When Neoliberalism and Patriarchy Conspire
Plastic Surgery in the South Korean Reality TV Show *Let Me In*

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**She Who Used to Be Courted by Celebrities**
A woman in her 30s, visibly upset, sits in front of four celebrity MCs in a brightly lit TV studio with geometric wall decor and a hardwood floor. She stares down through thick glasses at her hands as a nondiegetic drumroll envelops their uncomfortable silence. Finally, one of the MCs speaks up. “This is sad. How could you let yourself get to this point?” Another adds, “We can’t possibly believe you’re the same person from that past photo of you. You were so gorgeous. How did you end up gaining so much weight?” A split screen shows, on the left, a “before” selfie of the woman from a couple of years earlier, in which she is made-up, naturally backlit, and conspicuously thinner; on the right is her in-studio presence with glasses, no makeup, an oversized grey hoodie, sweatpants, and weighing “120 kgs” (265 lbs), the viewers are told. Choked up, the woman explains how postpartum depression led to the weight gain, which then spiraled...
into bulimic episodes of binge eating and throwing up. “I am so devastated because my children see me throw up...” She breaks into a sudden sob and falls to her knees on the floor. “I have come on the show because this is my last chance in life. Help me, please.” Elegiac piano music accompanies the heightened moment as text runs on the television screen: “Let Me In: Season 5: She used to be courted by celebrities. How come she now weighs 120 kgs?” Her name is Cho Jin-young, but this will not be mentioned until the next week’s moment of reveal. Until then, she is iteratively referred to as “she who used to be courted by celebrities” (which doubles as the episode title), offered as a summary of her past self that the show aims to recover.1

Cho’s saga was portrayed on Let Me In, a reality television show that aired on the South Korean cable channel StoryonTV from 2011 to 2015. One of the most controversial makeover shows on Korean television, a typical Let Me In episode featured four celebrity MCs, two contestants competing for a total body makeover, and a board of surgeons that made the final decision. Each episode also presented two formulaically stylized docudramas with “a day in the life” scenarios reenacting the extreme body shaming that each contestant faced from living with visibly disfigured or aesthetically unpleasing bodies, juxtaposed with crosscuts of teary-eyed MCs in the studio reacting to the tragedies. Afterward, plastic surgeons from renowned private clinics in Gangnam — the affluent district of Seoul with a marked concentration of plastic surgery clinics — discussed which contestant to choose, and a suspenseful moment hung in the studio until they selected who would receive a free head-to-toe “total makeover” of eight to ten surgical procedures. After each winner was sent away for the surgeries and recuperation for as long as six months, she or he was brought back to the studio for a spectacular “final reveal” to debut the new look to friends and family, some of whom always broke out in happy sobs over the transformation. To intensify this moment of reveal, Let Me In’s hosts emphasized to the viewers that the post-op contestants agreed not to look at themselves in mirrors prior to the finale. This was part and parcel of Let Me In’s affective promise to use plastic surgery’s shock factor to evoke a moving conclusion, as the show’s main tagline boasted: “Let Me In: Aspiring to Warm Hearts Beyond the Controversies.” As the winner thanked the team of good-willed professionals for helping her find a new life through a new body, viewers were reminded that the show’s English-Hanja title, “Let Me In (美人)” not only means “let me be beautiful,” but betrayed a more supplicative connotation, “please make me become beautiful,” as if a plea to the mercy of the medical professionals who held the power to provide a chance at surgical metamorphosis.

The genre of plastic surgery “makeover” reality TV emerged in South Korea in 2003, with the on-again, off-again show Challenge Cinderella (도전! 신데렐라) by Herald Donga TV, the first program to offer free plastic surgery in a game show format. This was by no means exceptional in global television; in fact, similar reality TV shows surfaced in the United States that established a format for the makeover show, such as ABC’s Extreme Makeover (2002–2007) and Fox’s The Swan (2004). Challenge Cinderella, which offered “three ordinary twentiesomething women a chance to become ‘it girls’ through a hundred-day regimen of plastic surgery, teeth whitening, makeup, hair, diet, and skin care,” was met with media criticism for commodifying women. “That TV media is offering to ‘transform’ women from head to toe greatly reinforces the unjust lookism of our society,” stated Kim Tae-hyun from the media watchdog group Citizens’ Coalition for Economic Justice, referring to the show’s sensationalism to attest to “the low extent to which cable television can go for a grab at ratings” (in Ahn 2003). Despite the

Figure 1. (previous page) Let Me In, season 2, episode 3 (2012). Split-screen visualization of the contestant with screen captions, “Seventy days ago, Jung Young-gwang” (left) and “Jung In-hye, transformed into a perfect woman.” (Screen grab by So-Rim Lee)

1. The clip can be found on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3yhlVNGdR0 (StoryonTV 2015). All quotes from the show are from the videos; throughout, all translations from Korean are my own.
existent critique of such makeover TV shows from the early 2000s, CJ Entertainment and Media (CJ E&M)'s digital cable network StoryonTV started airing Let Me In in 2011. It was the unexpected buzz caused by Let Me In that spawned a handful of similar shows up to the mid-2010s, including Birth of a Beauty: Reset by Herald Donga TV (미녀의 탄생: 리셋, 2013–2014); Challenge! Miracle by MBC Queen (도전! 미라클, 2014); Back to My Face by the broadcast television channel SBS (백 투 마이 페이스, 2014); Change Life, Doctor and Star by OBS (체인지 라이프 닥터&스타, 2014–2015); White Swan by JTBC (화이트 스완, 2015); and A-List Men by TV Chosun (대세남, 2016).

