Abstract
This thesis examines contemporary cosmetic surgery within a multidisciplinary feminist framework and is particularly interested in anti-ageing cosmetic surgery. It looks at many discursive and concrete examples of cosmetic surgery and casts a net that is inclusive of a wide variety of voices. These discourses are analysed in relation to the idea of ‘makeover culture’. Makeover culture is shown to be an increasingly important part of everyday life that is not confined to – but is particularly evident within – cosmetic surgery. For my purposes ‘makeover culture’ describes the set of cultural logics – the landscapes – in which cosmetic surgery is embedded. In these environments cosmetic surgery is an important part of a socio-cultural paradigm that values endless remaking, improving, renovating, importing and rejuvenating. The thesis’ theoretical cauldron contains cultural studies, media studies, feminist philosophy, actor-network theory, feminist theories of space, and psychoanalysis. I analyse cosmetic surgery as it appears in many media-scapes. The public narratives of some famous ‘extreme practitioners’ of cosmetic surgery are reviewed, as well as the stories of those celebrities who are secretive about cosmetic surgery and aim for a more ‘natural’ look. Also carefully analysed are the cosmetic surgery experiences told to me by more everyday recipients and doctors in interviews. I aim to develop a feminist understanding of contemporary cosmetic surgery that is beyond ideas of agent and victim, that goes further than the rhetoric of ‘just don’t do it’, that sees more similarities than differences between women who choose cosmetic surgery and women who don’t, and that positions the doctor/patient relationship inside a network of technologies and assemblages that includes many actors. The thesis offers suggestions about how people – especially women – may live critically and constructively with cosmetic surgery in all its contradictory, concrete, discursive, and imaginary forms. It acknowledges that there are complex pleasures and desires associated with cosmetic surgery, intertwined with its offensiveness and terrors.
Cosmetic surgery instinctively seems like a modern phenomenon. Yet it has a much longer and more complicated history than most people likely imagine. Its origins lie in part in the correction of syphilitic deformities and racialised ideas about “healthy” and acceptable facial features as much as any purely aesthetic ideas about symmetry, for instance. Some of the first recorded surgeries took place in 16th-century Britain and Europe. Tudor “barber-surgeons” treated facial injuries, which as the medical historian Margaret Pelling has shown, was crucial in a culture where damaged or ugly faces were seen to reflect a disfigured inner self.