I was stunned when Mel Gibson’s Braveheart won the Oscar for best picture of the year. I know Hollywood loves a “sweeping” epic, and I liked the innovative use of mud and the absence of hairbrushes for the men (a commitment to material realism not matched in the commercial-perfect shots of the movie’s heroines). But as interesting as it was to see Mel in unkempt cornrows, I didn’t think it would add up to an Academy Award. Usually we require at least the semblance of an idea from our award winning epics. Braveheart is a one-liner (actually a one-worder)—and an overworked one. “Your heart is free. Have the courage to follow ’er,” the young William Wallace is told by his father’s ghost at the start of the film. And he does, leading an animal-house army of howling Scotsmen against the yoke of cruel and effete British tyrants. “Freedom!” he screams, as he is disemboweled in the concluding scene, refusing to declare allegiance to British rule. Between these two scenes, “free,” “freedom,” and “freemen” were intoned reverently or shrieked passionately. And that was about it for “content.”

“Live free or die.” That slogan does have historical and ideological resonance for Americans. But it’s clearly not the collective fight against political tyranny that counts in the movie; it’s the courage to act and the triumph of the undauntable, unconquerable action hero. Yes, Gibson makes William Wallace a fluent linguist, educated in Latin, well traveled, a man who uses his brain to plot battle strategy. But these traits are just a ploy to create the appearance of masculine stereotype busting. It’s doing, not thinking, that reveals a man’s worth in the film, whose notion of heroics is as toughguy as they come. In the last scene Wallace endures public stretching, racking, and evisceration so that Scotland will know he died without submitting, and Gibson (who directed the
film as well as starred in it) makes the torture go on for a long, painful
time. Wallace’s resistance is really the point of the film. Braveheart has
his eyes on a prize, and his will is so strong, so powerful, that he is
able to endure anything to achieve it. The man has the right stuff.

This macho model of moral fortitude has a lot of living currency
today—and for the first time, we now see it as applying to women as
well as men. Undiluted testosterone drives Braveheart. Its band of Scottish
rebels is described in a voice-over as fighting “like warrior-poets,” an
unmistakable nod to the mythopoetic men’s movement to reclaim
masculinity. King Longshank’s son is a homosexual, and this detail is
clearly coded in the film as signifying that he lacks the equipment to
rule. But the movie’s women, within the limits of their social roles,
are as rebellious and brave-hearted as the men and enjoy watching a
good fight. (In an early scene Wallace’s girl’s eyes light up as he and
a fellow Scot have sport throwing bricks at each other’s heads.) I think
Gibson’s idea of feminism is that one doesn’t have to be male in order
to be a real man—and it is an idea that is widely shared today, with
“power” and “muscle” feminism as the culturally approved way of
advancing the cause of women.

That women have just as much guts, willpower, and balls as men,
that they can put their bodies through as much wear and tear, endure
as much pain, and remain undaunted, was a major theme of the coverage
of the 1996 Summer Olympics. Not since Leni Riefenstahl’s Olympiad
of 1936 has there been such a focus on the aesthetics of athletic perfec­
tion. But this version of beauty, like Riefenstahl’s and like those stressed
in the numerous photo-articles celebrating the Olympic body, has little
to do with looking pretty. It’s about strength, yes, and skill, but even
more deeply it’s about true grit. “Determined, defiant, dominating,”
the bold caption in the New York Times Magazine describes Gwen Tor­
rence. (The same words, applied to rebellious wives or feminist politi­
cos, have not been said so admiringly.) As in Braveheart, the ability to
rise above the trials of the body is associated with the highest form of
courage and commitment. Mary Ellen Clark’s bouts of vertigo. Gail
Devers’s Graves’ disease. Gwen Torrence’s difficult childbirth. Amy
Van Dyken’s asthma. Life magazine describes these as personal tests of
mettle sent by God to weed out the losers from the winners. And
when gymnast Kerri Strug performed her second vault on torn tendons,
bringing her team to victory in the face of what must have been
excruciating pain, she became the unquestionable hero of the games
(and set herself up with ten million dollars in endorsement contracts).
It’s not the courage of these athletes I’m sniping at here; I admire them enormously. What bothers me is the message that is dramatized by the way we tell the tales of their success, a message communicated to us mortals too in commercials and ads. Nike has proven to be the master manipulator and metaphor maker in this game. Don’t moan over life’s problems or blame society for holding you back, Nike instructs us. Don’t waste your time berating the “system.” Get down to the gym, pick up those free weights, and turn things around. If it hurts, all the better. No pain, no gain. “Right after Bob Kempainen qualified for the marathon, he crossed the finish line and puked all over his Nike running shoes,” Nike tells us in a recent advertisement. “We can’t tell you how proud we were.” A Nike commercial, shown during the games: “If you don’t lose consciousness at the end, you could have run faster.” Am I the only one who finds this recommendation horrifying in its implications? But consciousness apparently doesn’t figure very much in our contemporary notions of heroism. What counts, as in Braveheart, is action. Just Do It. This is, of course, also what Nike wants us to do when we approach the cash register. (The call to act sends a disturbing political message as well. Movies like Braveheart, as a friend of mine remarked after we’d seen the film, seem designed to provide inspiration for the militia movement.)

The notion that all that is required to succeed in this culture is to stop whining, lace up your sneakers, and forge ahead, blasting your way through social limitations, personal tribulations, and even the laws of nature, is all around us. Commercials and advertisements egg us on: “Go for It!” “Know No Boundaries!” “Take Control!” Pump yourself up with our product—a car, a diet program, hair-coloring, sneakers—and take your destiny into your own hands. The world will open up for you like an oyster. Like the Sector watch advertisement (figure 1), AT&T urges us to “Imagine a world without limits” in a series of commercials shown during the 1996 Summer Olympics; one graphic depicts a young athlete pole vaulting over the World Trade Center, another diving down an endless waterfall. And, indeed, in the world of these images there are no impediments—no genetic disorders, no body altering accidents, not even any fat—to slow down our progress to the top of the mountain. All that’s needed is the power to buy.

The worst thing, in the Braveheart/Nike universe of values, is to be bossed around, told what to do. This independence creates a dilemma for advertisers, who somehow must convince hundreds of thousands of people to purchase the same product while assuring them that they
are bold and innovative individualists in doing so. The dilemma is compounded because many of these products perform what Foucault and feminist theorists have called "normalization." That is, they function to screen out diversity and perpetuate social norms, often connected to race and gender. This screening happens not necessarily because advertisers are consciously trying to promote racism or sexism but because in order to sell products they have to either exploit or create
a perception of personal lack in the consumer (who buys the product in the hope of filling that lack). An effective way to make the consumer feel inadequate is to take advantage of values that are already in place in the culture. For example, in a society where there is a dominant (and racialized) preference for blue-eyed blondes, there is a ready market for blue contact lenses and blonde hair-coloring. The catch is that ad campaigns promoting such products also reglamorize the beauty ideals themselves. Thus, they perpetuate racialized norms.