Whereas Let Me In was hardly the first of its kind, by 2014 it had gained an unprecedented online international audience in China. In August 2014, South Korea’s Joins.com News reported that Let Me In garnered over 24 million views on the Chinese video-sharing service Youku, making it the most popular Korean reality TV show in China (Bae 2014). This followed the huge popularity of the “K-drama” (Korean drama) My Love from the Star (별에서 온 그대) among Chinese fans earlier that year; sponsored by South Korea’s cosmetics conglomerate Amorepacific, My Love from the Star was one of the bestselling products of the so-called Hallyu 2.0 (Korean Wave) phase of South Korea’s national rebranding and cultural export initiatives of the 2010s, propelled by social media and user-generated content. The K-drama’s particular success in China went hand-in-hand with two adjacent state-sponsored industries, plastic surgery tourism and “K-beauty” (Korean skin-care and beauty products). A report from the Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA) cited K-drama as a contributing factor to the steady increase of Chinese medical tourists from 2009 (4,725) to 2014 (79,581), with 27.9% of Chinese patients in 2014 visiting specifically for plastic surgery (Park 2015). It is no surprise that Let Me In piggybacked on this complex transnational boon.

Domestically, however, Let Me In had long outraged a panoply of South Korean women’s rights groups for perpetuating the systemic oppression of women in the lookist and gendered economy of beauty. From its airing in 2011 and throughout its five seasons, the show stirred regular protests from feminist and social justice nonprofit organizations, spearheaded by the women’s health team and the media activism headquarters of the organization Hanguk Yeoseong Minuhoe (Korean Womenlink), joined by other feminist groups including the Korean Sexual Violence Relief Center, Korean Women’s Association United, Unninetwork, Korea Women’s Hotline, and Seoul YWCA.2 On 5 June 2015, the activist alliance hosted a

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2. Hanguk Yeoseong Minuhoe, or Korean Womenlink, is one of South Korea’s representative women’s rights NGOs. Founded in 1983 as Yeoseong pyeonguhoe by the feminist intelligentsia that led antigovernment protests during the nationwide democratization movement, and restructured in 1987 as Minuhoe, the organization has played a key role in advancing South Korea’s women’s rights. Working in close collaboration with other feminist activist groups, Minuhoe’s victories that led to nationwide policy changes include the “No Diet, No Plastic Surgery” campaign launched in 2002 that achieved a ban on the public airing of beauty pageants such as Miss Korea that same year; abolishment of the patriarchal hoju (“head of the family”) system in 2005, which had legally acknowledged
press conference in front of the main complex of CJ E&M in Sangam-dong, Seoul, which received widespread media coverage (Kwon 2015a). The alliance issued four accusations against Let Me In. First, that the show promoted plastic surgery through false marketing (e.g., “a total life makeover,” “life reversal”); second, that it violated medical laws against promoting private plastic surgery clinics on television, perpetuating the myth of “celebrity” doctors; third, that it offered unsolicited and often unscientific medical information; and, last, that it featured just as many indirect advertisements as ones directly selling particular clinics through promoting various skin-care and weight loss products from the Korean beauty industry (Womenlink Fairmedia 2015). Each objection employed the rhetoric of medical science to buttress the point that Let Me In normalized the pathological view of the female body as in need of an aesthetic fix (“promotes plastic surgery” and “offers unsolicited medical information”); identified illness or weakness as the reason behind all struggles in life (“false marketing”); and promoted the surgeons, their clinics, and their services to the winner (“violates medical laws against advertising”). After the public outcry against the show’s capitalist mission to turn “ill, ugly, and unfit” bodies into perfect mannequins, even the Korean Association of Plastic Surgeons (KAPS) released a statement supporting the protesters. Noting the “questionable qualification of some doctors featured on Let Me In,” KAPS pointed out that the show featured a clinic that had been investigated by the police for teaming up with loan sharks who offered loans to patients (Kwon 2015b); another clinic falsely promoted scientifically baseless breast-enhancing acupuncture on the show, and had since closed its doors after fraud allegations (Bae 2015).

The activist alliance’s 2015 protest took place within 24 hours after StoryonTV’s official press conference promoting the upcoming season 5 of Let Me In. The press conference took place in the CGV Cheongdam movie theatre, located in a particularly opulent neighborhood of the Gangnam district. Yang Jae-jin, a psychiatrist who appears frequently on TV programs and is a staple on Let Me In since its first season, claimed the show’s main objective was to “help improve the self-worth of women and improve lives by offering plastic surgery to those who suffer from inherent functional disabilities as well as disfigured appearances,” so that they may “live within the social norms without discrimination” (Moon 2015). The show’s executive producer Park Hyun-woo added, “Let Me In is not a plastic surgery promotion program, since it uses plastic surgery as a means, never as an end to itself.” To add insult to injury, he added, “Every woman deserves to hear that she’s pretty” (Moon 2015). Unfazed, in less than

