

Beauty as Dystopia: Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies**

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LORI BAKER-SPERRY and Liz Grauerholz explore the mechanism of pervasiveness that characterizes feminine beauty ideals in fairy-tales and how it influences their popularity as well as its impact on young people's vision, predisposing them to equate beauty and goodness. The two authors argue that those tales emphasizing feminine beauty are more likely to have survived, along with the preconception that "while beauty is often rewarded, lack of beauty is punished" (Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz 2003, 711-726). Possessing beauty, however, points, in the context of their plot, to a promising future, one that eludes the unfavorable odds that circumscribe the protagonist's actions. Turning beauty into a feature that supposedly leads to a "happy ding" is to be viewed as a prominent contribution to the consequence of the so-called halo-effects upon the deepening of discriminatory gaps between individuals.

The "halo-effect" is a cognitive bias consisting in the tendency to judge another according to a series of features that inspire certain traits, which are then reflected as actually belonging to that person in question. This judgment fallacy is viewed as one of the most common errors in our perception of the people around us. Coined in 1920 by Edward Thorndike, the term exerts a vivid, increasing fascination in an era that promotes interfaces and surfaces more than ever. Thorndike's experiments in proving the common occurrence of this phenomenon were followed by researches in the consequences of physical attractiveness. A 1975 *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* article signed by Harold Sigall and Nancy Ostrove of the University in Maryland Research investigated the interpersonal consequences of physical attractiveness, stating that "good-looking people have tremendous advantages over their unattractive counterparts in many ways." Dion, Berscheid and Walster reported in a similar study conducted in 1972 that "compared to unattractive people, good-looking people are more likely to possess a variety of socially desirable attributes." Moreover, the subjects participating in the study "predicted rosier futures for the beautiful stimulus persons, attractive people were expected to have happier and more successful lives in store for them." The conclusion revealed that "at least in the eyes of others, good looks imply greater potential" (Dion, Berscheid and Walster 1972, 285).

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The halo-effect bias is associated with the frequently portrayed bias of “everything that is beautiful is good”: Harold Sigall and Nancy Ostrove proved that beautiful people are more likely to get away with murder unless its motive seems to somehow be related with the criminal’s attractiveness. Beauty may speak of both vulnerability and danger, each of these languages emphasizing both the positive and the negative impact a pleasant outer appearance—as a state of being different, “elected,” privileged—takes over in socially and psychologically challenging situations.

As Webster and Driskell note, “beauty or physical attractiveness affects social life in both pervasive and profound ways.” Not only do “folklore and intuition tell us it is fortunate to be beautiful and unfortunate to be ugly,” but many recent experimental and naturalistic studies “document the respective advantages and disadvantages of these in a wide range of situations” (Webster and Driskell 1983, 140).

A further interesting result of such studies is that “commonsense and professional explanations of attractiveness effects often rest on strictly individual processes such as romantic or sexual appeal, envy, or desire for equity” (Webster and Driskell 1983, 140), a contrastive effect deriving also from beauty as an inaccessible status. The two above quoted sociologists demonstrate that “attractiveness effects derive usually from the structure of society,” where “beauty (or its opposite) often functions as a status cue; that is, when it activates patterns of widely shared cultural beliefs it is a status characteristic just as race and sex are, meeting the same defining criteria and having most of the same sorts of effects as those other status characteristics.” The surprising, “most general conclusion” of their study is “that the world must be a more pleasant and satisfying place for attractive people because they possess almost all types of social advantages that can be measured” (Webster and Driskell 1983, 165).

While “attractive people are seen as better at doing something than un-attractive ones,” attractiveness in itself, the study proves, “produces a wide range of effects”: “beautiful people have a great many advantages over ugly people” (id.), but they, in the spirit of beauty as a different status, are perceived as more likely to be the victims of discriminatory treatment. However, those high expectations concerning a physically attractive appearance generally render them as desirable key-features for a better living.

The issue of beauty as subjective limitation becomes the ground for a dystopian outlook in the circumstances of having the world progressively devoted to a general “halo effect.”

