The purpose of this paper is to indicate possible research methods for humanistic research on aesthetic surgery in South Korea. In order to do so, we will propose a hypothesis. Changes in the body reflect the extensive social changes occurring in South Korea. The popularity of aesthetic surgery in South Korea reveals the idea of 'possibility' and its implications. What is the essence and importance of such an idea, and what results will occur when applied to women's perception of their bodies?
1. Introduction

According to data drawn from the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, South Korea is the country with the world’s highest per capita rate of procedures. With 74 operations per 10,000 inhabitants, it surpasses by far Brazil(55), Taiwan(44) and the United States(42) (APS Dec 2010). The intention of this paper is to provide an initial ethnographic exploration into this phenomenon of aesthetic surgery in South Korea.

While the short space provided does not allow for an exhaustive appraisal of the different sociological and anthropological approaches applicable to this subject, nor does it allow for a complete overview of the practice, we may nonetheless try to better frame the issue in ethnographic terms.

To do this, I would like to advance an initial hypothesis: South Korea has been undergoing enormous economic, political and cultural change for the past half century or so. Do the surgical changes occurring on the body somehow reflect the rapid transformations occurring in South Korean society? Do they reveal an ‘ideology of the possible’ in which anything and everything is subject to change, renewal, amelioration?

This ‘ideology’ may be tentatively summarised by the following tenet: anything can change, a natural landscape as much as an entire society, so why accept something as it is when it can easily be made better, more useful, more practical. It is my hypothesis that such ideology in South Korea is articulated in the way individuals view and manage their bodies. Through aesthetic surgery the body, for the consumer of such service, is in fact made better, more useful, more practical.

This paper will explore this idea and its implications in six different parts. The next part will provide some more precise definitions of aesthetic surgery and social change on the Korean peninsula. In part three I will review some relevant literature on South Korea, on aesthetic surgery and on issues of embodiment. In parts four and five I will attempt to bounce my hypothesis off the real life experiences of South Korean women through a series of interviews on the subject.

These interviews will assess: 1) the psychological role of aesthetic surgery, the personal meaning of these changes upon the body, 2) the social role of aesthetic surgery, the practical reasons for which these changes are made within the social reality of South Korea, 3) how the psychological role and the social role of aesthetic surgery become part of, or play into, or help define what I have hypothesised as an ‘ideology of the possible’.

Through the aid of these interviews we will try to shed some light on an important issue: for whom exactly are these changes made? Are the standardized beauties that line the halls of shopping centres the passive receivers of an ever-expanding ‘culture of beauty’ or are they simply the empowered new managers of their own tech-mediated and more comely countenances? Or, is this the wrong question altogether, and is it more a

---

1) The terms aesthetic surgery, cosmetic surgery and plastic surgery have been, and continue to be used almost interchangeably. While there is some technical difference between these, I prefer the term aesthetic for it covers a broader range of implications. More on this distinction will follow.

2) An increasing number of men also undergo aesthetic surgery in South Korea (see Elfving-Hwang and Holliday 2010). However, for the purpose of maintaining a narrower focus, this paper will deal primarily with women that have experienced aesthetic surgery. I should like to point out that while this research has been conducted amongst women informants, the subject is not the condition of women in South Korea per se. As such, I have chosen not to approach aesthetic surgery in South Korea from a gender perspective for the time being. However, it is undeniable that gender studies literature could be of much use for future studies on this subject. Especially the literature in gender studies that looks at the different types of conceptualisations of the female body, and not so much the literature concerned with women status/rights issues. For now, I apologise for this momentary shortcoming, and recognise that future investigations of this subject will need to engage with ideas and theories in gender studies.