Figure 3. On 5 June 2015, Korean Womenlink, SeoulYWCA, Unninetwork, Korean Women’s Environmental Network, Korean Sexual Violence Relief Center, Korean Women’s Association United, Korea Women’s Hot Line, and the media monitoring coalition Maebius ˘ held a joint press conference against the airing of Let Me In: Season Five in front of the main complex of CJ E&M in Sangam-dong, Seoul. (Photo © Womenlink Fairmedia)
two months, the activist alliance formally requested the Korea Communications Standards Commission to stop the airing of *Let Me In*. On 17 September 2015, CJ E&M finally released a statement that it had “considered the public opinion on the content of its channel and decided to stop airing programs featuring cosmetic surgery,” emphasizing yet again that “the sole intent of *Let Me In* was to improve the contestants’ lives, and to deliver a touching narrative to the audience through the process” (Keum 2015). Using this momentum, protestors and KAPS alike further pushed for legal sanctions to manage the hitherto unregulated plastic surgery advertisements that proliferate not only on public media, but also bus stops, train and subway stations, airports, billboards, and other public spaces throughout Seoul. In November 2017, Seoul Metro announced that it would banish all cosmetic surgery advertisements within the subway stations by 2022, citing that 91.4% of the complaints it had received on advertisements in Seoul subway lines 1 to 4 have been about “plastic surgery and other ‘beauty-related’ practices that concern women’s bodies” (Kim 2017). The activist alliance’s hard-won victory against *Let Me In* not only made a case against the unethical plastic surgery practices undergirding the makeover TV show, but also successfully channeled national attention to the rampant image-based industries capitalizing on the notion of a desirable female body.

Even after the discontinuation of *Let Me In* on South Korean TV, the deep-seated capitalist collusion between the plastic surgery industry and the global media persists in the promotion of other beauty, makeup, and health-related shows catering to both men and women. In 2016, TV Chosun aired a short-lived *A-List Men* (*대세남*), a makeover show exclusively for men. While the show quietly discontinued upon failing to gain popularity, its structural and topical similarities to *Let Me In* indicate an ongoing consumption of plastic surgery in TV entertainment. In Thailand that same year, Workpoint TV began airing *Let Me In: Thailand* (2016–current) featuring plastic surgeons from both Thailand and South Korea, having purchased the TV show format from CJ E&M (Yoo 2016). If anything, *Let Me In*’s pan-Asian success strongly resonates within the ongoing national project of Hallyu, specifically South Korean government’s attention to maintaining plastic surgery as a lucrative tourist draw. Chinese plastic surgery tourists visiting South Korea in 2015 decreased by 27.9% compared to an all-time high in 2014. The decline continued in 2016 and 2017 due to strained Korea-China relations as a result of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system debate (Jeong 2017). In April 2016, hoping to draw tourists back, the government officially revised its tax code to refund foreigners on value-added taxes for having plastic surgery in South Korea (Shin 2018). The persistent popularity of makeover TV shows and the efforts to maintain the plastic surgery tourist industry—including policy revisions—even after the discontinuation of *Let Me In* signify a need to unpack the discursive symbiosis among the plastic surgery industry, the media, and South Korean patriarchal values and neoliberal ethos that undergird such consumption practices.

Revisiting *Let Me In* in 2019, I’ve parsed through the complexities of the show’s mechanisms that often went unnoticed in news media reports. To understand the processes involved in the makeover TV show and its rhetorical violence concerning real people’s lives, I refer to the unpublished 2014 Human Rights Group Collaborative Project Report from Womenlink Fairmedia (Hanguk Yeoeseong Minuhoe’s media activism center) titled, “Lookism and Women’s Rights Violation: Investigating the Warped Beauty on TV.” This report presents the findings from media monitoring South Korean TV on the topics of makeovers, plastic surgery, and diet from June to August 2014, with specific case studies including three makeover shows, one health-related talk show, three broadcast morning shows, and broadcast news. It also includes anonymous interviews conducted by Yunso Lee and Jung Joo Yoon at Womenlink Fairmedia with two makeover TV show contestants and two show producers. While no one interviewed was directly involved with *Let Me In*, Lee and Yoon’s report provided an invaluable look into the making of such shows. In solidarity with Womenlink Fairmedia’s continued work to monitor South Korean broadcast and digital media while educating the public on feminist media literacy, I reconstrue how *Let Me In*’s visual rhetoric bespeaks the mass media’s continued practice of capitalizing on the pain of minorities as TV entertainment. This practice is particularly demonstrative in *Let Me In*’s undergirding logic that conflates two separate definitions of...
queerness, namely nonnormativity (presented as defect) and gender identity (presented as deviance), both perceived as threats to patriarchy.

**South Korea’s Neoliberal Turn to Plastic Surgery**

In June 2017, the Moon Jae-in government announced a policy change for all job applications, implementing *beullaindeu chaeyong* (blind hire) in all public sector jobs: “Except in special cases where a job requires a certain level of education or meeting certain physical requirements, job application forms should not inquire about discriminatory factors such as educational background, hometown, and physical condition” (Steger and Jung 2017). Requiring identification photographs, as well as information about other attributes such as weight, height, blood type, eyesight, family details, parents’ occupations, and educational background had been common practice for most job application processes in South Korea. Saramin, one of the nation’s largest online job portals, reported in 2016 that 93% of 760 companies required a photograph in their job applications, while “nearly 34% of 312 human resources managers said that they had employed people on the basis of looks, even if their background was not the best fit for the job,” and “nearly 50% said they had rejected an applicant because of appearance” (Saramin 2016). Public surveys and news outlets have also reported on the phenomenon of *chwieop Seonghyeong* (plastic surgery for employment) in both private and public sectors, characterized by the use of plastic surgery to land jobs. Incruit, another online job portal, reported in 2017 that among the 552 people surveyed who had job experience or were on the job market, 58% answered that they had actually consulted a plastic surgeon, among whom 29% had undergone a surgical procedure and 6% were planning a surgery—all specifically for the purpose of getting a job (Incruit 2017). These numbers cannot be read outside the context of a high youth unemployment rate among South Koreans aged 15 to 24, peaking at 10.7 percent in 1999 and almost reaching that record in 2018 at 10.5 percent (OECD 2019). According to Statistics Korea’s estimate, which includes the number of job applicants aged 15 to 29 who remain in school while they continue searching for jobs or who have discontinued the search, the youth unemployment rate went up to 20.4% as of November 2019 (Statistics Korea 2019). Amidst such conditions, implementation of blind hiring signifies the government’s awareness of the pervasive use of plastic surgery as an investment in a social agent’s body capital—and therefore, in an individual’s upward mobility.