The present paper aims to explore Scott Westerfeld’s insight into beauty as a dystopian turn in *Uglies*, his much appraised young adult novel (followed by three sequels, which may recommend it as a series), supporting the critical view his work involves by making the beauty issue a plot device. In addition, I shall also comment upon its relation to real-life deviations in beauty industry and achievable plastic surgery. Although not a remarkable piece of literature in terms of aesthetical value, Westerfeld’s series looks at current issues that may, in time, degenerate into real objects of an ethical conflict. Quoting a line in *New York Times* (*Is it not good to make society full of beautiful people?*) (Westerfeld 2005, 5), the first chapter of the novel is set in Uglyville, a suburb where all (still) imperfect (thus, non-surgical) children are raised and educated to hate their natural features and anxiously wait to be sixteen. This age marks a turning point in their individual and collective evolution: they become subjects of an extreme surgical procedure performed

in order to turn them “pretty.” This rite of passage is followed by their departure to New Pretty Town, a city of utopian general wellness and harmony, inhabited by youngsters recently transformed from “plain ugly” into “breathtaking pretty.” The famous and long-expected Surge is described as a standardized medical procedure consisting of several steps that transform an ordinary being into an epitome of beauty. The massive appearance transformation aside, the Surge is known to also cause mutations in the immune and neurotic systems of its subjects. They are made into calm, un-harming creatures, whose existence will be affected, at most, by the constant struggle of being kept beautiful: while benefiting from plastic surgery, the people of Pretty Towns will eventually live to be two hundred.

Tally, the central character of the book, has already lost her best-male friend, operated and departed into the dream-like city of beautiful people. Recollecting their rebellious escapades into the metropolis, Tally is in for a risky attempt at seeing the brand new face of Peris one more time before she herself received the official visa to a long-term cohabitation amongst living embodiments of symmetry. Once she clopes to the never-ending party-ville, Tally encounters not only a beautified, but also a mellowed and indifferent Peris, a disappointing fixed shadow of what he once was. Her friendship with the infamous fugitive Shay whom she eventually meets that night, a fifteen year old that questions and, ultimately, rebels against the idea of turning pretty, as well as their later adventures in a place called Smoke (an ancient city that belonged to the pre-beautiful people of the 2000s, nicknamed Rusties after the decaying industrial traces of their civilization) reveals the true reason behind the logic of this normalized total bodily intervention: a beautiful face hides a beautified brain, unable to rebel, fully fed on vanity, pride, over consciousness of the body’s frivolous desirability.

The term “pretty” designates an individual lacking not only authenticity, but also the capacity of self-doubt: engaged into nothing but the duty of being happy and self-sufficient, “pretties” are controlled by specials, ferocious beautiful people in charge with maintaining the perfected scenarios of their flawless world. Programmed to think that wealth and happiness are earned through nothing but the effortless privilege of being beautiful, these people never question anything. Where, in the 20th century dystopias, brainwashing was a painful, unrewarding procedure, Westerfeld varies its consequences by inventing a propaganda of objectified beauty, denying subjectivity from the very core of its vulnerable intuitions, self-image included. Thus, as Westerfeld further argues, the effect that best characterizes a pretty appearance was a somewhat magical quality: “their large and perfect eyes” possessed “something that made you want to pay attention to whatever they said, to protect them from any danger, to make them happy” (Westerfeld 2005, 8). Although designed to bear identical features based on few available patterns, Tally claims that not all “pretties” look alike: some still bear the familiar feeling of uglies once known, resembling a possible brother or sister they would have lived in the bitter shadow of, if the surgical beauty revolution hadn’t been possible. The notion of brother and sister, however, is not promoted by the society which educates young people such as Tally: once a “pretty,” you are in a perpetual state of brotherhood with all others like you. The state of ugly is seen as a larval state to be hated and removed “when the time is right” or, in other words, as soon as the body reached its

maturity. The age of sixteen is convenient from both the biological and the psychological point of view: it juxtaposes maturity with a still undisclosed awareness that makes the utopian dream of beauty not only bearable, but exciting and, ultimately, plausible: “At school,” Tally recalls, “they explained how it affected you. It didn’t matter if you knew about evolution or not—it worked anyway. On everyone.” The surgical body encompassed “a certain kind of beauty, a prettiness that everyone could see,” consisting of “big eyes and full lips like a kid’s; smooth, clear skin; symmetrical features; and a thousand other little clues.” The reason why cosmetic surgery aimed for this type of perfection was explained historically: “Somewhere in the backs of their minds, people were always looking for these markers. No one could help seeing them, no matter how they were brought up. A million years of evolution had made it part of the human brain” (Westerfeld 2005, 16). This model beauty that not only became affordable, but was made into a compulsory maturity rite was based on a number of halo-effects (we shall analyze this bias in a further paragraph): “The big eyes and lips said: I’m young and vulnerable, I can’t hurt you, and you want to protect me. And the rest said: I’m healthy, I won’t make you sick. And no matter how you felt about a pretty, there was a part of you that thought: If we had kids, they’d be healthy too. I want this pretty person. It was biology, they said at school. Like your heart beating, you couldn’t help believing all these things, not when you saw a face like this. A pretty face. A face like Peris’s” (Westerfeld 2005, 16). The paradox of this conditioning is the fact that surgery did not fix the problems of future offsprings: although desire pointed to a beautiful person, that beauty was not natural, thus, un-inheritable.

