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Sport and Education

Tribute to Martin Lee

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BODY IMAGES AND SELF-IDENTITIES

1. Introduction

Diet is a cultural practice that regulates the quantities and types of food for specific categories of people. The process of dieting involves the control of emotions and expression through changes in expectations, table manners and the regulation of desire. The dieting process has, however, undergone an important transition in social significance from the eighteenth-century to the world of mass consumption. In today's modern consumer culture, the body has also assumed new individual and social significance. The body has become a major focus for personal strategies of balance, and improving physical health and quality of life. Jogging, slimming, keep-fit, and dieting plans are all activities designed to manage body size, composition and/or physique. The management and molding of the body has become increasingly central to the presentation of self-image, and this has been backed up by a growing industry catering for dieting and general body care. The age at which people experience anxiety about their body shape and weight appears to be getting younger, and research suggests that a substantial number of young girls and boys are unhappy with their bodies. The stress placed on appearance by advertising, diet industries, fashion and sport icons put forward strong and limited images of what bodies should be. This pressure mainly affects women and is, nowadays, connected with the association between beauty, health and status.

The unprecedented amount of attention given to the personal construction of healthy bodies promotes a self-care regime designed to prevent the onset of numerous degenerative diseases, such as diabetes or heart disease. Many such diseases are increasingly portrayed as avoidable through the combination of appropriate diet and sufficient quantities of exercise. These new regimes of self-responsibility promote an image of the body as an island of security and are increasingly associated with appearance and the *presentation of self*. Concerns about body image and presentation have been facilitated by the production of a great number of self-help books, magazines and television programs, dietary supplements and exercise plans. Eating and dieting are topics of a global agro-industry complex which connects, through advertising and fashion, personal status, sociability and appearance.

2. Crisis of the Body

Life in the 21st century is dominated by a crisis of the body. The search for an immediate and present meaning to human life is one of its principal signs. The pressure to remain young and attractive, and an increased obsession with health, fitness, diet and self-therapy programs and the expansion of the nutritional supplement industry are all signs of an increased desire for self-knowledge and self-fulfillment. However, greater self-knowledge does not necessarily afford the actor with the capacity to rule the external situation. On the contrary, a greater knowledge of science and medicine does not necessarily equate to a greater understanding of the self or a greater degree of control over our destiny. Such incapacity is the result of excess reflexivity, a strict environment, and the immobility of the society as a whole. Society seems protected to all changes while a permanent turn makes way to the own individual and its body. The body has become the last refuge of development.

3. Body Discourses

On this cultural context, there was an unprecedented growth of discourses about the body. Among other domains, the sociology of the body emerged as a separate area of study and research. However, as Mirzoeff (1995) suggested, the body became central in academic studies in such a way, that it started to be the spinning plate of the direct contact between scientific areas that were traditionally separated. From medical studies to cultural studies, from feminism to *gender and gay studies*, from pharmacology to dietetics, from cybernetics to art history, from the human performance study to surgery, from biophysics to dance, from cultural criticism to body imagery, all confirms that an amplification of the body is happening and this is, above all, a proliferation of discourses about the body.

Our current representation of the body is the result of a multifactorial historic process. Scientific, cultural and technical conditionings have contributed to how we perceive the body. Mauss (1973) proposed the notion of *body techniques* to underline the social nature of body practices, a kind of body *habitus* which varies according to social factors as education, wealth, fashion and status. Mauss (1979) considers the modern notion of person as a resulting symbol of a particular way of personality elaboration and, as a specific model of attribution of subjectivity to individuals. That is the result of the invention of the technologies of subjectivity (Foucault, 1988) which lead the individuals to relate with themselves while subjects of their own behaviors and capacities. Both Mauss and Foucault refuse an original subjectivity, an ontological essence of each subject. The subject doesn't exist out of the social processes, mainly the ones of discursive order that produce them like free and autonomous beings. That is precisely the meaning of the expression *technologies of subjectivity*: a set of ethical techniques about itself which has in the *subjectivity* its own effect.

Here, the perspective of the body, like a unitary being, should be abandoned. Instead of speaking about an entity intrinsic to the body it is suggested that the body is the result of a specific body regime that leads a certain relation with the embodied individual and of this with the notion of body totality. In other words, the agency is

itself an effect, the result of the technologies of the self which invoke human beings as body reality. Thus, we need to think the historical conditions which made possible for man to build himself as an object of reflexivity. This relation of control of the self over the self, or of the knowledge of the self by the self, has been established in different ways. Confession, care, body care, self-esteem are only some of the proposed or prescribed procedures to individuals trying to give themselves an identity. In any case, the body itself is present as property of subjectivity from which life and death depends.