But people don’t like to think that they are pawns of astute advertisers or even that they are responding to social norms. Women who have had or are contemplating cosmetic surgery consistently deny the influence of media images.1 “I’m doing it for me,” they insist. But it’s hard to account for most of their choices (breast enlargement and liposuction being the most frequently performed operations) outside the context of current cultural norms. Surgeons help to encourage these mystifications. Plastic surgeon Barbara Hayden claims that breast augmentation today is “as individual as the patient herself”; a moment later in the same article another surgeon adds that the “huge 1980’s look is out” and that many stars are trading their old gigantic breasts for the currently stylish smaller models!2

I’m doing it for me. This saying has become the mantra of the television talk show, and I would gladly accept it if “for me” meant “in order to feel better about myself in this culture that has made me feel inadequate as I am.” But people rarely mean this. Most often on these shows, the “for me” answer is produced in defiant refutation of some cultural “argument” (talk-show style, of course) on topics such as “Are Our Beauty Ideals Racist?” or “Are We Obsessed with Youth?” “No, I’m not having my nose (straightened)(narrowed) in order to look less ethnic. I’m doing it for me.” “No, I haven’t had my breasts enlarged to a 38D in order to be more attractive to men. I did it for me.” In these constructions “me” is imagined as a pure and precious inner space, an “authentic” and personal reference point untouched by external values and demands. A place where we live free and won’t be pushed around. It’s the Braveheart place.

But we want both to imagine ourselves as bold, rebellious Bravehearts and to conform, to become what our culture values. Advertisers help us enormously in this self-deception by performing their own sleight-of-hand tricks with rhetoric and image, often invoking, as Braveheart does, the metaphor and hype of “political” resistance: “Now it’s every woman’s right to look good!” declares Pond’s (for “age-defying”
makeup). “What makes a woman revolutionary?” asks Revlon. “Not wearing makeup for a day!” answers a perfectly made-up Claudia Schiffer (quickly adding, “Just kidding, Revlon!”). A recent Gap ad: “The most defiant act is to be distinguished, singled out, marked. Put our jeans on.” The absurdity of suggesting that everyone’s donning the same (rather ordinary-looking) jeans can be a “defiant” and individualistic act is visually accompanied by two photos of female models with indistinguishable bodies.

**Power as Agency: Masking Reality**

From evisceration at the hands of tyrants to defiance through dungarees may seem like a large leap. And in real terms, of course, it is. But we live in a world of commercial rhetoric that brooks no such distinctions. And not only commercial rhetoric. “Just Do It” is an ideology for our time, an idea that bridges the gulf between right and left, grunge and yuppy, chauvinist and feminist. The left wing didn’t like “Just Say No,” perhaps because it came from Nancy Reagan, perhaps because it was aimed at habits they didn’t want to give up themselves. It isn’t that easy, they insisted. The neighborhoods, the culture, social despair. . . . But the mind-over-matter message of “Just Do It,” with its “neutral” origins (the brain of an ad woman) and associations with jogging, nice bodies, and muscle-lib for women, has roused no protests.

In a recent interview, rock star Courtney Love urged “liberals” to “breed” in order to outpopulate the Rush Limbaughs of the world. “It’s not that hard,” she said. “It’s nine months. You know, just do it.”3 But right-wing ideologues like Limbaugh, who celebrate bootstrapping and Horatio Alger and scorn (what they view as) the liberal’s creation of a culture of “victims,” also advocate “just doing it.”4 And so too do celebrities like Oprah when they present themselves as proof that “anyone can make it if they want it badly enough and try hard enough.” The implication here—which Oprah, I like to believe, would blanch at if she faced it squarely—is that if you don’t succeed, it’s proof that you didn’t want it badly enough or try hard enough. Racism and sexism? Just so many hurdles to be jumped, personal challenges to be overcome. And what about the fact that in a competitive society someone always has to lose? We won’t think about that, it’s too much of a downer. Actually, in the coverage of the 1996 Olympics, everything short of “getting the gold” was constructed as losing. The men’s 4 x 100 relay team, which won the silver medal, was interviewed by NBC after, as
the commentator put it, their “defeat”! How can everyone be a winner if “winning” is reserved only for those who make it to the absolute pinnacle?

As far as women’s issues go, “power feminists” are telling us that we’re past all those tiresome harangues about “the beauty system” and “objectification” and “starving girls. “ What’s so bad about makeup, anyway? Isn’t it my right to go for it? Do what I want with my body? Be all that I can be? Just a few years back “third-wave” feminist Naomi Wolf wrote a best-selling book, _The Beauty Myth_ (1991), which spoke powerfully and engagingly to young women about a culture that teaches them they are nothing if they are not beautiful. But in a wink of the cultural zeitgeist, she declares in her latest, _Fire with Fire_ (1993), that all that bitching and moaning has seen its day. Now, according to the rehabilitated Wolf, we’re supposed to stop complaining and—you guessed it—“Just Do It.” Wolf, in fact, offers Nike’s commercial slogan as her symbol for the new feminism, which, as she describes it, is about “competition . . . victory . . . self-reliance . . . the desire to win.”

Wolf is hardly alone in her celebratory mood. Betty Friedan has also said she is “sick of women wallowing in the victim state. We have empowered ourselves.” A 1993 _Newsweek_ article—most of its authors women—sniffs derisively at an installation of artist Sue Williams, who put a huge piece of plastic vomit on the floor of the Whitney Museum to protest the role of aesthetic ideals in encouraging the development of eating disorders. That kind of action once would have been seen as guerrilla theater. In 1993, _Newsweek_ writers sneered: “Tell [the bulimics] to get some therapy and cut it out.”

Getting one’s body in shape, of course, has become the exemplary practice, symbol, and means of empowerment in this culture. “You don’t just shape your body,” as Bally Fitness tells us. “You shape your life.” As a manufacturer of athletic shoes, Nike—like Reebok and Bally—is dedicated to preserving the connection between having the right stuff and strenuous, physical activity. “It’s about time,” they declare disingenuously in a recent ad, “that the fitness craze that turned into the fashion craze that turned into the marketing craze turned back into the fitness craze.” But despite Nike’s emphasis on fitness, in contemporary commercial culture the rhetoric of taking charge of one’s life has been yoked to everything from car purchases to hair-coloring, with physical effort and discipline often dropping out as a requirement. Even plastic surgery is continually described today—by patients, surgeons, and even by some feminist theorists—as an act of “taking control,”
“taking one’s life into one’s own hands” (a somewhat odd metaphor, under the circumstances).

These are the metaphors that dominate, for example, in sociologist Kathy Davis’s arguments about cosmetic surgery and female “agency” in her Reshapina the Female Body. Among some academic feminists, an insistence on the efficacy of female “agency” is the more moderate, sober, scholarly sister of “power feminism.” “Agency feminists” are not about to sing odes of praise to Nike, Reebok, or competition. They acknowledge that our choices are made within social and cultural contexts that are not all cause for celebration. But they do offer themselves as an alternative to what they caricature as the grim, petrified, politically dogmatic feminism of the past, now viewed as out of touch with the lives of real women. Those bad “old” feminists (I am one of these retrograde kvetchers, in some accounts) have a demeaning view of women as passive victims, tyrannized and suffocated by social norms, helpless pawns of social forces “beyond their control or comprehension.” In contrast, the good, “new” feminism respects and honors the individual’s choices as a locus of personal power, creativity, self-definition. So, for example, Davis argues that when a woman claims to have had her breasts enlarged “for herself,” it’s degrading and unsisterly not to accept this construction at face value. To deconstruct it—who is this “self”? where does it reside? in outer space? and where did it get the idea that it needed implants?—is to view the woman as a kind of helpless child who doesn’t know her own mind and is not in charge of her own life. Contrasting herself to those feminists who view the industries in feminine self-improvement as “totalizing and pernicious” agents of women’s oppression, Davis insists that these industries in fact play an important role in empowering women.

