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Resisting the Male Gaze: Feminist Responses to the “Normalization” of the Female Body in Western Culture

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Abstract

This paper attempts to present a feminist critique of the social and political promotion in Western culture of a univocal model of female corporeity imposed on women, and consequently detrimental to female subjectivity and agency. Starting from the Foucauldian position concerning social oppression determined by the *disciplinary gaze* of power structures, the paper discusses perspectives of resistance to the patriarchally-motivated scrutiny of the female body, and to the mass-media induced coercion of conformity to the *normalized* model for the female body in contemporary society.²

Keywords: Feminism, Body, Empowerment

Introduction

Power relations can materially penetrate the body in depth, without depending even on the mediation of the subject's own representation. -Michel Foucault³

The purpose of this study is to discuss some aspects of the representation of female corporeity in Western culture, a representation universally recognized as having been constructed and developed through a gender ideology at the service of the institutions of patriarchy, and covertly disseminated through the imposed and controlling definition of the “ideal” model of the female body. Secondly, the study intends to show how opposition in feminist thought to this patriarchally-motivated representation has emerged through a specific discourse of resistance, a re-representation of human corporeity, focusing on variations of the notion of hybridity, multiple mixed bodily forms. The first part of this article outlines what I have termed “normalized corporeity”, i.e. the media-induced promotion of a norm of bodily appearance along with the physical, psychological and social consequences provoked by that normative canon. The second part explores cultural and feminist theory in order to identify some of the avenues for resistance to the imposition of bodily normativity, resistance foregrounded by the awareness of the disciplinary function of the male

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³ M. FOUCAULT, *Power/Knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977*, (ed.) Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, and Kate Soper, Brighton, Harvester Press 1980, p. 186.

gaze, the refusal of a univocal model for the female body and, above all, the commitment to the principle of difference.⁴

Part I: Normatized Corporeity

The Binarized Body

Cultural representations of the body have been delineated according to a model for the human subject as *male, white, heterosexual, middle class*, leading to descriptions of corporeity rotating around a binary framework, an either/or condition, encoding distinctions of gender, race and class: *male/female, white/black, heterosexual/homosexual, middle class/working class* etc. Actually, given that the combination *male+white+heterosexual+middle class* seems to be the prototype for the human subject, the binary is more rightly defined as *male/ non-male, white/ non-white, heterosexual/ non-heterosexual, middle class - non middle class*. In other words, there is one polarity of the binary that carries negative social value since it is presented as a “non-condition”, as something “missing” or “unachieved”, as a “deficit” condition, whereas the positive polarity is erected as norm. It could be added also that in our contemporary times, another descriptor has been added, *weight*, with the normative condition as *thinness* and the deficit condition as *non-thinness*.

One of the main victims of the strictures of this socially constructed binary is the female part of humanity, the “second sex”, to cite the seminal attribute for women theorized by the icon of feminist thought, Simone De Beauvoir. Moreover, women are especially victimized when they possess one or more of these non-conditions, i.e., non- male, non- heterosexual, non- white, non-middle class (and non-thin) etc.

The Female Body

Feminist scholarship in the Western tradition has constantly denounced the historical invisibility and inaudibility of the female subject. Deprived of voice in culture, society and politics, women have been traditionally confined to the muted corners of domesticity, to the silenced margins of sociality, to the powerless outskirts of politicality. At the same time, female corporeity is intensely visible; exemplary of what Foucault (1980:186) considers a paradox in contemporary culture - the simultaneous disappearance and over-exposure of the body in culture, institutions, and in the persuasive discourse of social communication.

However, this apparently paradoxical condition of the simultaneous presence of corporeal visibility and invisibility, in Foucauldian terms, carries a particularly salient political value when it touches the female subject. The invisibility of women has been accompanied in an extraordinarily inversely proportionate manner by the visual display of her physical appearance, of her body as material object, to be observed, judged, valued, appreciated, rejected, modified and essentially commodified, for socially-constructed purposes. From a feminist point of view, this purpose can be claimed to be essentially male pleasure, concomitant social benchmarking and commercial profit. As pertinently commented by Dolezal (2010:357):

Despite the invisibility of women as social subjects, the physical aspect of female bodies has traditionally been subject to heightened scrutiny; women are expected

⁴ The argumentation in this paper was first presented to an interdisciplinary seminar in gender studies held in 2013 at the University of Rome “Tor Vergata”.

to maintain their form, appearance, and comportment within strictly defined social parameters, or else face stigmatization and the loss of social capital.