Plastic surgery applies scientific knowledge to the treatment of the human body as a kind of technology—that is, an assemblage of interrelated body parts that function as a whole. Medical professionals generally use “plastic surgery” as an inclusive term for two distinct specialties: “reconstructive surgery” performed primarily to restore bodily function (e.g., skin grafting for burn victims, cleft lip repair, or breast reconstruction after mastectomy), and “cosmetic surgery” performed to enhance the appearance of normally functioning anatomy (e.g., rhinoplasty, breast augmentation, and liposuction). While different in purpose, the desired outcome of both kinds of procedures is “normalcy,” often conflated with the ideology of beauty: bodily restoration necessitates a reconstruction of normative looks for social function, while bodily enhancement more explicitly caters to a desire for better looks. More often than not, then, differentiations between the two procedures become murky, especially when plastic surgery becomes imbricated in a narrative conducive to the neoliberal ethos of self-entrepreneurship, in what Rachel Hurst terms “surface imagination,” or the “fantasy that changes to our external appearance can transform our emotional and social lives” (2015:xviii). In other words, plastic surgery allows for a distinct surface imagination that channels the entrepreneurial impulse of a neoliberal growth mindset, assuming the individual social agent is limitlessly improvable, up to the point of achieving the fantasy of perfection. Plastic surgery’s narrative of upward mobility then turns one’s body into an extension of one’s performed social capital, which, in turn, becomes a developable asset rather than a given. With the technological developments that allow noninvasive procedures such as Botox injections to cost as low as US$20 per treatment, plastic surgery has
become an increasingly accessible tool to enhance body capital (Han 2016). As Ruth Holliday and Joanna Elfving-Hwang delineate its usage, “Having the ‘right face’ can be crucial in marrying well.” The ‘right face’ can also be a determining factor in gaining employment in a Korean job market” (2012:73). The rigidly gendered South Korean societal structure also reinforces such an impulse more among corporate women than men, as looks have notoriously been much more critical for female workers in the hiring process than for their male peers; every year, there are numerous news media reports on appearance-related workplace discrimination against female employees concerning makeup, skirt length, and weight, and even flat-out demands to undergo plastic surgery.3

Historian John P. DiMoia traces the exponential growth of plastic surgery clinics in South Korea, from just under 5,000 clinics in 2000 to roughly 6,500 by 2005, of which “935 were located in Gangnam-gu, providing a total of just over 600 hospital beds” (2013:205). DiMoia argues that the change in the cosmetic surgery climate took place with the neoliberal turn initiated after the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis (referred to as the “IMF Crisis” in South Korea), during which the discourse around plastic surgery significantly changed from a manifestation of excess and affluence to a tool for self-realization and sustenance: “If plastic surgery as a whole continued to be viewed as a luxury by many,” he notes, “it also became a necessity to some, a set of practices that might provide one with a decided advantage in the job market” (204). Critically, then, we may see national bankruptcy as having brought about a fundamental change in the perception of plastic surgery as a mode of performing one’s identity. Anthropologist Jesook Song also notes South Korea’s 1997 turn toward a neoliberal welfare regime as a socio-political turning point: “The first extensive welfare state in South Korean history,” the Kim Dae-jung administration, claimed “to guarantee ‘a minimum standard of living for all national members,’ but focused its energies on neoliberal measures [such as] employability, rehabilitation capacity, flexibility, self-sufficiency, and self-entrepreneurship” (2009:2). This research underscores the socioeconomic crisis as a pivotal event in the establishment of the neoliberal social ethos as a new norm—one that requires every individual social agent to be an entrepreneur of the self, solely accountable for the successes and failures of life.

This neoliberal turn was the final national trauma of South Korea’s eventful 20th century, including the foundation of the modern nation from the ravages of Japanese colonialism (1910–1945) and the Korean War (1950–1953), resulting in the division of the peninsula into North and South Korea. In the aftermath of these events, South Korea underwent a rapid capitalist development over a mere half-century. Unlike the so-called advanced nations of Western Europe that gradually moved toward creating welfare states beginning in the early 20th century through distributive democracy, South Korea went from a GDP per capita of below US$100 in 1961 to US$30,000 in 2015; its economic success narrative parallels a surgical transformational narrative, wherein socioeconomic structural changes went hand-in-hand with the changes in the performance repertoire of individual social agents in everyday life. When the 2010s began with record-high youth unemployment, cutthroat competition on the job market met with a normalization of individual body capital as part and parcel of one’s curriculum vitae, complete with the customary “ID photograph here” slot on the upper-left corner of every job application. This request for a photograph in the hiring process also indicated that the body should be a conduit for self-realization, which signified corporeal beauty as evidence of diligence and hard work put into self-management.