In a moment I will look more closely at Davis’s arguments, which seem to me typical of a certain contemporary preference for the rhetoric of “agency” over close analysis of social context and cultural reality, a preference that mirrors—in more scholarly style, of course—the more popular images of empowerment I have been discussing. I will then talk about what aspects of reality these models of empowerment obscure. But first I’d like to note that arguments such as Davis’s are often presented in the way she presents them—as an antidote against an imagined feminist position that holds that women are utterly passive and unconscious sponges, as subservient to cultural images as a brow-beaten wife is to her abusive husband. Phrases like “cultural dope”—which are used to describe how the bad feminists allegedly view
women—help vivify a nasty picture of condescending politicos who push women around with their theory as disdainfully as they claim the images do. Once such a picture is created, of course, the audience nods in agreement and approval, for the “new” feminism is sure to follow. But portraits of “victim feminists” are almost always caricatures. Davis, for example, accuses me of viewing women as “cultural dopes.” But in fact where the power of cultural images is concerned, Davis and I actually have very little quarrel with each other. We both see cultural images as central elements in women’s lives and we see them as contributing to a pedagogy of defect, in which women learn that various parts of their bodies are faulty, unacceptable. Neither of us views women as passive sponges in this process but (as I put it in my 1993 book Unbearable Weight) as engaged “in a process of making meaning, of ‘labor on the body.’ ” We both recognize that there is ambiguity and contradiction, multiple meanings and consequences, in human motivations and choices.

While I object to Davis’s placing the blame on feminists, I do have sympathy with Davis’s desire to correct a general cultural tradition that has equated women with passivity rather than activity—the done to, not the doers, the acted upon, not the actors. But like many other attempts at “correcting” the mistakes of the past, Davis goes too far in the opposite direction. In this reaction we see a clear similarity between current academic obsessions with “agency” and the more popular versions of “power feminism,” like Katie Roiphe’s. Roiphe insists that most of what passes for “date rape” is actually an after-the-fact attempt on the part of young women to avoid responsibility for their own actions, like getting drunk on a date, for example. Roiphe, like academic “agency feminists,” wants us to stop casting women as passive “victims,” and she connects that perspective to the passe feminism of the past. But what Roiphe and Davis both seem to forget is that the main point of what is disparagingly (and misleadingly, I believe) called “victim feminism” was not to establish women’s passivity or purity but to draw attention to the social and political context of personal behavior. Remember “The personal is the political”? Let’s not forget that it wasn’t so long ago that it was common coin to believe that women who get raped “ask for it” and that as far as beauty is concerned we are “our own worst enemies.”

Where agency feminists and I most differ is over that magic word “agency.” I don’t see the word as adding very much beyond rhetorical cheerleading concerning how we, not the images, are “in charge” (the theory equivalent of “I did it for me”). More important, I believe that the cheering of “agency” creates a diversionary din that drowns out the
real orchestra that is playing in the background, the consumer culture we live in and need to take responsibility for. To make this point clear, I need to look a bit more closely at Davis’s arguments. Advertisements, fashion photos, cosmetic instructions, she points out (drawing on the work of eminent sociologist Dorothy Smith), all require “specialized knowledge” and “complex and skilled interpretive activities on the part of the female agent,” who must “plan a course of action, making a series of on-the-spot calculations about whether the rigorous discipline required by the techniques of body improvement will actually improve her appearance given the specifics of her particular body.”

By showing her how to correct various defects in her appearance (“Lose those unsightly bags under your eyes,” “Turn your flabby rear-end into buns of steel,” “Have a firm, sexy bosom for the first time in your life!” “Get a sexy stomach—fast!”) the ads and instructions transform the woman into an agent of her own destiny, providing concrete objectives, goals, strategies, a plan of action. Davis quotes Smith here: “The text instructs her [the woman] that her breasts are too small/too big; she reads of a remedy; her too small breasts become remediable. She enters into the discursive organization of desire; now she has an objective where before she had only a defect.” So the “sexy stomach” article (just one example of the scores of fitness features that appear regularly in women’s magazines; see figure 2) addresses a consumer whose stomach, the text implies, is not yet sexy; at the same time, the lean body of the model offers visual “proof” to all but the fittest readers that they are indeed in less than ideal shape “for bikini weather.” But it’s not too late, we are reassured; those abs can still be whipped into shape with the right exercises. This prescription for improvement, as Davis would interpret it, allows the woman to take control of her own body in a way that was unavailable to her before she read the article.

Now, just so you know that I’m not really some sour old “victim feminist,” let me say at once that make-up and fashion can be creative fun, and I enjoy exchanging beauty tips with my friends. But Davis is claiming more—that it is precisely the learning to see ourselves as defective and lacking, needful of improvement and remedy (too fat, too flat-chested, too dark-skinned, too wrinkled), that mobilizes us, puts us in charge of our lives! Is this argument not strained, if not downright perverse? I know that Davis views what she is doing as correcting the sins of other feminists, who, as she describes them, are so focused on the “tyranny” of the big bad beauty system that they don’t notice the female subjects who are participating in it. But her
critique goes beyond regarding women as subjects to equating the self-scrutinizing subjectivity these ads encourage with a state of liberation. In the quote from Smith, just when is the woman in question supposed to have been in her disempowered “before” state, when she “only had a defect” without an objective? Before she read the liberating “text” that tells her how to remedy her too small breasts or insufficiently flat stomach? In telling her how to remedy this “defect” is the text not simply providing a cure (at a price, of course—they are selling something here, let’s not forget) for the very poison it has administered?

To see this point more concretely, consider this ad (I have chosen one from another cultural period, situated within notions of femininity that emphasize delicacy and fragility, in order to encourage a bit of distance): “Conspicuous Nose Pores: How to Reduce Them” (figure 3). The formula here is exactly as Davis describes it. First we are warned that “complexions otherwise flawless are often ruined by conspicuous nose pores.” The ad goes on to describe with great specificity and detail the beauty regime that will correct those conspicuous nose pores. As Davis would interpret this ad, the specification of such a regime makes the “female agent the *sine qua non* of the feminine beauty system.” By telling women what they need to *do* in order to bring their bodies up
Conspicuous Nose Pores

How to reduce them

COMPLEXIONS otherwise flawless are often ruined by conspicuous nose pores. In such cases the small muscular fibers of the nose have become weakened and do not keep the pores closed as they should be. Instead, these pores collect dirt, clog up and become enlarged.

To reduce enlarged nose pores: wring a cloth from very hot water, lather it with Woodbury’s Facial Soap, then hold it to your face. When heat has expanded the pores, rub in very gently a fresh lather of Woodbury’s. Repeat this hot water and lather application several times, stopping at once if your nose feels sensitive. Then finish by rubbing the nose for thirty seconds with a lump of soap.

Do not expect to change in a week, however, a condition resulting from years of neglect. Use this treatment persistently. It will gradually reduce the enlarged pores until they are inconspicuous.

You will find a 12c cake of Woodbury’s Facial Soap sufficient for a month or six weeks of this treatment, and for general use for this time. Get a cake today. For sale everywhere throughout the United States and Canada.

Woodbury’s Facial Soap

Figure 3. Ruined by conspicuous nose pores.
to par (defined here, I want to note, as “flawless”—a goal that will keep female agents busy till they topple into the grave, perfectly em­balmed), they inspire women to no longer suffer their dissatisfaction passively, impotently, but as “an active process.” “Rather than immobiliz­ing women, bodily imperfections provide the opportunity for action.”

