. Regressive moments can be only brief – a temporary oasis from the painful recognition of the difference and separateness that nevertheless guarantees the survival of the self and of the other.