In this climate of cosmetic wellness, the 2010s saw a global expansion of the two state-sponsored export industries of K-pop (Korean popular music) and medical tourism. Through the synergistic popularity of these two industries, the idea of surgical self-reinvention lives

3. For the LGBTI community, this oppression is worse. According to a 2014 survey by the Korean gay men’s human rights group Chingusai, 74% of 3,208 gender minorities experienced discrimination and/or gender violence merely by revealing their gender identity (Chingusai 2014).
on—discursively ensconced within the social membrane, normalized into everyday discussions on internet forums, offline meet-ups, and phone apps for rating clinics, and manifested by the bandaged tourist bodies that crowd the public spaces of Seoul.

Demystifying Let Me In’s Transformation Narrative

Not unlike dramatic theatre, Let Me In operated on scripted scenarios played out by various devices and performers that, as an ensemble, created its spectacle. The narrative formula of Let Me In presented a survey of the contestant’s tragic life through reenactments of the “everyperson” struggles in South Korean society, blown out of proportion for a 15-minute TV docudrama. In a typical episode, the camera followed the contestants through a series of everyday public shaming in their interactions with family, friends, coworkers, and strangers—ironically enough, reenacting such violence by staging the traumatic events with actual people from the contestants’ lives. Again taking the episode featuring Cho as an example, female contestants married with children suffer from all or many of the following types of villainy: the unhelpful husband who threatens to divorce her “unless she changes,” the verbally abusive mother-in-law, a general fatigue from lack of childcare support, and postpartum depression. For working female contestants, their shame is found in workplace discrimination and the critical scrutiny of the public. The baseness of the villains in the contestants’ lives, faces blurred and voices altered to protect their identities while reinforcing that they are indeed “real people,” effectively masked the undergirding villainy of South Korea’s Confucianist patriarchal scripts that propose model citizenship based on gender norms. “Confucianism begins with family relationships and ascribes different roles and responsibilities to various family members,” note Seung-kyung Kim and John Finch: “Taking family as a microcosm of society, [Confucianism] organizes political and economic life along a model of harmonious family relationships” (2002:43). These Confucian stereotypes include the stern and domineering father, the loving and submissive mother, the docile daughter-in-law/wife, and the enterprising son/husband. Such role-playing is critical to maintaining a societal system that disciplines “immoral” individuals—usually women who play service roles for men but fail to fulfill their roles as

Figure 4. Medical tourism center at the Incheon International Airport, which serves as a first stop for medical tourists, 2018. (Photo © Hae Soo Kim)

Figure 5. Tourists wear facial bandages and tote shopping bags in Myung-dong, Seoul, 2014. Foreground signage in Chinese (simplified) reads, “Today 20% Off! Chinese friends, welcome!” (Photo © NEWSIS)
steadfast supporters of the patriarch. Coupled with the neoliberal onus of self-management, then, Cho Jin-young’s postpartum obesity was clear evidence of her own character flaw (as an MC pointed out, “You’ve let yourself go”), which, in turn, justified her mother-in-law’s verbal abuse (“You used to cook and clean when you first married into the family, so why are you so fat and lazy now?”). Each episode of *Let Me In* framed everyday violence not as demonstrative of flaws in the patriarchal scenario but as the result of the contestant’s physical appearance, which was due to character flaws. And its validating visual rhetoric was none other than a series of video montages that placed the contestant’s body on display for a closer look, stripped down to underwear in extreme closeups of its perceived pathology. Cho is shown jumping up and down in grey underwear, played in slow motion repeatedly throughout the episode. As the tumbling mass of flesh, the bumpy cellulite, and rippled stretchmarks of her postpregnancy body presented tangible and monstrous evidence of her deviancy, Cho’s obesity became a thing to be exorcized.

This narrative of the pathological body attests to the patriarchal visual system of representation that permeates South Korean television entertainment. The gendered divide of this system is symptomatic of the gender divide throughout Korean society. Moreover, *Let Me In*’s gender dichotomy proves a deliberate strategy; shame circulates differently in the respective gender roles that South Korean social norms prescribe each individual, which we see in *Let Me In*’s two all-male episodes in seasons 3 and 4 that likewise operated under the misogynist logic that gives a “special” chance at life to each “ill” body. While simply inserting a male body into the patriarchal logic does not undo it, male contestants illuminated the different roles men are expected to perform within it. For instance, the show identified season 4’s Yang Jung-hyun’s bodily flaws as the following: too skinny, uneven skin tone, and serious malocclusion of the jaw. The docudrama reenacted how such flaws directly resulted in poverty, as Yang had to work multiple low-paying jobs on a daily basis to support his aging father. While the narrative logic identified Yang’s body as problematic, as it did in Cho’s case, it also showed his body as an unfortunate obstacle blocking him from living his life to the fullest, as a diligent, aspiring young man deserves to do. This is contrary to the show’s characterization of Cho’s body as evidence of
her sloth, buttressed by the social prejudice against obesity as a marker of indolence. If the narrative served to evoke pity for Cho, it offered to morally resuscitate Yang, depicting him as “a fine young man in all aspects except looks,” working two jobs to pay for his tuition and to support his father. Unlike Cho’s body, then, Yang’s body did not bear the stigma of his character flaw but rather existed as an obstacle hindering his entry into the patriarchal society to perform the role he was born to fulfill. In this sense, simply accusing Let Me In or the cosmetic surgery industry of demonstrating a gendered lookism or “the woman’s vanity problem” takes the discussion away from addressing the underlying symbiotic workings of patriarchy and neoliberal social ethos.