But what made the woman with the conspicuous nose poses dis­satisfied to begin with? What gave her the idea that they were “ruinous” to her beauty? Probably not this ad alone. But certainly this ad, among other social factors, creates the very condition of perceived defect that it now tells women how to overcome. By this logic it would be a sorry day indeed if women were to become content with the way they look. Without all those defects to correct we would lose an important arena for the enactment of our creative agency! There doesn’t seem to be much chance of that happening though. Instead, the sites of defect have multiplied for women, and men increasingly have been given more of these wonderful opportunities for agency, too, as magazines and prod­ucts devoted to the enhancement and “correction” of their appearance have multiplied.

I have spent so much time on this point not to whip the agency feminist position to its knees but because what is obscured in Davis’s discussion of ads and beauty features is exactly what must be kept at the forefront of any cultural analysis of practices of bodily improvement. There is a consumer system operating here that depends on our perceiv­ing ourselves as defective and that will continually find new ways to do this. That system—and others connected to it, generating new technologies and areas of expertise organized around the diagnosis and correction of “defect”—is masked by the rhetoric of personal empowerment.

Take cosmetic surgery, which Davis describes as an empowering “solution” to an individual’s problems with body image, a way for women to actively “take control” of their bodies and “take the reins” of their lives “in hand.” (Ads for cosmetic surgery, by the way, use the exact same argument.) Davis supports her position by drawing on interviews with a handful of individual women, whose “defects” range from facial deformity to too small breasts and who all describe surgery as having helped them. I am disturbed, to begin with, by Davis’s failure to draw distinctions between kinds of body alteration. Cosmetic surgery covers an enormous range of corrections, from the repair of major birth defects to Roseanne’s cheek implants to Liz’s liposuction. But for Davis all women’s body-image problems are given the same weight,
and they are represented by her in terms such as “terrible suffering” and “valiant struggle.” I don’t deny that many of us in this culture have deep wounds of shame about our bodies (I certainly do); I have written extensively about this, I believe with empathy and understanding. But there are still distinctions to be drawn here, distinctions that are rapidly disappearing in our talk-show culture, where everyone’s story is worth a show and is sensationalized on the air as dramatically as possible.

By treating breast augmentations and operations to correct facial deformities as the same by virtue of their ability to “empower” individuals, we lose the ability to critique the former from a cultural point of view. I don’t have a problem with the notion that an individual’s long and fruitless struggle to live with a particular “defect” may end happily when that defect is corrected. But assessing “the dilemma of cosmetic surgery” (as Davis calls it) requires more than taking these individual snapshots of satisfied customers (or dissatisfied ones, for that matter). We need a picture of the landscape, too. For cosmetic surgery is more than an individual choice; it is a burgeoning industry and an increasingly normative cultural practice. As such, it is a significant contributory cause of women’s suffering by continually upping the ante on what counts as an acceptable face and body. In focusing on narratives of individual “empowerment,” Davis—like Oprah’s guests who claim they did it “for themselves”—overlooks the fact that the norms that encouraged these individuals to see themselves as defective are enmeshed in the practice and institution of cosmetic surgery itself. And so is individual behavior.

I now want to sharpen my focus to discuss some of the cultural and institutional aspects of cosmetic surgery that are missing from Davis’s stories of individual empowerment. Let me say, as a general introduction to this discussion, that we have barely begun to confront—and are not yet in a position to adequately assess—the potential cultural consequences of regarding the body as “cultural plastic,” to be deconstructed and rearranged as we desire. For this reason alone, we need to keep track of cultural trends, not just personal narratives. Our relationship to our bodies has clearly become more and more an investment in them as “product” and image, requiring alteration as fashions change. Consider breast augmentation, now increasingly widespread, and its role in establishing new norms against which smaller or less firm breasts are seen as defective. Micromastia is the clinical term, among plastic surgeons, for “too small” breasts. Such “disorders” are, of course, entirely aesthetic and completely socially “constructed.” Anyone who
doubts this should recall the 1920s, when women were binding their breasts to look more boyish. Today, with artificial implants the norm among movie stars and models, an adolescent boy who has grown up learning what a woman’s body looks like from movies, cable television, and magazines may wonder what’s wrong when his girlfriend lies down and her breasts flop off to the side instead of standing straight up in the air. Will we soon see a clinical term for “too floppy” breasts?

As the augmented breast becomes the norm, the decision to have one’s breasts surgically enhanced becomes what the psychiatrist Peter Kramer has called “free choice under pressure.” We can choose not to have such surgery. No one is holding a gun to our heads. But those who don’t—for example, those who cannot afford the surgery—are at an increasingly significant professional and personal disadvantage. The same is true of facelifts and other surgeries to “correct” aging, which are also becoming more normative. More and more of my friends—these are teachers, therapists, writers, not movie stars and models—are contemplating or even planning surgery. We scan our faces every morning for signs of downward drift, and we measure our decline against the lifted and tightened norms of the images that surround us. For me, viewing the Academy Awards was something of an exercise in self-flagellation, as actresses my own age and older stepped up to the podium, each one looking younger and tighter around the eyes than she had ten years ago. At forty-nine I have come to feel each fresh capitulation to surgery on the part of these actresses as a personal affront; my own face, after all, will be judged by the standards that these actresses are establishing. As a teacher and writer, my status and success depend far less on my looks than they do for other women. If it all gets to me, imagine how women feel in the countless service and public relations positions for which youthful looks are a job prerequisite.

The fact is that the plastically reconstructed and preserved faces and bodies of the forty- and fifty-something actresses who came of age with us have made the ideal of aging beautifully and “gracefully” obsolete. Now we are supposed to “defy” our age, as Melanie Griffith (her own lips decidedly poutier than they were a few years ago) instructs us in her commercials for Revlon. In thinking about this “defiance” of age, I often wonder what existential traumas lie in store for those who have not been slowly acclimated to the decline of their bodies, learning to accept and accommodate the small changes that happen gradually over the years, but who have become habituated instead to seeing those changes as an occasion for immediate action. Although for now true
“scalpel slaves” are generally found only among the fairly wealthy, first surgeries are becoming more and more common among people of all classes, races, and ages.9 (We should know by now how such practices tend to “trickle down” in this culture.10) And first surgeries often lead to more. Some surgeons acknowledge that once you begin “correcting” for age, it’s all too easy to start sliding down the slope of habituation. “Plastic surgery sharpens your eyesight,” says one. “You get something done, suddenly you’re looking in the mirror every five minutes—at imperfections nobody else can see.”11

The pressure to have age-defying surgery is now creeping across the gender gap too. Men used to be relatively exempt from the requirement to look young; gray hair and wrinkles were (and still mostly are) a code for experience, maturity, and wisdom. But in a “Just Do It” culture that now equates youth and fitness with energy and competence—the “right stuff”—fortyish businessmen are feeling increasing pressure to dye their hair, get liposuction on their spare tires, and have face-lifts in order to compete with younger, fitter-looking men and women. In 1980, men accounted for only 10 percent of plastic surgery patients. In 1994 they were 26 percent.12 These numbers will undoubtedly rise, as plastic surgeons develop specialized angles to attract men (“penile enhancement” is now advertised in the sports sections of major newspapers) and disinfect surgery of its associations with feminine vanity. Also thanks to the efforts of surgeons, who now argue that one should start “preventive” procedures while the skin is still elastic, younger and younger people are having surgery. Here is the text of an advertisement I came across recently in the local (Lexington, Kentucky) paper:

Picture this scenario. You’re between the ages of thirty-five and fifty. You feel like you are just hitting your stride. But the face in the mirror is sending out a different message. Your morning facial puffiness hangs around all day. You’re beginning to resemble your parents at a point when they began looking old to you. If you prefer a more harmonic relationship between your self-perception and outer image, you may prefer to tackle these concerns before they become too obvious. You may benefit from a face-lift performed at an earlier age. There is no carved-in-stone perfect time or age to undergo a face-lift. For those who place a high priority on maintaining a youthful appearance, any visual disharmony between body and soul can be tackled earlier when cosmetic surgical goals tend to be less aggressive and it is easier to obtain more natural-looking results. The reason is: Younger skin and tissues have more elasticity so smoothness can be achieved with surgery.
What this ad obscures is that the “disharmonies” between body and soul that thirty-five- and forty-year-old (!) women may be experiencing are not “carved-in-stone” either but are in large part the product of our cultural horror of wrinkles and lines—a horror, of course, that surgeons are fueling. Why should a few lines around our eyes be experienced as “disharmonious” with the energy and vitality that we feel “inside,” unless they are coded as a sign of decrepitude (looking like our parents—good heavens, what a fate!). That these lines can be coded otherwise is a theme of a Murad ad (see figure 4). But while Dr. Murad acknowledges that our various lines and wrinkles are markers of the accumulated experience and accomplishment of our lives, the ad recommends that we wipe our faces clean of them. This ad, like many others, attempts to have its commercial cake without having to “eat” criticism along with it, to value “character” (along with critics of the beauty system) while insisting that it doesn’t have to show on our faces (just buy our product).

The woman in the ad is dazzling, of course; but that only serves as a reminder of just how fragile beauty is, and how important it is to start protecting it against age before time gets the upper hand. We are now being encouraged to view this aging process as a disaster for our sense of “who we really are” (our “self,” our “soul,” as the ad puts it) and as a slippery slope heading for the time when we will be utterly beyond saving, social detritus. (A fifty-nine-year-old face-lift patient describes the skin around her neck as “garbage old, ugly, sagging . . . garbage.”) We are always holding our finger in that dam, getting in as much “life” as we can before the deluge, as though “life” ends when we are no longer young and firm. If we thought of the “real self” as evolving into new and unpredictable forms (perhaps with “harmonies” in store that are deeper and more satisfying than looking good), we might look on wrinkles and lines as an opportunity to engage in a learning process about the inevitability of change, the impermanence of all things. Yes, and about our own physical vulnerability, and mortality. Others around us are dying too. Focusing on unsightly wrinkles and disfiguring nose pores, we don’t have to look at that.

Every “correction” of aging represents a lost opportunity to do this important psychological work. And if cosmetic surgery becomes the normalized, affordable alternative that it now seems to be becoming, how will generations used to “correcting” their bodies surgically according to perfected norms cope with the inevitable failure of such correction? For, you know, you just can’t go on doing it forever. For those
Figure 4. Erase your age from your face.
who try, the stretched and staring, often cadaverous mask of plastically preserved beauty becomes itself a marker of age and impending death. This transformation is partly why I am not inclined to surgery. I would rather get used to aging gradually, to changes in the way I am seen by others, to the inevitability of frailty creeping into my presence and mode of being in the world, to my own mortality, so that I can be prepared and respond consciously and with dignity and, yes, in a way that I hope will actually enhance my physical appearance. I care about looks (I don’t live on Uranus, after all). But I’d rather be a vibrant old woman than embalm myself in a mask of perpetual youth.

In assessing the consequences of our burgeoning surgical culture, there are ethical and social as well as existential issues to be confronted. As I noted in Unbearable Weight, the surgeries that people “choose” often assimilate ethnic and racial features to a more “white” norm. “Does anyone in this culture,” I asked, “have his or her nose reshaped to look more ‘African’ or ‘Jewish’?” The answer, of course, is no. Given our history of racism—a history in which bodies that look “too black” or obviously Jewish have been refused admittance to public places and even marked for death—how can we regard these choices as merely “individual preferences”? In Japan it has become increasingly common for job-seeking female college graduates to have their eyes surgically altered to appear more occidental. Such a “Western” appearance, it is widely acknowledged, gives a woman the edge in job interviews. But capitulating to this requirement—although it may be highly understandable from the point of view of the individual’s economic survival and advancement—is to participate in a process of racial normalization and to make it harder for others to refuse to participate. The more established the new norm, the higher the costs of resisting—“free choice under pressure.” The same points can be made about many of the operations that people have performed on them in this country. And while some might celebrate being able to “choose” one’s features as part of a “melting pot” society, as eradicating racial differences that we don’t need and that have only caused pain and suffering, we should face the fact that only certain ingredients in the pot are being encouraged to “melt” here.

Situating “personal” choices in social, cultural, and economic contexts such as these raises certain issues for the thoughtful individual, one being the interpretation of his or her own situation, which becomes harder to see as a “free,” autonomous choice done “for oneself”; another being his or her complicity in the perpetuation of racialized norms and in the suffering of other people. These issues of complicity may be
most striking in the case of influential and highly visible culture makers such as Cher and Madonna—who never take any responsibility for the images they create, of course. But those of us who aren’t celebrities also influence the lives we touch. Mothers (and fathers) set standards for their children, sisters and brothers for their siblings, teachers for their students, friends for their friends. Adult behavior reinforces cultural messages sent to teens and preteens about the importance of looking good, of fitting in—pressures that young people then impose, often brutally, on one another. (One of my students wrote that the images of slenderness only began to “get to her” when she realized that her parents also “believed in them.”)

Not that many years ago parents who smoked never thought twice about the instructional effect this might be having on their children, in legitimating smoking, making it seem adult and empowering. A cultural perspective on augmentation, face-lifts, cosmetic “ethnic cleansing” of Jewish and black noses, Asian eyes, and so on similarly might make parents think twice about the messages they are sending their children, might make them less comfortable with viewing their decisions as purely “personal” or “individual” ones. And they should think twice. We are all culture makers as well as culture consumers, and if we wish to be considered “agents” in our lives—and have it mean more than just a titular honor—we need to take responsibility for that role.

To act consciously and responsibly means understanding the culture we live in, even if it requires acknowledging that we are not always “in charge.” That we are not always in charge does not mean that we are “dopes.” In fact, I think the really dopey thing is living with the illusion that we are “in control,” just because some commercial (or ad for surgery) tells us so. In the culture we live in, individuals are caught between two contradictory injunctions. On the one hand, an ideology of triumphant individualism and mind-over-matter heroism urges us to “Just Do It” and tries to convince us that we can “just do it,” whatever our sex, race, or circumstances. This is a mystification. We are not runners on a level field but on one that is pocked with historical inequities that make it much harder for some folks to lace up their Nikes and speed to the finish line—until the lane in which they are running has been made less rocky and the hidden mines excavated and removed. A few of us, if we are very, very lucky (circumstances still do count, willpower isn’t everything, despite what the commercials tell us), do have our moments of triumph. But it is often after years
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of struggle in which we have drawn on many resources other than our own talent, resolve, and courage. We have been helped by our friends and our communities, by social movements, legal and political reform, and sheer good fortune. And many, of course, don’t make it.