The Aesthetic Canon and the Role of the Media

In contemporary society, there is an aesthetic canon of female corporeity in which certain characteristics, dictated by ideologies of gender and sexuality, class and rank, race and ethnicity, are obligatorily present. The canonical female body is first of all middle class, white and young, with fine facial features and unwrinkled skin, fit and well toned and especially slim. This aesthetic ideal has been so rooted in popular consciousness that it has been raised to the status of standardized norm, to what Garland Thompson (2004) has termed the “normate”, equated not only with good health but also with beauty. Only this type of body is healthy; only this type of body is beautiful. Rosi Braidotti (1996) refers to the model as an “American, and more specifically Californian ‘body-beautiful’ ideology”. And the Barbie doll is the highest expression not only of this ideal but also of a socially induced brainwashing of young girls for the purposes of acceptance and conformity to this canon.

Moreover, even when Barbie dolls have ethnic variations (Indian, Muslim, African, African-American), the basic bodily characteristics of these multiracial versions are the same: always tall and slim with facial features displaying only minor departures from the standard, white, Western European/American model. In other words, the product creators of the Barbie doll compromise with the multi-ethnicity of third world populations but propagate nonetheless the basic Euroamerican aesthetic norms. The brainwashing is universally performed by the media, in all the popular genres which dominate contemporary communication: women’s fashion and gossip magazines, internet blogs and zines, television and internet ads, popular music videos, internet sites dedicated to film, sports and music celebrities. In the words of Dolezal (2010:365):

Despite the paucity of real bodies that meet the normate’s standards, just a cursory glance at a wide spectrum of fashion and gossip magazines demonstrates the disproportionate ubiquity of the normate in the images of celebrities, models, and other public figures. These faultless images have become emblematic of the dominant reality, setting the standards for normal bodies.

Women, and especially young women, find in the media display of the female figure not only models of female corporeity but also both overt and covert messages imposing conformity to those models. The images of female bodies which dominate print, TV, cinema and internet media repeat the same physical model, a model constructed artificially with sophisticated photographic technology (photoshop and air brushing) and glorified by its exemplification in rich and famous singers and actresses, a body model which is not only waifish but often emaciated, almost anorexic and at any rate undernourished and medically unhealthy. Once these models become conventionalized and universally accepted, they obviously assume the status of cultural norm, a socially sanctioned myth of the ideal body. Moreover, besides its distance from the naturalness of the female body, the model does not accommodate differences in corporeal form, differences determined not only by the genetic variety of the human species but also and most significantly by developmental changes in the life cycle. There is no place in this model for maturity or historicity; there is no place in this model for lumpy, bumpy, bulging, sagging flesh, for dingy, wrinkled, dry, veined, potted skin. The body cannot age; it must remain unequivocally and eternally young. The

naturally ageing body can almost be said to be projected and perceived as repugnant.⁵ Susan Bordo (1997:3) comments to this effect:

With created images setting the standard, we are becoming habituated to the glossy and gleaming, the smooth and shining, the ageless and sagless and wrinkleless. We are learning to expect “perfection” and to find any “defect” repellent, unacceptable.

The Cult of Thinness

In contemporary first world society, the dictum for female corporeity is above all the physical quality of slenderness. In all media-intense contexts, a specific message dominates “Be thin!” (Benn & Walters (2001), Hess-Biber (1996), Kilbourne (1999). As noted by Blood (2005), both magazine articles and advertisements, in their focus on food and exercise, on weight loss and fitness, and in their use of negatively-connotated words such as ‘unwanted’, suggest to women that their flesh may be undesirable and their bodies abnormal, leading obviously to a distorted body image and negative self-esteem. Researchers have found that magazine exposure and processing are predictors of “Body Image Disturbance” (Nathanson & Botta (2003:325). For young adolescents, moreover, peer pressure to conform to the model is particularly detrimental to the preservation of self-acceptance and psychological well-being. The contribution of mass media to the social imperative of female thinness becomes an external cue for self-nutrition and therefore contributes to physical and psychological illness, a point signaled out as far back as 1994 by the American Psychiatric Association, according to Harrison, Taylor and Marske (2006:525), who explain:

Eating in response to external cues rather than internal hunger signals is one of the first steps involved in the development of disordered eating (American Psychiatric Association, 1994), be it anorexia, bulimia, or compulsive eating (Hu, Li, Colditz, Willett, & Manson, 2003).

The Cult of Fitness

Now the cult of thinness, celebrated in fashion model and cinema actress icons is accompanied in media discourse by the cult of fitness. In the 1980s and 1990s, contemporary culture witnessed the arrival of the “fitness boom” and the adoption of a frenetic investment of personal time and energy in jogging, bodybuilding, aerobic gymnastics, along with a new interest in healthy and chemical-free nutrition. The concept of the body was naturally the centre of this movement. Although this interest originated as a middle class phenomenon based on a concern with bodily health, it became a new market taken up by the commercial sectors of society. Moreover, given that in the capitalistic economy, the pursuit of individual self-interest is an unquestionable doctrine,⁶ and given the analogous dogma that an individual has the duty to control and manage her/his own body, fitness became a social imperative quickly and easily exploited by the consumer industry. Maintaining a fit body through products and services of the fitness industry became obligatory. Moreover, a fit body can consume more and better, since it presumably enables

⁵ It is interesting to note the presence in the English language of a vast glossary of negative terms for “defective” skin.