As Virginia L. Blum pointed out in her insightful work on what she identifies as the nowadays ever expanding culture of cosmetic surgery, “these surgeries we perform to transform ethnically and racially different bodies into *mainstream bodies* are not in the service of thorough integration into WASP/Western culture, because the aesthetic changes are . . . the badges of parental success in the new land. A nose, a double lid—these dominant culture codes of beauty are etched into our bodies in token of our parents’ simultaneous submission to the dominant culture and accomplishment *within* it. The entrance fee is the daughter’s rehabilitated body” (Blum 2003, 10). Virginia L. Blum’s text comes as a helpful counterpart reading to Westerfeld’s *Uglies* in terms of describing the relationship a teenager develops with his/her body, under the pressure of a parent’s disapproval of it (expressed through the encouragement of having it “fixed”): “Having a parent criticize a physical feature is a complicated emotional experience that induces both anger and guilt. You feel as though you have let the parent down. Why didn’t you come out right? At the same time, the pervasive mythology of parent-child relations tells you that parents think their children are perfect, no matter what” (Blum 2003, 1). In the dystopian context of Westerfeld’s series, society takes over the function of parents: refusing beauty is a manner of refusing a parent’s love and approval. Moreover, a type of education focused on the body image solely imprints this desperate need for quieting any possible misfitting discourses: “Young children and adolescents receive their body images wholly from the outside. The adolescent girl, especially, enters the world tentatively and waits for it to say yes or no to her face and body. Now that my face had emerged from its childish amorphousness, it was finished enough to predict its disadvantages. Negotiating adoles-

cence can feel like traveling in a herd of sorts, always under fire or under threat of some dangerous predator; you hope that you will escape notice. Then one day you are singled out—shot down in the field—just when you imagined yourself safely swallowed in anonymity” (Blum 2003, 2). In this respect, learning that your body is not right is the first step towards wanting it altered into its best version: be it possible or not possible.

Young teenagers in Uglyville are encouraged to project beautiful versions of themselves through computer programs that enable them to daydream the blessed moment of receiving a beautiful shell. “When surgery enters your experience, the mirror becomes a kind of blueprint on which you project and plan the future of your body,” Virginia L. Blum claimed, and this affirmation suits the Uglyville psychological climate better than anything else. Although the surgeon “did what he wanted” to the diseased, ugly body, this exercise in virtual beauty helped maintain what Virginia L. Blum called the story of a body which required correction. The digital versions of what young people’s faces would look like after the Transformation Tally creates share a double-code language of desire and despair: once becoming aware of one’s own individuality, he also becomes attached to the image that reflects it. But a lifetime trapped in an ugly body is preached as an unfathomable curse. Fortunately, this is seen as a solvable issue: there had only been ten natural born “pretties” in all history, statistics taught, thus no one could escape either the humiliation of being called insulting nicknames in Uglyville, or the exaltation of becoming beautiful. This simple equation, however, hides a deeper challenge to one’s inner balance and develops a subtle control device: where “it feels like an intervention in the body’s wayward path,” the “body is heading in a certain direction that threatens to make *you* worthless unless you rise up in resistance—unless you intervene. With surgery. It is important to remember that if you don’t intervene *now* while there’s still time, you will lose. Something. Everything” (Blum 2003, 308). The result of not losing it is a type of obedience to anything that alters this disaster-headed path.