For both female and male contestants, a common narrative element remained: a deliberate downplay of the bodily processes of coping with the surgical rupture that takes place between the pre-op docudrama and the dramatic post-op reveal. Choosing not to represent cosmetic surgery as the material labor of all parties involved within and beyond the operating room, thus excluding the very materiality of pain that is part of the bodily rupture and suture, Let Me In minimized the most critical point on the transformation timeline — the surgeries themselves, and their affective result of bodily pain — into less than 10 minutes per episode. Recovery was shown in a sped-up montage in which a group of post-op contestants camped together for the duration of the healing process, engaging in daily activities such as watching TV, working out, and preparing to return to their post-op lives in an apartment unit provided by the production, purposefully isolated from friends and family until the moment of the in-studio reveal. Between the stripped-down, pre-op body and the fully made-over, made-up, accessorized, and lavishly dressed post-op body, a symbolic break occurred behind the scenes, tucked away in the performative world of reality television.

Dramatizing the moment of reveal, Let Me In’s euphemistic omission of the materiality of bodily redress was critical to portraying the actual protagonists of the show — that is, the surgeons who made the selection, benevolently bestowing makeovers on the pathological bodies. Although Let Me In’s advertisements purported to portray its contestants as protagonists of their life-reversal stories, the actual narrative focus was on none other than the medical professionals who exercised the authority not only to identify the “flaw” of each contestant but also the “cure” or the “fix.” In every episode, the doctors’ medical gaze offered the viewers a glimpse

Figure 8. Let Me In, season 2, episode 4 (2012) shows seven post-op contestants watching the show on TV in a Let Me In recovery unit. Top left corner show title reads, “From a tiny 35.5 sq. ft. room to a 2,135 sq. ft. shared house, can her dreams also get bigger?” Bottom left screen caption reads, “I now have friends.” (Screengrab by So-Rim Lee)
into the patronizing debates over which contestant to choose, the scope of the discussions including the clinical plausibility of certain procedures, and the moral qualifications of the contestants (whether they deserved the makeover). In their white lab coats, sitting in a semicircle in an astonishingly white room, the doctors stayed hidden until they reached a verdict on the winner. Evocative of a popular internet neologism that surfaced in the 2000s referring to plastic surgeons as unimunim (doctor-god) to parodically underscore the transformational power of plastic surgery makeovers, *Let Me In*’s doctors literally “played” god. Their performance was a visual reminder that the plastic surgery economy’s systemic collusion with patriarchy and capitalism conflates the consumer and patient; *Let Me In* proffered such conflation as entertainment on TV, visually transforming “doctor” into the new signifier of “second creator.” As if to materialize South Korea’s biomedical patriarchy, season 5 featured nine doctors, seven of whom were men, four of them plastic surgeons, with only two female doctors, a dentist and a dermatologist — no female plastic surgeons. As of 2019, four years after the cancellation of the show, all nine doctors still promote their private practices both online and offline by including “*Let Me In* doctor” as part of their name brand. Moreover, many of these doctors continue to be present in the TV media on other related beauty and health talk shows, continuously promoting their personal brands as well as exhibiting their “humane” side as celebrity doctors on variety shows. Yang Jae-jin, for instance, went from *Let Me In* to a variety of talk shows including *Red Handbag* (빨간 핸드백, 2015), *No Way I’m an Adult* (어쩌다 어른, 2015), *Same Bed Different Dreams* (동상이몽, 2016), and even an MBC TV drama, *Angry Mom* (앵그리맘, 2015), in a cameo role.

**Public Shaming and Queer Performativity**

Contrary to the continued presence of *Let Me In* doctors across media, not all past contestants of makeover shows — including the much-dramatized winners — faced life reversals as the show portrayed. An anonymous interviewee from Womenlink Fairmedia’s 2014 report suffered from social phobia, a fear of being recognized in public or hearing unsolicited comments on her post-show body. “Some can’t go out of their houses due to fear. When they do go out, people ask, ‘Why do you look the same after losing weight on the show?’ or ‘You should go back on the show once more’” (2014:23). This interviewee also stated that the drastic weight loss she experienced on the program was only possible in the liminal duration of the show: “The show’s setup was to portray post-makeover life as a Cinderella narrative. When we read the Cinderella story,
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we don’t imagine what comes after the end” (2014:21). Another interviewee told Womenlink Fairmedia that she underwent six months of extreme pain from the repercussions of a head-to-toe liposuction, all the while having to wear a compression bodysuit to “physically keep making [her] body size smaller,” the details of which are omitted in makeover TV shows (2014:17). In fact, interviewers Lee and Yoon note that some contestants had to appear on the shows before fully recovering, hiding their bodies in pain under thick makeup and artfully angled photo-ops; others experienced dehumanizing microaggressions, from being filmed in underwear to expose their pre-op bodies to being edited in postproduction to a degree that misrepresented their characters to create affective spectacles. According to an anonymous makeover show producer interviewee, “The media, plastic surgery, and beauty industry cannot be separate,” since “in some cases, without makeup, pre-op and post-op looks might not be that different” (2014:18).