But on the other hand, while consumerism assures us that we can (and should) “just do it,” it continually sends the contradictory message that we are defective, lacking, inadequate. This message is the missing context of the stories of empowerment that Davis tells, rewriting the “old” feminist scripts. But what she leaves out just happens to be the very essence of advertising and the fuel of consumer capitalism, which cannot allow equilibrium or stasis in human desire. Thus, we are not permitted to feel satisfied with ourselves and we are “empowered” only and always through fantasies of what we could be.

This is not a plot; it’s just the way the system works. Capitalism adores proliferation and excess; it abhors moderation. One moment the culture begins talking about greater health consciousness, which is surely a good thing that no one would deny. But the next moment we’ve got commercials on at every hour for every imaginable exercise and diet product, and people are spending huge quantities of their time trying to achieve a level of “fitness” that goes way beyond health and straight into obsession. Technological possibilities emerge that allow surgeons to make corrective repairs of serious facial conditions; before long our surgeons have become Pygmalions of total self-transformation, advertising the slightest deviation from the cultural “norm” as a problem needing to be solved, an impediment to happiness (as in the ad in figure 5). Drugs like Prozac are developed to treat serious clinical depressions: the next moment college clinics are dispensing these pills to help students with test anxiety.

The multiplication of human “defect” is aided by factors other than economic. Drug companies may be focused on profits, but those folks at the university clinic are genuinely concerned about students and want to make their lives easier. Cosmetic surgeons, while fabulously paid, are rarely in it for the money alone. Often, they are carried to excess not by dreams of yachts but by savior fantasies and by pure excitement about the technological possibilities. Nowadays, those possibilities can be pretty fantastic, as fat is suctioned from thighs and injected into lips, breast implants inserted through the bellybutton, penises enlarged through “phalloplasty,” and nipples repositioned. Each of us, working in our own professional niche, is focused on the possibilities for our
own "agency" and personal effectiveness working within that niche, so we rarely stand back to survey the big picture. That's precisely why we need cultural criticism.

Recently I had a personal experience that brought freshly home to me the central and complex role the multiplication of "defect" plays in our culture and the way it can be masked by a rhetoric of agency. With a very specific request, I went to a dentist specializing in cosmetic dentistry. Because of antibiotics I had been given in infancy, my front teeth were starting to darken and I wanted to have them capped. I
described the problem to the dentist and he asked me to smile. No problem with capping the teeth, he said. But wouldn’t I also like a less gummy smile and a correction of my overbite? I told him that I thought I had a pretty nice smile as it was. He was stone silent. I was somewhat hurt, even shaken by his refusal to reassure me, and suddenly old childhood insecurities began to surface. At the age of eight I was convinced that I looked like Alfred E. Neuman, from Mad magazine. On better days I saw a small, freckled, overweight rabbit in the mirror. I had thought those days were long gone, but now I was looking again in the mirror for signs that “What, Me Worry?” Neuman or chubby Bugs was really still lurking there. Letty Cottin Pogrebin, in her new book on aging, describes a similar experience at her dermatologist:

It started with a small cyst on my back and two bumps, each the size of a lemon pit, on my thigh. For no apparent reason, my skin occasionally produces these outcroppings—my friend Gale calls them the “barnacles of age”—and, given the gaping hole in the ozone layer and the idiosyncrasies of skin cancer, I’ve learned to take it seriously. Off I went to the dermatologist, who performed minor surgery on the lemon pits and, to my relief, pronounced the bumps benign. At the end of the checkup, the doctor glanced at my face, then at my chart, then again at my face. “You look pretty good for your age,” he declared. “But you’d look a hundred percent better without those fat pouches under your eyes.”14

Pogrebin then goes on to describe in fresh and honest detail her own ambivalence about the possibility of surgery (she decided against it). She does not, however, comment further on the role her doctor played, not just in normalizing surgery in her eyes but in suggesting that she was an appropriate candidate for it—when she had come in on an entirely different matter. When people claim to be having surgery “for themselves,” they frequently mean that they are not being urged to do so by husbands or boyfriends. But husbands and boyfriends are not the only eyes that survey and evaluate women; the gaze of the doctor, especially with the tremendous authority that doctors have in this culture, may hold a lot of weight, may even be experienced as the discerning point of view of a generalized cultural observer, an “objective” assessor of defect. Writing for New York magazine, a twenty-eight-year-old, 5 foot 6, 118-pound Lily Burana describes how a series of interviews with plastic surgeons—the majority of whom had recommended rhinoplasty, lip augmentation, implants, liposuction, and eyelid work—changed her perception of herself from “a hardy young sapling that
could do with some pruning . . . to a gnarled thing that begs to be torn down to the root and rebuilt limb by limb.\textsuperscript{15}

Under these cultural conditions the desire to be “normal” or “ordinary,” which Kathy Davis claims is the motivation for most cosmetic surgeries, is much more slippery than she makes it out to be. Davis makes the point that none of her subjects describe their surgeries as having been done for the sake of “beauty” but insist they only wanted to feel “ordinary.” But in a culture that proliferates defect and in which the surgically perfected body (“perfect” according to certain standards, of course) has become the model of the “normal,” even the ordinary body becomes the defective body. This continual upping of the ante of physical acceptability is cloaked by ads and features that represent the cosmetic surgeon as a blessed savior, offering miraculous technology to end long-standing pain. The “Before/Happily Ever After” noted earlier (“She didn’t like her nose. She felt it kept her from looking and feeling her best.”) offers its advice to an imagined consumer who is already troubled and ashamed of her defect. An unhappy reader is also assumed in “Correcting a Gummy Smile” (figure 6): “Do you hold back when you smile so as not to reveal too much gum? If you’ve always hated your smile and tried to hide it, you’ll learn how a simple plastic surgery procedure . . .”). But how many women who are basically

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.8\textwidth]{gummy_smile.png}
\caption{The shame of a gummy smile.}
\end{figure}
satisfied with their appearance begin to question their self image on the basis of images and advice presented in these features or—even more authoritatively—dispensed to them by their doctors? As noted, the "gumminess" of my own smile was of no concern to me until after I had seen the dentist; but under his care I began to wonder if it wasn't in actuality something I'd better hide . . . or "correct."

The spell was broken, however, when a few days after my appointment I received a computer-generated set of recommendations from the same dentist. The recommendations were phrased so as to make his prescribed course of cosmetic alteration seem precisely individualized and entirely a matter of satisfying my stated desires. My name was plugged in, of course, and the recommendations chosen from a set list of options, ready to be inserted with a keystroke, each with its own little prefabricated paragraph. The pretense that it was written specially for me didn’t bother me too much (we are used to this nowadays), but I became enraged when I saw that he had inserted all the options that were his idea as though they represented my expressed dissatisfaction and desires. It went something like this: "Susan Bordo: You have taken an important step toward giving yourself a beautiful, youthful smile. You have told us that you are dissatisfied with the discoloration in your teeth, with the gumminess of your smile, that you would like a shorter, neater bite, and a brighter, younger look."

I realized while going over this form that no patient was going to get away without at least one or two of those prefabricated keystrokes. "Gummy smile." "Shorter bite." And so forth. If you are trained to see defect, you will. I went for a second opinion, from a family dentist, and I was relieved to hear that she thought my smile was fine as it was and that there was no need to cut huge trenches in my gums in order to make me look more like Michelle Pfeiffer. I never called the first dentist back, but a few days later I received a message on my answering machine in which he wondered why I had not come back. He had wanted so much, he said, to give me the nice smile I wanted.