The main doctrine motivating the society of people who have already gone under surgery is based on so-called biology claims that one has to look in a way that everyone else will approve of. Outer appearance is held responsible for maintaining a climate of peace and harmony, devoid of any frustration. This official discourse is challenged by Shay and David, promoters of the right to stay ugly because beauty, they believe, is a trick. When taking Tally to Rustyville (an abandoned industrial city), her friend gives voice to this opinion that believing everyone else, except for the surgically fitted ones, ugly, is a cultural bias, not a biological feature to adjust to. “‘You’ve only seen pretty faces your whole life,’ she notices. ‘Your parents, your teachers, everyone over sixteen. But you weren’t born expecting that kind of beauty in everyone, all the time. You just got programmed into thinking anything else is ugly’” (Westerfeld 2005, 109).

What the official discourse often preferred to hide was the possibility of the operation not working, generating the so-called uglies for life, parias of society. The magic did not work on them. But this was no reason it could fail in the case of everyone else. The hypnotizing promise of beauty does more than the fear of being a surgical failure. Plausible characters in Westerfeld’s dystopian account on beauty are most surgeons. Claiming to perform “acts of magic,” they admit to the illusion of adjusting a surgical, painful work to the attractiveness of a fairytale, in which you go to sleep one way and wake up another.

“How different, ultimately, is cosmetic surgery from the story of, say, Sleeping Beauty, who goes to sleep a young, isolated maiden and wakes up to love and perfect happiness forever after? This is what you want at the end of the surgeon’s wand.” In Westerfeld’s novel cosmetic surgery is viewed, as a redeeming possibility: we are all ugly until we become pretty, Tally claims, and this belief keeps a non-productive, brain-washed, aesthetically satisfactory society going in an inertia of senses and void of attitudes. Westerfeld approaches a current tendency of “Viewing themselves as *healers* of cosmetic defects and emotional desperation, plastic surgeons need not interrogate their own psychological necessity for intervening in the appearance of healthy bodies.” This “harm being done to a healthy body, cuts being made, blood flowing for no known medical reason” is justified through the claim of psychological necessity. The result is similar to the functional ethics of *Pretty cities*: healthy bodies begin to appear “diseased” and “plastic surgeons operate under the pretext that the damage has already been done in the form of the cosmetic defect, hence they are simply correcting a problem that originated elsewhere” (Blum 2003, 80).

Refusing beauty equals the illogical, insane refusal of a better life. Consequently, any contact with ways of being otherwise than ornamentally suited to create a paradise’s crew is seen as a crime. Taken to the department of Special Circumstances (an obvious control body), Tally is faced with the unseen machinery that rules the apparent order of the New Pretty Town: “This city is a paradise, Tally. It feeds you, educates you, keeps you safe. It makes you pretty. . . . And our city can stand a great deal of freedom, Tally. It gives youngsters room to play tricks, to develop their creativity and independence. But occasionally bad things come from outside the city. . . . We exist in equilibrium with our environment, Tally, purifying the water that we put back in the river, recycling the biomass, and using only power drawn from our own solar footprint. But sometimes we can’t purify what we take in from the outside. Sometimes there are threats from the environment that must be faced” (Westerfeld 2005, 106). The ecological argument covers a deeper disturbance: that of having “six of the smartest uglies” gone and the threat of their un-beautified selves discovering what was rotten in this artificial Garden of Eden.

The story of choice, friendship and betrayal aside, *Uglies* offers a brutal insight into the price of failing looks and the fear of not attaining beauty, already specific to the postmodern society. Associated with Helen Deutsch’s “as if” personality, which described patients whose “whole relationship to life has something about it which is lacking in genuineness and yet outwardly runs along ‘as if’ it were complete” because their personality depends only “by way of identifications with others, identifications that keep shifting because there is no core personality discriminating and selecting. The identifications, in other words, are whole instead of partial,” resulting in the uncanny impression of “the performance of an actor who is technically well trained but who lacks the necessary spark to make his impersonations true to life” (Blum 2003, 151), idealized beauty is based on a craving for half-assumed realities. In this respect, surgery fails because femininity is perceived through film-edited, bidimensional images solely. The incisively promoted new skin pretties are to receive in their operation is a poreless, film-like surface that cancels the distance between the craver and its illusory craving.

A blog reviewer of Westerfeld’s novel underlines the similitude between the ideal markers that are guiding the final results of the Surge and the current mass fascination with

young models that look like grown infants and spell the same mixture of desirability and vulnerability that helped make the world in *Uglies* as so-called better place.