Such testimonials show how Let Me In’s spectacle operated on a reiterative politics of representation conditioned by South Korean heteronormativity. Through mechanisms of public shaming, the show performatively placed its very onus of patriarchal malaise onto the individual contestant; thus, if shame was the affective counterpart to the bodies portrayed as grotesque, repulsive, and unnatural, it not only completed the capitalist transaction that propelled the contestants into competing for a new body, but also performatively undermined the very visual rhetoric embedded in its making—from pre-op docudrama features, body imaging techniques, and in-studio competition, to the final moment of reveal. In the show’s doing and undoing of the elusive narrative of beauty as neoliberal “becoming,” then, shame turned performative—especially read in terms of what Eve Sedgwick calls “queer performativity,” or “a strategy for the production of meaning and being, in relation to the affect shame and to the later and related fact of stigma” (2003:61). Sedgwick describes queerness as a forever deferral of an identity that “remains to be specified, [and] is always belated,” as its “shame-delineated place of identity doesn’t determine the consistency or meaning of that identity” (2003:63; emphasis added). While shame may already be a foremost component of the identity for a person identifying as queer, then, its very plasticity characterizes the intangibility of shame as a proto-affected betwixt and between performativity, queerness, identity, and desire. An affective sign of the excessive, residual, or always belated identity of queerness, shame becomes a wedge that performatively cuts through the very making of Let Me In’s narrative heteronormativity.

The queer performativity of Let Me In, then, arises out of the patriarchal narrative, an attempt to assume and assimilate the contestants into its script, and in so doing, undertake to “normalize” each body by framing its visual peculiarities as shameful. Each contestant’s body in Let Me In was set up to demonstrate primitive or subhuman symptoms of nonnormativity that the patriarchy has long identified as a threat, as almost but not quite normal in its unmarriageable, therefore unreproducible, state; a queer body, therefore, that is forever deferred in its social construction. Staging a spectacle out of corporeal otherness, Let Me In did not call each contestant by her given name but used mnemonic, dehumanizing, categorically misogynistic and racist labels including “jaw-protruding monster female” (season 2), “Frankenstein female” (season 2), “gigantic-bellied female” (season 2), “gigantic-breasted female” (season 5), “spatula-chinned female” (season 3), and “Kunta Kinte look-alike female” (season 4). These monikers doubled-up as titles of each episode and became critical to building media hype to boost the show’s ratings. Brutalizing names were the first step to making legible the contestants’ problematic queerness, which was characterized as akin to possession; measuring the success of each contestant’s redemption scenario following a queer exorcism was none other than the moment of the spectacular final reveal.

5. Kunta Kinte, a character in Alex Haley’s 1976 novel Roots: The Saga of an American Family, became known in South Korea through ABC’s 1977 dramatized series, which aired in 1978 on South Korean network TBC (Dongyang Broadcasting Company); in 2016, the History Channel’s remake of Roots also aired on South Korean cable TV channel Dramax.
Critically, queerness as a gender construct was, for the most part, unspoken throughout the duration of the show; all contestants were assumed to be cisgender and heterosexual according to the unspoken heterosocial norms, unless otherwise noted. The danger here, then, becomes a conflation of queerness as a gender minority (those treated as invisible) and queerness as a designation of strangeness (those sensationalized as monstrous). Both definitions of queerness coevally prevailed in the show, one as a lack and the other as an excess. In this sense, my reading queerness in *Let Me In* is not so much a subversion as an underscoring of the inherent subversiveness of the unspecific and ambiguous semantics of queerness itself—which became particularly fraught in the episode featuring Jung In-hye, the male-to-female transgender winner of season 2, episode 3.

Introducing Jung as having undergone a gender affirmation surgery with regular hormone treatments prior to coming on the show, *Let Me In* labeled her as a “son who wants to become a daughter” with facial and bodily features as “yet too masculine to pass as a woman,” and backing up the diagnosis with visual reenactments of daily struggles Jung faces as “a woman trapped in a man’s body.” As the show focused primarily on identifying Jung’s appearance as problematic, it spent minimal time engaging with notions of gender and sexuality, much less portraying Jung’s struggles as resulting from systemic discrimination. In other words, by making Jung exceptional, *Let Me In* precluded the possibility of considering the shared struggles faced by sexual and gender minorities in South Korea.

Upon selecting Jung as the winner, *Let Me In’s* doctors turned to prescribing multiple surgical procedures for her to “be really reborn as a woman,” including facial feminization surgery and breast augmentation. At her final moment of reveal, celebrity MCs’ jaws dropped over Jung’s new sizable breasts (referred to as “the ultimate symbol of femininity,” by a plastic surgeon), as well as a face so frighteningly beautiful that one MC got “the creeps (소름끼치).” Another MC gushed, “you’re going to make all the men line up on the streets.” Jung’s mother, who had hitherto characterized her transgender identity as “filial disobedience,” did not attend the final reveal; her father, on the other hand, burst into tears as if he was finally seeing her, for the first time, as a daughter. These reactions echo Joanna Elving-Hwang’s analysis of *Let Me In*’s narrative as a tale of moral redemption, in which the parents “repeatedly thank their children for their hard work” upon the final reveal, thereby “reaffirming the process of cosmetic rebirth as an action that embodies the Confucian value of filial piety through acknowledging their children’s willingness to submit to physical pain as an act that erases the physical evidence of the parents’ inability to ensure their children’s future success” (2013:11). This discourse of filial piety became embedded in a larger patriarchal discourse as the doctors came onstage to cheer on Jung’s success, which read more like a pat on their own backs for materializing the imagined fantasy of “woman”; upon “restoring” the queer body to the heteronormative field of vision, then, the studio was filled with praise and relief upon Jung’s newfound gender role.