⁶ Let us remember that “the pursuit of happiness” is a principle of the Bill of Rights of the United States Constitution.

better earning power and therefore more money to enjoy the benefits of a fit body: good restaurants, vacations, sports, sex and longevity. Thus, as MacSween (1993:154) has commented, “we become fit for consumption and have a positive duty to be fit.”

Thus, the fitness craze rendered the body a vehicle for the pursuit of happiness through consumption. This message to discipline and self-discipline the body for the sake of further and better consumption, has been labeled a “new hedonism” by Turner (1984: 112), who comments:

the new hedonism [...] is not oppositional, being perfectly geared into the market requirements of advanced capitalism [...] hedonistic fascination with the body exists to enhance competitive performance. We jog, slim and sleep not for their intrinsic enjoyment but to improve our chances of sex, work and longevity.

Thus, although “taking control of one’s body” and “making it stronger” is projected through mass media as an element of female agency, we can easily understand how it serves the capitalistic enterprise. As emphasized by MacSween (1993:156), “fitness of women means being fit to be looked at rather than fit to act”.

The Cult of Beauty

As a result, in mainstream Western culture, the “right” body, defined as thin and fit, has become conflated with the “beautiful” body, a definition that exerts tremendous psychological and social pressures on women and girls, not only through mass media and advertising but also through medical discourse. In fact, educational psychologists have noted that the model of the physically strong woman, the “new girl”, promoted obsessively by the media, risks negative consequences on the psychological development of girls and young women. Azzarito 2010: 261):

The “problem” with girls’ physicality has not been resolved, but rather complicated by discourses of new femininities in sport, fitness and health promoted by the new economies. Messages of new powerful femininities might be troubling for some girls, especially “other” girls and/or girls “at risk”, whose physicality collides with the emerging image of the “new” girls.

Moreover, as a consequent entailment, if only the thin and fit body is beautiful, only the beautiful body is sexually attractive. This has led to an excessive focus in media discourse on sexiness and to a social tendency towards the early sexualization of girls. Media messages, which promote sexualized images of young girls, include advertisements showcasing popular female music artists in sexy schoolgirl poses. Clothes for even very young girls are designed and advertized as “sexy”. Along with the traditional more feminine appearance of the Barbie doll, the overtly sexualized Bratz dolls, appeared, dressed in sexy clothing such as miniskirts, fishnet stockings, and feather boas. So powerful and worrisome is this tendency towards the premature sexualization of girls that in 2007 the American Psychological Association produced a report on this phenomenon, noting as well that even parents sometimes contribute to early sexualization in various ways. For example, parents may convey the message that maintaining an attractive physical appearance is the most important goal for girls. Some parents may allow or even encourage cosmetic surgery to help them meet that goal (American Psychological Association 2007). Stannard (1971:122) comments interestingly on this message of female beauty addressed to young girls:

Little girls look endlessly at beautiful women. They hear and read about them too [...] [the girl] compares herself to the ideal of beauty and is usually found wanting. She then begins woman's frantic pursuit of beauty [...] in this culture women are told that they are the fair sex but at the same time that their "beauty" needs lifting, shaping, dying, painting, curling, padding.

Sexual attractiveness then also becomes a norm for social acceptability, a norm that invades intimate and economic relationships. Only women who respond to the norm will be certain of success, as girls in peer relationships, as teenagers and adults in intimate relationships, in dating and marrying, and therefore in satisfying basic needs of female subjectivity: love, family and procreation.

A look at any of the popular women's magazines will tell you how imperative this message is. Let us take as an example a single issue of one of the most popular, entitled *Shape*. The title of the magazine is itself self-explanatory of the current focus of media messages addressed to women: body form is projected as the primary concern and focus of women's daily interests and activities. In the April 2011 issue (whose format and messages however never change), the cover page features a young, thin, fit, well-toned female body accompanied by various inserts of slogan-type copy, like *Tight Tush*, *Toned Thighs* and *Slim without the Gym*. The effect of the rhetorical patterns featuring alliterations and assonances is immediately evident. Out of 186 pages, 105 are dedicated to body shaping articles (slimming and fitness), interspersed with the advertisements of the remaining pages which, significantly, have the same content, making magazine content and commercial advertizing indistinguishable. An example of the advertisement captions which encode the normativity of the young, thin fit, body and which stigmatize weight as an enemy or a disease are the following:

THE BATTLE OF THE BULGE
FIGHT BACK AGAINST UNWANTED LBS
WORK THAT BIKINI
GET FIT: BIKINI BODY COUNTDOWN
TAKE THE LEAD: LOSE MORE WEIGHT THAN DIETING ALONE
LOSE UP TO 25 LBS
YOU IN SHAPE
ONE HOT MOMMA
I WEIGHED MORE THAN HE DID!
YOUR BODY: THE ULTIMATE MACHINE
NEED TO LOSE THIRTY POUNDS OR MORE?
JENNIFER LOST 58 LBS IN TEN MONTHS
I LOST 35 POUNDS WITH (DRUG)
TOUGH TOTAL BODY PLAN
FIGHT WRINKLES WITH THE TOUCH OF A BUTTON
REFORM SCHOOL FOR AGEING SKIN
FLAT BELLY BENEFIT
GET FIT: SCULPT YOUR BEST BODY EVER
SECRETS OF A SLIM SHOPPER

Although the normalized model of the beautiful body is obviously unachievable, it is promoted, nonetheless, as *attainable*. This media-induced conviction of the perfectibility of the material body thus continually encourages consumption and serves the commercial interests of the beauty industry (MacSween 1993:174).

Consequences of the Normalized Body Model

The consequences of establishing a standard for acceptable female physicality are far-reaching and potentially lethal. Obviously, any corporeal configuration, which deviates from this standard, enters into a “deficit” paradigm and is socially stigmatized as unacceptable, unworthy and needy of correction. A potential psychological consequence of this deficit paradigm is negative self-body image; potential physical consequences are all the dangers inherent in self-modification choices: excessive dieting and anorexia, side-effects of chemical anti-ageing treatments and cosmetic surgery aftermaths; a potential social consequence is the risk that women are oriented away from social concerns and towards a self-obsession with their physical appearance; a potential political consequence is that women become complicit with the patriarchal ideology of the female body as an object to be dominated and managed, and consequently accept the commercialization of identity that follows the commercialization of the body.

Body Image

Although the development of a personal body image has psychological motivations, acquired initially in childhood, it is obviously heavily conditioned by social factors. Messages about how our bodies should look, move, act and interact are dictated by historically and socially specific social conventions and these conventions are intrinsically related to gender differentiation: how a male body “should be” and how, *differently*, a female body “should be”.

Women of all ages feel themselves submitted to scrutiny, both by others and by self in a continual task of comparison with the idealized model and consequent self-verification (cf. the significant title of the 1996 study by Hess-Weber on the cult of thinness: “*Am I thin enough yet?*”? Women struggle continually with self-interrogations: not only, *Am I thin enough?*, but also, *Am I fit enough? Young enough? Beautiful enough?*, which then become the judgmental parameters for self-worth: “*Am I good enough, acceptable enough, worthy enough? -worthy to be respected, worthy to be loved?*” This aspect has been addressed in Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts 1997), which holds that women react to societal objectification by taking on an observer’s perspective of their own bodies to determine self-worth. In other words, they are induced to see their bodies as objects to be evaluated, thereby reinforcing society’s ideology of the objectification of female corporeity. Conformity to the normative messages then becomes a psychological imperative, since in non-conformity there is a risk of ostracism. According to Blood (2005: 46):

But to ignore them is to risk being an outcast, from femininity, desirability and normality. Because few women’s bodies fit the ideal, most women ‘must’ fail to measure up to current standards of femininity.

If self-perception, self-evaluation and self-esteem develop as the result of induced mass media messages, and if identity is reduced to the appearance of the physical body rather than the whole person, the result is what Hess-Biber (1996) calls “the commercialization of identity”.

Self-Body Modification

The result of this continual self-scrutiny, self-judgment and self-doubt is thus often negative body image and poor self-esteem. Moreover, the social emphasis on personal responsibility for one's body appearance along with the social imperative to "control our bodies" has encouraged self-body modification. Again, decisions about modifying one's body are projected by the media not only as a personal choice but as a personal obligation, ironically a testimony to the fact that you are "self-disciplined", that you "respect your body", that you want to "take care of it", and that you "try to improve it". Heiland, Darrin, Murray & Edley (2008: 258) pertinently note the following:

Stinson (1998) labels this concept the 'silent conformity,' a concept akin to Foucault's (1988) 'technology of the self' in which one practices unquestioning self-discipline and control of the body. Individuals 'effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, *perfection*, or immortality'.

Dieting

The message of the beautiful body perpetuated by the media often causes impressionable girls and young women to take the ideal body myth to dangerous extremes, to personal dissatisfaction, and at the farthest extremes, as notes Bordo (1993:166), to utter demoralization, debilitation, and death. Excess weight is almost a universal social and personal obsession and obviously one of the main avenues of control of weight gain is food intake. In other words, contemporary society has induced a common, popular ritual imposed particularly on women: obsessive dieting. In the first world of abundance, women are conditioned to deny themselves food! Therefore the drive to conform to the normatized model of corporeity has led to that social phenomenon, with all its negative serious medical and psychological consequences, which goes under the label of 'disordered eating', and includes the potentially terminal illness of anorexia (Kilbourne 1999). In US data, anorexia nervosa is believed to affect a significant part of the female population and has sometimes registered the highest mortality rate of any psychiatric illness (cf. Hoeck 2006).