A less regarded fact, however, is that the plot of *Uglies* is not innovative in terms of speculating a dystopian future where not wanting to be beautiful is a sign of rebellion and the symptom to becoming a misfit. *The Beautiful People*, Charles Beaumont's 1952 short story (later turned into a *Twilight Zone* episode), tells the story of a young teenager named Mary who does not want the Transformation that would turn her into a woman "like Mother and like the others in the room; slender, tanned, shapely, beautiful women," the perfect match for "men with large muscles and shiny hair. Women and men, all looking alike, all perfect and beautiful." Her encounter with the doctor that is to perform the surgery is considered crucial in the character's expelling rebellious thoughts. While, as Virginia L. Blum pertinently argues, a teenager's experience of learning that their "recalcitrant" body came out wrong is inscribed in one's mind and body as a story of imperfection that "requires" correction, it also emphasizes the guilt of not intervening in its flaws and, thus "compounding the original failur ." "Your body," she adds, "Your body is heading in a certain direction that threatens to make 'you' worthless unless you rise up in resistance—unless you intervene. With surgery. It is important to remember that if you don't intervene *now* while there's still time, you will lose. Something. Everything" (Blum 2003, 5). When Mary faces the surgeon with her decision of not being operated, he serves her an explanation of why her mind is biased into thinking this beauty-aiming society wishes nothing but the best for its inhabitants. Beauty is skin-deep, and so is an unaware self. Her decision, connected with her father's suicide as a result of regretting his own Transformation and blaming it for loss of identity, is based on the thought that what society wants is not beauty, but uniformity, a case in which beauty becomes an irrelevant term, as it is counterparted by a fading memory of one's own imperfect self ("Where *are* these people?' Mary asked half to herself. 'What has happened to *them* and don't they miss *themselves*, these manufactured things?' She stopped, suddenly. 'Yes! That *is* the reason. They have all forgotten themselves!"). The plastic surgeons view themselves "as *healers* of cosmetic defects and emotional desperation" (Blum 2003, 13), they justify their practice through the claim of aesthetic necessity. Healthy, but otherwise ugly bodies, are seen as diseased: conforming to beauty would be, in the case of both Mary, Shay and Tally, a means of eradicating their inherent ugliness.

Criticized for its fundamental lack of political correctness—presenting a twelve year old as an ugly individual—Westerfeld's book reinterprets uniformity and alienation in terms of the superficial accounts on nowadays' standards of acceptable being. The dream of extreme makeover is glanced as utopian and fully desirable. The body is a landscape to be tamed and a story to be rewritten in a more achievable form. Cosmetic Surgery Reality Shows already go that far into promoting before and after bodily experiences as exploitable subjects. A show of the structure of *Extreme Makeover*, as Victoria Pitts-Taylor indicates, involves cosmetic surgery makeovers "granted as prizes to participants who had competed to win by writing applications, which were essentially stories about their desires for bodily improvement" (Pitts-Taylor 2007, 43). Furthermore, "*Extreme Makeover* would pay a team of experts—surgeons, dentists, dermatologists, and so on—to suggest and perform procedures, ranging from surgeries to teeth whitening

and chemical peels. The participants would not only be given the rhinoplasty, tummy tuck, or breast lift they had especially wanted but they would also get a whole range of additional procedures that would beautify them. For six weeks, they would stay in hotels, hospitals, and clinics paid for by *EM*, isolated from friends and family. At the end of the six weeks, each participant would be given a party, what the show called the ‘Big Reveal,’ where he or she would be reintroduced to their amazed friends, family, and loved ones in new haircuts, clothing, and makeup, but most important, in permanently, surgically changed bodies” (Pitts-Taylor 2007, 45).

Not only is this concept congruent with the *Uglies*’ or *The Beautiful People*’s plots, but it somehow elevates it at a simulated level that is not afar from an expansion into the real. By undergoing multiple surgery operations in order to achieve happiness, we speak of a new, dystopian order of priorities, a subjugating discourse where the body is granted much more than it sustains, and the surface takes over the disponibility of the depth. □

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Abstract

Beauty as Dystopia: Scott Westerfeld’s *Uglies*

The paper follows the halo-effect bias and the challenge of surgical beauty as plot devices in *Uglies*, the first of Scott Westerfeld’s homonymous young adult dystopian series. We discuss the manner in which beauty becomes a mean of mass control in the context of consumerism and image-based societies.

Keywords

Scott Westerfeld, Halo Effect, Plastic surgery, Cosmetic surgery, Beauty, Dystopia.