South Korean TV’s fascination with transgender embodiment of feminine signifiers is not new. Mass media’s description of Harisu, South Korea’s first openly male-to-female transgender celebrity, as “prettier than a woman” not only exceptionalized her as an anomaly of successful passing, but also reinstated a politics of exclusion—from women, or even humans. Patty Jeehyun Ahn notes, “To praise her for her feminine beauty without any modifiers about her sexual identity would concretize her femaleness, but to label her as prettier than a woman safely displaces her from the imagined category of real womanhood” (2009:262). In 2012, 11 years after Harisu made her debut in 2001 with a Dodo Cosmetics TV commercial, *Let Me In’s* portrayal of the

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6. Discussion of Jung’s gender and sexuality was mainly limited to two segments; first, a reenactment of Jung’s childhood rejection when she kissed a boy on the playground; second, the doctors’ brief discussion of whether to medically assist Jung with facial and bodily feminization surgery, during which a psychiatrist mentioned how “homosexuality and gender dysmorphia are no longer characterized as disorders,” as the screen caption read, “Homosexuals and transgenders considered normal in current psychiatry diagnosis!”
cosmetic fix as antidote to societal discrimination for its transgender contestant still resonates with the imagined gender norms undergirding the visual logic of TV representation.

Undermining the show’s own portrayal of gender binarism precisely in the moment of reveal, *Let Me In* brought the rebirth of its queer subject center stage; Jung “became” a woman, not by identifying as such from an early age or going through the processes of gender affirmation surgery and hormone replacement therapy, but by dressing up like one with the “right amount” of curves and makeup — thereby reinstating, ironically enough, that gender performs. What ultimately transpired through *Let Me In*’s theatre of shame operating within the optics of gender binarism, then, was the queer(ing) performance of plastic surgery itself. Visually edited so that Jung’s sad-faced “before” and triumphantly smiling “after” split-selves appeared side-by-side, the two impossibly coeval bodies evinced the powerfully belated arrival of queer performativity. Precisely in the show’s attempt to reinstate gender norms by construing Jung’s surgically altered body into an image of femininity, the uncertainty that she “once looked different” unfailingly queered her successful foray past the porous surface of heteronormativity. Ironically, then, in all the efforts to “fit” Jung into the binary gender role-play, plastic surgery only recon-structed her body as queerer than ever. Jung’s triumphant performance of “woman” undercut the very celebration of normativity undergirding her dramatic reveal, completing the narrative poetic justice — while the queerness of plastic surgery itself successfully resisted its script.

**The Television Show Goes On**

In 2014 the news media began reporting on the prevalence of *yuryeonguisa* (ghost doctors) among the biggest department-store clinics in Gangnam, where physician assistants and other unlicensed individuals would replace the advertised celebrity doctor to lead the actual surgery, once the patient went under full anesthesia. “To make ends meet in a factory-like plastic surgery clinic, it’s impossible to produce enough celebrity doctors to cater to the demand,” explains a Gangnam plastic surgeon in 2019, “which is why people come up with all kinds of illegal ways to survive the competition in this overheated market, by hiring subs” (MBC News 2019). To prevent such illegal activities behind the closed doors of the operating room, the Korea Alliance of Patients’ Organizations is calling for closed-circuit televisions to be installed in every plastic surgery clinic — a call met with great opposition from numerous surgeons for possible infringement of workplace privacy. In the face of such debate, more news media are reporting on the problem of the Ministry of Health and Welfare’s penalization of particular TV programs that falsely advertise particular beauty- and health-related procedures *without* an accompanying measure to penalize the individual doctors who do the advertising. With the advent of another neologism, *syodakteo* (show doctor), to designate these “celebrity doctors” who frequent various TV shows for the purposes of self-promotion, such criticism points to the unresolved repercussions of the colluding capitalist industries of plastic surgery and TV media, long after the cancellation of *Let Me In* in 2015.

*Let Me In* represents a particular case of reality television culture whose main affective modus operandi involves situating nonnormative bodies within rigidly defined gender roles to draw sympathy from viewers. Echoing such performative measures of enhancing the body capital to better befit the scripted model citizenship, *Let Me In* demonstrates how systems of patriarchy and heteronormativity disseminate through the accessible and mundane media representations of life that reality TV re-presents; tapping into culturally codified gender roles, the makeover show ultimately troubles the discursive line between everyday life and entertainment, offering its contestants’ tragedies as effigies to the neoliberal fantasy of perfection. The success of *Let Me In* as television entertainment was due in part to its portrayal of how plastic surgery might offer something even more real, and therefore queerer, featuring extra/ordinary bodies whose subversive function lies precisely in the optic rhetoric that presents the nonnormative as aberrant and tragic. Offering narratives of wish fulfillment through the literal and figurative framing device of television, the show normalized the heteronormative fixing, mending, and controlling of unruly queer bodies into a stylized game show. As such, *Let Me In* self-
referredential pointed toward the diversionary genre of “television show,” which reduces real life to entertainment, testifying to the latent spectatorial desire to see things that may not necessarily be real, but seem real enough. Identifying the pathos of the story became more important than the twists and turns of the story itself, just as the final reveal turned the spectators’ pity and disgust into abject adoration. Just as the show treated the post-op body as a perfect object within the political economy of beauty, it categorically abstracted each contestant into keywords and nicknames, blurring their lives into the fantasy of a screen dream. Effectively masking the problematic social position of queer identities in current Korean society with spectacular life-reversal scenarios, *Let Me In* ironically took on a semblance of “minority empowerment” that putatively resolved misogynist social maladies by offering contestants another chance at life—and, in so doing, construed them as empowered warriors who braved the surgical knife.

References