Cosmetic Surgery: The "Make-Over"

Media messages commercialize ways of changing one's body to conform to the model. A prime example is the reality show aired in 2004 on the American TV channel *Fox News*, called *The Swan*, where women had the opportunity to change from "ugly ducklings" into "beautiful swans", by submitting themselves to extensive, often painful cosmetic surgery in order to modify their appearance.

Ironically, this choice of body modification through surgery is projected by the TV programme as a strategy of empowerment, which supposedly allows a woman to take charge of her body, to improve it by altering it to her wishes, wishes which correspond ultimately to the "normatized" aesthetic for beauty and desirability. Significantly, we can read in many feminist forums on the one hand a questioning of the stigma on aesthetic surgery but often, simultaneously, an acceptance and even promotion of body modification. Moreover, recourse to technology for the purposes of preserving youth and beauty has been considered by many as a positive form of activism, "a new feminism" (Kuczynski 2006). According to Kathryn Pauly Morgan (1991), however, this current tendency of recourse to invasive forms of elective cosmetic surgery, far from

being a form of agency and activism, should be understood from a Foucauldian viewpoint and, that is, as a manifestation of the normalization of technologized women's bodies (cf. Foucault 1988).

Cosmetic Surgery Tourism

So great an obsession has self-remodelling become that a new industry has emerged recently in first-world society: cosmetic surgery tourism. This new industry counts thousands of people each year who choose to travel abroad (Thailand, Korea and Singapore, Spain, Tunisia and Poland) to find more affordable economic conditions for aesthetic surgery interventions. The social, economic and cultural stakes in this growing phenomenon are demonstrated for example by the creation in 2011-2013 of an EU project (Economic and Social Research Council: Shaping Society) entitled: "Sun, Sea, Sand and Silicone: Aesthetic Surgery Tourism in the UK and Australia".⁷

Part II: Feminist Responses to Normalized Corporeity

Unfortunately, the conquests of the feminist movement in terms of awareness of female subjection, of attack on the institutions of patriarchy and of increased access to the public sphere of politics and the professions have not produced an equally forceful rejection of normalized corporeity. On the other hand, as explained by Naomi Wolf in *The Beauty Myth*, the emancipatory conquests of women have been accompanied by persistent insistence on the physical attractiveness of the female body, through obsessive media images and messages featuring sexuality and beauty, and with a concomitant success of industries which victimize and commercialize women's bodies: pornography, weight-loss products, cosmetic surgery etc.

The more legal and material hindrances women have broken through, the more strictly and heavily and cruelly, images of female beauty have come to weigh upon us [...] During the past decade, women breached the power structure; meanwhile, eating disorders rose exponentially and cosmetic surgery became the fastest-growing specialty [...]. Pornography became the main media category, ahead of legitimate films and records combined, and thirty-three thousand American women told researchers that they would rather lose ten to fifteen pounds than achieve any other goal [...] More women have more money and power and scope and legal recognition than we have ever had before; but in terms of how we feel about ourselves physically, we may actually be worse off than our unliberated grandmothers. (Wolf 1991: 10)

In a similar vein, Peterson, Grippo & Tantleff-Dunn (2008: 640) referring to an experimental study of feminist women's views on body image by Rubin, Nemeroff & Russo (2004) note:

While feminism did promote intellectual understanding of cultural messages and modify beliefs, women's awareness did not translate into changed personal feelings about beauty and their appearance.

⁷ <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/my-esrc/grants/RES-062-23-2796/read>.

At this point we can ask the following question: Has feminist thought successfully addressed this issue – i.e. the acceptance of women (including many feminists) of this normative model of female corporeity? Why do all women want to be young, thin, fit and beautiful? Why for example is cosmetic surgery interpreted by many as a choice of empowerment and agency rather than as a submission to normatization and victimization at the service of the interests of capitalistic profit?

Responses to this question can be identified in various strands of culturalist and feminist thought. In this part of this essay, we shall revisit some of their central positions. We shall then suggest how a new definition of the body emerging originally from feminist thought, rotating around the concepts of plurality, difference and hybridity, has provided a forceful discursive tool for resistance to ideologically induced manipulation of the female body.

Critiquing the Normatized Body Model

As emphasized by Leung, Qiu, Ong & Tam (2011), some associations between bodily experiences and abstract concepts are *situated* in that they develop from socio-cultural contexts and are thus informed by cultural imperatives, values, and habits. Thus, body image, and the value assigned to the physical appearance of the body, are claimed to be determined by social and historical contexts. One of the most imperative of these contexts is what Susan Bordo (2003) has called the “empire of images” in contemporary society for which “there are no protective borders”. This attribution by Bordo of an imperialistic quality to the media is interesting since it points to the all-embracing, mind-invading, behavior-conditioning power of this world of pictures. Bordo emphasizes the political consequences of this gigantic mosaic of visual forms in contemporary culture, in which the display of the female body occupies a consistent and preponderant space. From this multiplicity of media-disseminated visual images of the female body, a single model is reiterated and erected as the model par excellence, to imitate, to strive for, assuming thus the normative status of the “way to be” (cf. also Bordo 1990, 1994, 1999). According to Bordo (2003), the natural genetic, developmental, ethnic variations of female corporeity are “homogenized” and “normalized”. What is the political effect of this process? A univocal model of female corporeity, of what a female body should look like, of how a female body should behave, reduces the possibilities of women for individuality, for self-definition, for access to knowledge and for the right to produce knowledge. In other words, the imposition of normatized corporeity inherently denies female agency.