Nowadays the body seems to be gaining in both dignity and valorization because it implies caring for its good performance. Meanwhile, medicine develops a technical-scientific complex that presents predictive medicine, based upon genetic knowledge, as the perfect health platform. Thus, the discourses about the body cannot be understood outside the progress and human perfection ideology that has been leading to the progressive medicalization of society.

The literature on consumer culture examines consumption in relation to the construction of distinct lifestyles. The emphasis is upon the consumption of goods and services which contribute to various aspects of body maintenance and image such as diet, sport, clothes, and health clubs. Thus, the images of health are akin to body images promulgated by the cosmetic and fitness industries. Exercise and diet management becomes a response to control image and health.

These messages promote the myth of moral strength and will as a way of building the contemporaneous subjectivities. Biological perfection it is the counterpoint of moral perfection. But the other side of these perfectionist presumptions hides contradictory practices and representations: on the one hand, the compulsion to work out (*vigorexia*) and the refusal of nourishment (*anorexia*); on the other hand, the orgiastic bodies, excessive in nourishment (*bulimia*) and the refusal of physical exercises. The former suggest a large tolerance to body suffering and exhaustion. Eating disorders have the tendency to grow amidst a cultural environment based upon diets which frequently propose caloric restrictions (Bordo, 1993). The later refuse body normalization and suggest excess.

As Turner (1996) reminds us we are again in the face of a pendulum that swings between Dionysus and Apollo. A great part of the cultural history of the western Christian civilization can be epitomized by the two extremes, orgy and fasting, that have in the Dionysian cult the expression of excess, marginality and protest of the low social groups and, in the apollonian the expression of rational control, restriction and dominion.

Underlying this new healthy ideology is the free choice and personal autonomy rhetoric. On this context, we can identify two types of speech, with apparently contradictory values:

- a) The defense of an ascetic lifestyle, devoted to hard work, self-restraint, and discipline. Framed by a representation of a thin but muscled body, middle and upper classes strive to physically distinguish themselves as capable of clean living and obtain a healthy life. Through self-control, fitness programs and regular training, frequently with personal trainer, they try to demonstrate their own moral and physical superiority, differentiating themselves from lower class groups.

- b) The proliferation of practices built upon a new «prudentialism» (O'Malley, 1992). Through sales techniques and marketing the technologies of consumption exacerbates both individual and collective anxieties concerning each one's future, encouraging the investment on the quality of life. The ethics of lifestyle maximization, coupled with new technologies of lifestyle management generates a ruthless imperative of self-government. From this point of view, training and sportive practice are not socially neutral activities but rather ways of social regulations.

Narcissism can be understood as a neurotic version of a new lifestyle centered on jogging, healthy diets, weight control and physical maintenance. Anorexia as an extreme version of narcissism (Turner, 1996) has, in a sport context, some interesting reflective elements. The data about the prevalence of eating disorders among athletes is well illustrative of the normative power of numerous biological signs. The American College of Sports Medicine suggest that 65% of the women who compete in ice skating, synchronized swimming and endurance sports suffer (I would look into this statement, I'm thinking it should be 'are or have previously', even still this statement will need a reference) from eating disorders. The connection between food, health and physical appearance is particularly important to women, especially in a society that gives so much importance to self image. On this perspective, the social value of women is associated to her body, represented nowadays by an ideal of thinness. Being thin, or being fit, became not only a seductive and attractive image but also a symbol of self-control, moral integrity and high social status (Marzano-Parisoli, 2001). This orthodoxy tends to produce an ascetic approach to both body and sports, convincing more and more people that everyone can modify and build the body they really want. This attempt to achieve perfection and virtue through the subordination of will and «flesh» is a behavior frequently found in anorectic individuals. Similarly, some male athletes tend to use extreme methods so they can lose weight, but these behaviors are more common in sports that need a slim female body. Finally, there is a bigger and bigger evidence of compulsive behaviors in sport activities.