Babe: A Real Metaphor in our Lives

Freedom. Choice. Autonomy. Self. Agency. These are powerful words in our culture, fighting words. But they are also words that are increasingly empty in many people's experience. Are we invoking the rhetoric with such desperation precisely because the felt reality is slipping
away, running through our fingers? I think about the pain and self-doubt, the compulsions and disorders that often accompany our efforts at becoming what the culture rewards—particularly among my students, so many of whom have serious problems with food, weight, and body image. Then I listen to the rousing cries of “power feminism” in both its commercial and its academic formulations: “Just Do It!” “Take Control!” “Go for It!” There is a discordance for me between the celebration of “agency” and empowerment and what I see going on in people’s lives today.

Don’t misunderstand me here. I think that there have been great gains in the status of women in this culture. And I love seeing women with muscles, particularly when they project strength and solidity—as they did on the bodies of some of the Olympic runners, swimmers, ball players—and not merely a tighter, toned, anorexic aesthetic. I’m thrilled to see women who don’t feel they need to hold back on their skill and power in order to remain “feminine.” But let us not be deceived into believing, along with the magazine articles and TV commentaries, that we are at the dawn of a new, “postfeminist” age for women.

Do we really think that the twelve-year-old who becomes obsessed with looking like Gabriel Reece is really in such an alternative universe to the one who wants to look like Kate Moss? Sure, rigorous weight training is probably less dangerous and makes you feel better than compulsive dieting (although my students seem perfectly capable of combining the two in a double-punishing daily regime). But isn’t the real problem here the tyrannized relation in which young women stand to these images (whatever they may be), their sense that they personally are of no use, no value, ugly, unacceptable, without a future, unless they can get their bodies into the prescribed shape? How can feature writer Holly Brubach of the New York Times look around her—at the eating disorders, the exercise compulsions, the self-scrutiny and self-flagellation of young women today—and honestly write that “women, as they have gradually come into their own, have at last begun to feel at home in their bodies”? Call me a “victim feminist,” but I just don’t see it.

The triumphs that we wrest from those arenas of bodily improvement in which we are all supposed to be able to “just do it” are especially tenuous, reflecting the more generally unstable and desperate quality of life today. Both literally and figuratively there is an on-the-treadmill quality to the lives of most women (and men) as we struggle to achieve some sort of homeostasis in a culture that doesn’t really want that from
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us. The practices of dieting and exercise succinctly capture this treadmill quality. Dieting, it has now been fairly decisively established, is self-defeating and self-perpetuating, for physiological as well as psychological reasons. Our bodies, thinking we are starving, slow down their metabolism and make it harder for us to burn up the few calories we are eating. Feelings of deprivation (especially combined with the demoralization of working hard at a diet and not getting very far) lead to bingeing, which leads to a sense of failure and hopelessness, and so more bingeing. Even the “successful” diet that results in the desired weight loss is a tenuous achievement. While dieting, pumped up with excitement over the project of “taking control,” imagining our gorgeous bodies-to-be, we may be able to live (in hope, if not contentment) on broccoli and fat-free cheese. But once we reach our goal, this regime is no longer part of a project with a clear beginning and end. It’s a life sentence. The “Healthy Choice” dinners stare at us: “This is how it’s gonna be from now on, baby. Get used to it!” Most of us, understandably, don’t feel we can.

Nowadays they tell us that the way to beat the diet syndrome is to exercise. So, many of us exercise in order to be able to eat. I have friends who use the StairMaster like a purge; after a big meal, they hop on it. The oddness of this practice notwithstanding, exercise can of course be healthy, stress-relieving, and empowering. It can also become a compulsive daily ritual around which people organize and subordinate all other activities, and frankly I’ve found this compulsiveness to be more common than not. I have friends and students who become intensely anxious when they miss just one day at the gym, who view their daily routines not as maintaining health or fitness but as a kind of finger-in-the-dam against disaster. I don’t see this as paranoia but as a recognition of the reality that something in them is always near rebellion against the struggle to simply maintain the status quo. That rebellious little imp—the imp that wants to “let go” instead of stay in control—can’t be let out of the bottle, ever. He’s too dangerous.

I have serious problems with any theory, rhetoric, or narrative that masks these realities in favor of the inspiring (but inevitably deceptive) “success story” that, like the commercials and ads, captures a moment of “empowerment” and makes it stand for the reality of things. And so I come to Babe, which did not win the Academy Award but which moved and haunted me for weeks after I saw it. For a long time I tried to put my finger on just why that was. As I’ve said, I generally bristle against the triumphant success story. And Babe, like Braveheart (and
Rocky), is a success story, a tale of individual empowerment and personal triumph against enormous odds, of questing, self-transformation, and, you might even say, transcendence of the body. A little pig, seemingly destined to be dinner, dreams of becoming a sheepdog—and he succeeds! Crowds cheer and tears flow. And so did mine (dry at the end of Braveheart and Rocky).

When I tried to explain to a more cynical friend why I loved the film, I grasped impotently at the available takes on the film then circulating in magazines and among intellectuals. “Allegory of social prejudice,” that sort of thing. But I knew that wasn’t exactly what did it for me, and when my friend pressed on, amazed that I could be so taken by what she saw as a sentimental fantasy, I realized that sentimental—in the sense of wrenching emotion while falsifying reality—was precisely what I found Babe not to be and a large part of why it moved me so powerfully. Braveheart, apparently based on real events, seemed like a slick commercial to me from start to finish. But Babe—a fable with talking animals—was for me a moment of reality in a culture dominated by fantasy.

Babe, on the face of it, seems far removed from the land of StairMasters, liposuction, and face-lifts—and it is certainly nothing like a Nike commercial. Babe’s personal triumph takes place in a world that—as the film never lets us forget—permits such moments only for a very few. On the farm most of the animals eke their joy humbly from the circumscribed routines and roles allotted to them—and they are the lucky ones, the safe ones. The others—those who are destined to be eaten—tremble on little islands of temporary peace, the vulnerability and perishability of their existence always hovering before them. Death for them will not be accompanied by the dignifying hoopla of the big battle or the knowledge that they have made a statement for history. They will have no control over when death comes, and they will be unable to make the “why” of it more meaningful than the fact that others are luckier and more powerful and more arrogant than they are. Theirs is a world in which those who can “just do it” are a privileged few. A world in which “agency” is real but limited and “empowerment” possible but hardly an everyday affair. A world in which the notion that we are “in charge,” “in control,” “at the reins” is strictly an illusion. Existence is precarious for the animals on the farm, as it is materially for many people, and as it is existentially for all of us, whether we recognize it or not. We can try to avoid this recognition with illusions of “agency,” fantasies of staying young forever, and the distractions of “self-improvement,” but it only lies in wait for us.
It is very important to the emotional truth of the film that *Babe* himself learns about the fragility of his safety. When he decides to go on anyway, it is not as a hopeful hero-to-be, dreaming of glory, but out of the simple fact that despite “the way things are” in the awful world he has learned about, there is still the unanswerable, unbreakable bond between him and the Boss. The men in *Braveheart* are bonded too. But, as Gibson directs it, the relationship amounts to a fraternity handshake, a pledge of affiliation; they’re all pumped up, looking out over the grandeur of the countryside, ready to take up arms together. The bond between *Babe* and the Boss is established in a very different sort of exchange, in which each, in a Kierkegaardian leap of faith, bravely lets down his defenses in a moment of simple caring for and trust in the other. The taciturn and reserved farmer, trying to get depressed *Babe* to eat and obeying some wild impulse of inspiration, leaps up and performs an unrestrained, goofy hornpipe for him. *Babe* watches and, although he has heard “the way things are” from Fly, his surrogate-mother (pigs get eaten, even by the Boss and his wife), cedes final authority to the reasons of the heart. He eats.