Now, in his 2006 book entitled *Beauty Junkies*, Alex Kuczynski has argued that the struggle for beauty at all costs has become a new form of feminism since women feel that they can take charge of their bodily form and modify it to conform to the dictates of contemporary society. This would be a form of empowerment that enables women to overcome the stigma imposed by society on ageing, the cause of a marginalized status for many women. Women who do not conform to the model of female beauty risk failure in both the public and private sphere. Success in both the workplace and in the spaces of intimacy and the home require conformity to the model. Improving one’s body then becomes a way of resisting marginalization and failure, a way of maintaining standards of acceptability, a way of remaining competitive in a cut-throat, capitalistically-defined world. For the author and also for many feminists, as is evident in many feminist internet forums and blogs on this question, recourse to technological aids, including cosmetic surgery, is a sign of female agency.

However, the contrary position also exists. Feminism has always unmasked the crucial interplay between capitalism, imperialism, racism and sexism. As pertinently commented by Jennifer Cognard-Black (2007):

Feminists have emphatically and persistently shown that cosmetic medicine exists because sexism is powerfully linked with capitalism - keeping a woman worried about her looks in order to stay attractive, keep a job or retain self-worth!

Moreover, she comments on the skill of the consumer industry in capitalizing on the women's emancipation movement to find new markets for commercial profit:

Yet the cosmetic-surgery industry is doing exactly what the beauty industry has done for years: it's co-opting, repackaging and reselling the feminist call to empower women into what may be dubbed "consumer feminism". Under the dual slogans of possibility and choice, producers, promoters and providers are selling elective surgery as self-determination (Cognard-Black 2007).

Cognard-Black (2007) makes a striking point when referring to the result of this drive towards the univocal, artificial body model:

The most graphic consequences of these trends are the stretched, alien, expressionless faces worn by certain celebrities and increasing numbers of "everyday" women. There are also the disfigurements and deaths that can result from surgeries gone wrong.

Likewise, Bordo (2003) emphasizes the artificiality of this contemporary "modified" body, which denies the historicity of the female body:

In my 1993 book *Unbearable Weight*, I described the postmodern body, increasingly fed on "fantasies of re-arranging, transforming, and correcting, limitless improvement and change, defying the historicity, the mortality, and, indeed, the very materiality of the body". In place of that materiality, we now have "cultural plastic".

What Bordo has termed "cultural plastic", the contemporary model of female corporeity, affects the female subject and inverts the progressive struggle initiated by women for complete female agency. If women cannot grow old physically, they cannot mature intellectually, socially and politically. They are to be eternally child-like, universal Barbie dolls, frozen between childhood and adolescence. Cognard-Black (2007) concludes that only the rejection of the normative model can nourish the social struggle for female empowerment when she comments:

Feminists must instead insist that a furrowed, "wise" brow - minus the fillers - is the empowered feminist face, both old and new.

Rethinking the Meaning of Embodiment

According to Connell & Messerschmidt (2005) in order to understand the process of embodiment and the social drive towards corporeal hegemony, we need to understand that bodies are both "objects of social practice and agents in social practice". Thus an inroad to understanding and resisting the hegemony of a normatized body model must necessarily include an incisive

intervention on the construction/conceptualization of female embodiment: on the one hand its patriarchal definition and on the other hand its re-formulation and re-presentation in feminist theory. Simone de Beauvoir (1953: 39) explained “to be present in the world implies strictly that there exists a body which is at once a material thing in the world and a point of view towards the world”.

Embodiment in its most simple understandings implies the lived experience of human beings, an experience that always bridges “the natural” and “the cultural”. The body is a locus of the encounter between nature and culture. As both a material entity and a conceptual construct, the body links nature and culture but manages to do so in intricate ways, marked by social and psychological tension, often conflictual, always renegotiated, or at any rate re-negotiable, the site of multifaceted disputed and disputable meanings and behaviors. The connections between the material, social and cultural embodied conditions are complex and impacted by the consequent embodied practices in everyday institutional experiences: family, work, religion, and related communication and organizational modalities. These embodied practices are themselves the result of historically determined cultural contexts. This means moreover that the construction of embodiment is dynamic, i.e. that the process involves change, and is therefore resistant to stable, constant and essential definitions. Connell (1995, 1998, 2002, 2009) has emphasized that gendered embodiment establishes relations between changing bodies and changing structures of gender relations. In a similar vein, Braidotti (1996:3) suggests:

I would like to suggest as a consequence that it is more adequate to speak of our body in terms of embodiment, that is to say of multiple bodies or sets of embodied positions. Embodiment means that we are situated subjects, capable of performing sets of (inter)actions which are discontinuous in space and time.

