



# Beauty and the Beast

*Michael Taussig*

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*Beauty and the Beast* begins with the question: Is beauty destined to end in tragedy? Drawing on extensive fieldwork in Colombia, Michael Taussig scrutinizes the anxious, audacious, and sometimes destructive attempts people make to transform their bodies through cosmetic surgery and liposuction. He balances an examination of surgeries meant to enhance an individual's beauty with an often overlooked counterpart, surgeries performed—often on high profile criminals—to disguise one's identity. Situating this globally shared phenomenon within the economic, cultural, and political history of Colombia, Taussig links the country's long civil war and its bodily mutilation and torture to the beauty industry at large, sketching Colombia as a country whose high aesthetic stakes make it a stage where some of the most important and problematic ideas about the body are played out.

Central to Taussig's examination is George Bataille's notion of *depense*, or "wasting." While *depense* is often used as a critique, Taussig also looks at the exuberance such squandering creates and its position as a driving economic force. *Depense*, he argues, is precisely what these procedures are all about, and the beast on the other side of beauty should not be dismissed as simple recompense. At once theoretical and colloquial, public and intimate, *Beauty and the Beast* is a true-to-place ethnography—written in Taussig's trademark voice—that tells a thickly layered but always accessible story about the lengths to which people will go to be physically remade.

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