*Babe*’s world is the one we live in; heroic moments are temporary and connections with others are finally what sustain us. It is a reality we may be inclined to forget as we try to create personal scenarios that will feel like Olympic triumphs and give us the power and “agency” over our bodies and lives that the commercials promise. But we still feel the emotional tug of abandoned dreams of connection and intimacy and relationships that will feed us in the open-hearted way that the Boss feeds little *Babe* and *Babe*’s eating feeds him. My cynical friend disliked the movie for—as she saw it—idealizing parent-child relations through scenes such as this (and *Babe*’s relationship with his surrogate mother, the Border collie Fly). But unlike the Gerber’s commercials that feature mother and child ensconced in an immaculate nursery, cocooned together by the accoutrements of cozy furniture, perfectly tended plants, good hair and skin, *Babe*’s images of caring and intimacy do not work through sugarcoating but by keeping the darker realities always on the horizon. They are the reason we need to take care of one another.

*Babe* is, of course, a success story. But unlike *Rocky*, *Flashdance*, *Braveheart*, and the many other fantasies of empowerment in which socially underprivileged heroes and heroines rise above their circumstances and transform themselves through discipline, will, and dazzling physical prowess, *Babe* is a fable about the power of “difference,” of
nonassimilation. The polite little pig, who talks to the sheep rather than snaps and barks, turns out to be a better herder than the bossy Border collies! And in a significant way he transforms the culture and the values of the world he lives in. (It is suggested both at the beginning and the end of the film that attitudes toward pigs were never the same after *Babe* won the competition.) The *Rocky* model of success, like the “power feminism” model, is one of “making it” in a world that remains unchanged while the hero or heroine’s body transforms itself to meet—and perhaps even surpass—the requirements of that world. This success is what we celebrate when female athletes demonstrate that they can develop the strength and power of men, when “special” Olympians cross the finish lines in their competitions, when those who have struggled to lose weight finally squeeze into those size-eight Calvin Kleins; the “outsider” is included by showing that he or she can “do it” too—on the terms of the culture. When the media celebrates such successes (and I do not deny that they are cause for celebration, as dramas of individual will, courage, and dedication), it usually leaves those cultural terms unquestioned.

*Babe* illustrates a different kind of success, one in which the “it” (of “Just Do It,” “making it,” “going for it”) is interrogated and challenged. Those collies own the world (their own little world, that is) by virtue of their physical prowess and aggression, which—until *Babe* comes along—are the dominant values of that world. No one could have imagined that sheepherding could be done in any other way. How many of us have found ourselves struggling to prove our worth in a world that does not value us or our contributions? Often, the pressure to conform is overwhelming. *Babe*, unable to transform his waddly little body and unwilling to transform his empathic little soul into a mean, lean, fighting machine, represents the possibility of resisting that pressure—and transforming “the way things are.” In a culture in which people are shamed for their “defects” and differences and seek safety in conformity, this tale may be a fantasy. But it is a precious one, one more worthy of our imaginations and ambitions—and our children’s, surely—than “Just Do It!”

*Babe* is a fable and presents its message through the conventions of that genre, not through gritty realism. A glorious triumph is the reward for the “alternative” values that the little pig represents. Few of us experience such definitive or resounding validation of our efforts. But it is not necessary to win the big race in order to transform “the way things are.” All of us, in myriad small ways, have the capacity to
make some difference, because nothing that we do is a self-contained, disconnected, isolated event. Seemingly minor gestures of resistance to cultural norms can lay deep imprints on the lives of those around us. Unfortunately, gestures of capitulation do so as well. Consider the message sent by the mother who anxiously monitors her own weight and ships her daughter off to Jenny Craig at the first sign that her child’s body is less than willowy, or the father who teases his wife (perhaps in front of their daughter) for being “out of shape.” I don’t mean to sound harsh; these responses may reflect personal insecurity, concern about the social acceptability of loved ones, panic over a child’s future. But when we demonstrate seamless solidarity with our culture of images, we make its reign over the lives of those we love just a little bit stronger. And we unwittingly promote for them a life on the cultural treadmill.

I have learned a great deal about the extremes of that treadmill existence from my students’ journals and from conversations with them in my office. Yes, my students know that as long as they keep up their daily hours at the gym, they can feel pumped up, look like Madonna, and burn enough calories so perhaps they will not have to throw up after dinner. But how, they wonder, can they possibly keep it up their entire lives? They know there is no equilibrium there, that the conditions of their feeling all right about themselves are precarious. It is here that *Babe* can speak to the situation of those who try to stop the breasts from sagging, thighs from spreading, wrinkles from forming. The parable not only makes visible more basic struggles that our obsession with appearance masks but also presents us with a metaphor for the pathos of that seemingly “superficial” obsession. The little pig performs in the final competition without any solid assurance of a happy ending. Even as he herds the sheep into the pen, he has not been told, in so many words, that he will be spared the carving knife. He wins the sheepherding trials, and, as is customary, the farmer utters the standard words “real” dogs hear at the end of their runs. “That’ll do, Pig. That’ll do.” A formality usually—but in the context of *Babe*’s long struggle, these words say more, both to *Babe* and to the viewer. They represent, I believe, an acknowledgment that so many of us fervently long for in our lives—and are so rarely given. So many of us feel like *Babe*, trying our hardest to become something valued and loved, uncertain about whether we will ever be granted the right to simply exist. “That’ll do. That’ll do.” These are words to break the heart. Enough. You’ve worked hard enough. I accept you. You can rest.
NOTES


4. Rush Limbaugh, in his tirades against feminists and the academic left, has apparently not noticed that among these groups too the "victim" is not politically correct but passe. In the 1990s, postmodern academics look around and see not "oppressive" systems (which would be old-fashioned and "totalizing," so very "1960s") but "resistance," "subversion," and "creative negotiation" of the culture. (These academics may balk at being lined up on the side of *Braveheart* and Nike; they might also be surprised at how often the trope of cultural "resistance" appears in automobile ads.) In exalting the creative power and efficacy of the individual, the right and left—polarized around so many other issues—seem to be revelers at the same party.


9. In 1994, there were nearly 400,000 aesthetic cosmetic surgeries performed in the United States, of which 65 percent were done on people with family incomes under $50,000 a year, even though health insurance does not cover cosmetic surgery. At the same time the number of people who say they approve aesthetic surgery has increased 50 percent in the last decade. See Charles Siebert, "The Cuts That Go Deeper," *New York Times Magazine*, July 7, 1996, pp. 20–26, 40–44.

10. Diana Dull and Candace West’s research suggests that while "limited economic resources may hinder the pursuit of cosmetic surgery, they do not necessarily prevent that pursuit." They cite cases of people who have taken out loans for breast augmentations or who have scrimped and saved for years for their operations. See their "Accounting for Cosmetic Surgery: The Accomplishment of Gender," *Social Problems* 18, no. 1 (February 1991): 54–70.


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