Rethinking the Genderized Subject: Masculinities/Femininities

Cultural notions of “feminine” and “masculine” behaviour are shaped in part by observations about what women and men do. Femininities and masculinities are learned. Messages about “feminine” and “masculine” behaviours are embedded in advertising, media, news, educational materials, and so forth. These messages are present in a range of environments, from the home to the workplace to public spaces.

The concept of *hegemonic masculinity*, theorized primarily by Raewyn Connell, distinguished a dominant model of masculinity from other “masculinities”. Although the plural term “masculinities” emphasized the existence of various and multiple patterns of male behaviour, it recognized nonetheless the prevalence of a dominant definition for the male gender, a normative model of “the way a man should be”, which implied the subordination of women. Connell & Messerschmidt 2005: 832) explain:

Hegemonic masculinity was distinguished from other masculinities, especially subordinated masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. But it was certainly normative. It embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men.

By positing the term “masculinities”, and by shifting attention away from the unicity of a dominant mode, Connell significantly consolidates the move in gender theory away from binarized, essentialist definitions. And just as there are multiple masculinities, there are multiple femininities. “Femininities” like “masculinities” are shaped by socio-cultural processes. Attribution of positive or negative value to types of feminine or masculine behaviour differs significantly across cultures. The definition itself of what constitutes gender behaviour is determined by nation and region, class and ethnicity, religion and occupation. Gender behaviours are therefore plural and dynamic; they change with culture and with individuals. Any one person assumes gender roles according to life state, situation, occupation, peer pressure and general social expectations. Ultimately it is context, which defines gender identities.

Rethinking Transsexuality

Although transsexuality has been a problematic issue in feminist theory, it poses critical questions, which undermine the capitalistic control of the gender order. This criticism emerges from the work of Judith Butler (1990:141), for example, with her theory of performativity in which gender behavior is interpreted as a “stylized repetition of acts,” a position, as explained by Connell, which encouraged the development of a radical gender politics. Once gender was understood as “a proliferation of performances”, existing gender norms could be significantly questioned and subverted. The question came to the forefront in Butler’s 2004 work *Undoing Gender*, where traditional medical interpretations of transsexuality were critiqued as reinforcing the intransigence of gender normativity. Since transsexuality is a specificity that involves location and change of locations within the gender order, the body and embodiment become the centre of tension in subjects who choose gender transition. Connell (2012:857-858) discusses at length the feminist implications for transsexual women. Her definition of transsexual women focuses on the process as embodiment:

By “transsexual women” I mean women who have been through a process of transition between locations in the gender order, from earlier definition as a boy or man toward the embodiment and social position of a woman – whatever the path taken and whatever the outcome.

Gendered embodiment moreover is complex in transsexual subjects, whose personal narratives reveal that, in these subjects, masculine and feminine embodiments sometimes co-exist and sometimes alternate with each other. At any rate, the complexity of embodiment here can be seen simply as an extreme case of a process that in all human subjects is always present as contradictory.

Transsexuality thus becomes a profoundly feminist issue, since the choice of change of gender position foregrounds the feminist call to the recognition of difference, opposes the state’s claim to regulate gender identity, and in ultimate analysis, is a forceful antagonist to the patriarchal order, which guarantees the capitalistic state.

Contemplating the Technological Body

In the present postmodern context, gendered embodiment faces the challenge of technology. The postmodern subject is enmeshed in the inescapable world of the information society, what Donna Haraway (1991) has termed the “informatics of domination”, a very complex apparatus of control and surveillance.

However, feminist theorists have approached the issue of technology in postmodernity in an innovative way, in an attempt to harness the positive aspects of a new technologized subject. For example in the perspective of Rosi Braidotti, the technological factor is not posited as a contradiction for the history of humanistic thinking. Rather, in postmodernity, it is viewed as part of the human entity, constructing the cyber-body. In this light, the mix of human and machine assumes a symbolic value, which points to the need for re-locations of cultural practices. She claims:

Far from appearing antithetical to the human organism and set of values, the technological factor must be seen as co-extensive with and inter-mingled with the human. This mutual imbrication makes it necessary to speak of technology as a material and symbolic apparatus, i.e. a semiotic and social agent among others (Braidotti 1996:1).

Now, the theorization of the postmodern cyborg body is associated primarily with Donna Haraway and especially with her 1991 essay “Manifesto of a Cyborg body”. Haraway’s position on gender rests solidly on the refusal of antonymous categories (female/male, nature/culture mind/body) and defines identity in contemporary culture through the postulation of the cyborg, a corporeal form linking the biological with the technological. Naturalness and essentialism are called into question in all of contemporary cultural theory including feminism. This hybridized posthuman form becomes a metaphor leaving the way open for a new non-Western, non-patriarchal discourse (precisely because “grammar is politics by other means” (Haraway 1991)). Thus, in rejecting the rigid boundaries separating “human” from “animal”, and “human” from “machine”, Haraway makes a significant contribution to the epistemological shift in postmodernism which positions itself as unequivocal critique of binarized identities (cf. also Haraway 2003).

Envisioning the Hybrid Body

Here I would like to suggest that conceptualizing a “hybrid body” is a fertile framework for resistance to the imposition of “normated” corporeity. By hybridity, however, is intended something close to the definition given by Homi Bhaba (1994) for culture, where it is not just the process of combining two entities but rather a channel of negotiation between, or outside of, the boundaries and binaries that frame identities and cultures. And what can be more revolutionary than the affirmation of the right to negotiate one’s identity, to choose the when and how of one’s embodiment, to move freely within the multiple masculinities and femininities of the gender order, to erase borders and reject the structures and strictures of binaries?

Thus, the postulation of the hybrid body goes to the heart of a basic question in postmodern thought: the form of the location and, at the same time, the location of the form, of the human subject. Braidotti (2011a: 179) explains the problematics behind the question of the human/post-human:

More specifically, the question now becomes: what counts as human in this posthuman world? How do we rethink the unity of the human subject without reference to humanistic beliefs, without dualism oppositions, linking instead body and mind in a new flux of self? What is the view of the self that is operational in the world of the informatics of domination?

The Road to Empowerment: Refusing the Disciplinary Gaze

Empowerment has been defined in many areas of social science. We can cite the position in Rappaport (1987) and in Zimmerman and Rappaport (1988), which defines it as “the connection between a sense of personal competence, a desire for and a willingness to take action in the public domain”, or the perspective found in Segal, Silverman & Temkin (1995: 215) as a process of “gaining control over one’s life and influencing the organizational and societal structure in which one lives”. In feminist theory, the concept is related to the necessity and the will for women, and for the female subject, to move from awareness of female objectification to convinced, and active social agency, from passivity to engagement. Thus, the first step to women’s empowerment is the recognition of the patriarchal design behind the “normated” model of the female body. Bordo focuses on the theoretical construct of “male spectatorship” seeing it as central to the social tension over, and negotiation of, resources. Through the male gaze, the female body becomes territory, a valuable resource to be acquired. Thus the socially defined and culturally mediated forms to which the female body is expected to conform serve the political and economic struggle over the determination and possession of available resources. (cf. Conboy, Medina & Stanbury 1997). Concomitantly, the ideal appearance of the female body, i.e. the ideal sanctioned by historically specific physical and behavioural models of “acceptable corporeity”, reflects society’s discourse on gender-connotated power relations and reveals the status of women in that society, which most often emerges as exclusion from social power and denial of female subjectivity, individuality and agency. According to Bordo, for whom the body is “a culturally-mediated form” (1993:181), the ideal appearance of the female body emerges from the bondage of dependency, determined by racism, sexism and pre-determined social roles. The body, in other words, is territory conquered by masculine spectatorship, the site of a struggle over ownership of resources (cf. Bordo 1990, 1997, 2003).

Bordo is indebted to the thought of Michel Foucault for much of this argumentation. Foucault comments incisively on the coercive power of the *gaze*, of how it determines a self-regulatory, voluntary compliance and submission to the power structure:

There is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorizing to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising his surveillance over and against himself (Foucault 1980:155).

Women's bodies are constantly on display and mass media seems to be mandated to recite incessantly the story of this display. The ironic part of this story, following a Foucauldian position, is that women must self-monitor this display and alienate themselves from their own body, becoming compliant with the power structure, becoming complicit with the source of their oppression:

Women experience alienation from their bodies precisely because of the imposed act of observing and judging their bodies, of monitoring its appearance for the sake of public viewing (MacSween 1993:154).

Female individuality is suppressed in women’s efforts to conform to the dictates for female corporeity, posture and comportment imposed by social expectations. Men peer at women; they scrutinize and judge them; they reduce female subjectivity to a material form and expect that form

to be eternally youthful, sexually attractive, physically and psychologically compliant to socially-constructed patterns of bodily form and behavior.

What enormous power lies in the objectifying consequences of this male gaze, *a disciplinary gaze*, which subjects and victimizes women!

And that is why perhaps the best form of resistance is, first of all, the simple awareness that the female body is *a gazed-upon body* and secondly, the unrelenting conviction and steadfast commitment to reject that condition. In the feminist agenda of the affirmation of “difference”, there is no room for the normatized model of the female body. Only by turning “difference” into a “strength”, as Braidotti (2011b) has advocated, and by harnessing that strength for the enterprise of women’s empowerment, can society move ahead more steadily towards gender justice.

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