4. Methods

A documental *corpus* of an advertisement campaign for bran flakes was used, from which some relevant semiotic materials, including images, concerning the body and health were selected. We proceed to the discursive analysis. We have selected three broad topics: What are the main themes of advertising, health promotion programs and images of sport in relation to the creation of body identities? What is the impact of food information and vigilance in the creation of a health promoting self? What attention is paid to the social and environmental contexts in which people live out their lives?

Advertising is considered as part of the changing social, economic, and cultural environment, and its visuals can be created in a way that can reflect changes that people would want to adjust themselves to. However, advertising cannot be seen as a rhetorical signature. It needs to be taken as a text that redefines subjectivities and

identities that ascribes rules and meanings; as a system that constitutes rather than reflects that prescribes as well as it describes.

In order to analyze selectively the presence of body and health discourses we have designed a form for extracting content. This form provides context, and formal and content information about the product and how it is advertised. It contains five sections, each one with its codes:

- The first section refers to the technical characteristics of advertisement: support, format, medium, and product.
- The second deals with the characteristics of the product: requirements for consumption, nutritional information, ingredients, etc.
- The third analyses the structure of the advertisement and refers to the written message and the visually message. The formal characteristics of the language are analyzed: communicative resources, denotation/connotation, functional attributes, etc
- The fourth refers to the intended communication and takes into account the content of the advertisement. The practical and symbolic representations and the predominant themes of the message are recorded (values, metaphors and body images).
- The fifth defines the real and potential target audiences of the product deduced from references in the advertisement.

The form was used to analyze written and visually transmitted messages in three types of bran packaging, magazines advertisements, the three booklets attached to the packaging and the CD *Virtual Trainer*.

5. Results and Discussion

The marketing of health by commercial organizations is about the creation of wants, needs and desires. But that promotional activity is most effective if they work into a corpus of existing meanings. Advertisements incorporate everything that the consumer finds significant. Food advertisements therefore use several different arguments that update the coexistence of two kinds of knowledge in food choices, one scientific, the other common sense knowledge. The main themes of the campaign are: a) Product's functional attributes; b) Benefits to health; c) Benefits to beauty and appearance; d) Benefits to body shape; e) Benefits to wellness.

Food advertisements use several different arguments like nutrition, aesthetics, hedonism, tradition, identity, and elitism to promote goods and desires that encourage consumption. Of these, the food/health theme, with its related medical/nutritional discourse is one of the most important. Because of the institutional and social

recognition of the biomedical sciences, which run parallel to the medicalization of the daily diet, the nutritional argument and scientific referents are recurring themes in food advertising, helping medicine and «healthy» products to progressively exert its influence on people daily diet. Through plays on words and images that are full of connotations, advertisements proclaim healthy benefits and attributes through scientific reasoning:

- *A cause-effect relationship* between the consumption of the product and health (e.g.: whole cereals = less cholesterol).
- *Natural products* are comparable with high quality products like fiber, fruit, vegetable, and water irrespective of any industrial processes to which they have been submitted.
- *A preventive and therapeutic function* is mentioned (e.g.: obesity prevention or the regulation of the intestinal function).
- *Body shape and aesthetic function* is also proposed by means of food management and physical exercise (e.g.: the booklets propose that women exercise during work on household or shopping).

Advertisements now try to link goods to individual satisfaction placed within a certain lifestyle. The images they deployed identified the person through the commodities they purchased. The commodities appeared to have the power to transform consumers into certain kinds of person living a life that is both personally unique and socially normal.

Contemporary «healthism» produces a medicalization of everyday life in such a way that two main groups of people can be identified: (1) those whose main goal is to construct and present themselves to others as healthy, and (2) those who cannot, or who refuse, to come close to the healthy ideal. In this regard, Blaxter (1993) writes that for the contemporary era, exposure to health risks has become a central marker of social class. While most will blame themselves for their health, only some enjoy a social position that allows them a viable measure of real control over their lives. The author reports that regardless of class and education, respondents notice voluntary behaviours as the cause of diseases: «my life is unhealthy because I can't control my weight, because I smoke; it is healthy because I take exercise, because I watch my diet» (Blaxter, 1993, p. 125). These orthodoxie tend to result in victim-blaming approaches to body images, illness and health, and promote the view that individuals, not institutions, are responsible for their health. The linkage of health, personal virtue, and self-sufficiency mystifies the structural bases of inequality. By focusing on individual lifestyle as a major determinant of health, «sporting healthism» creates the illusion that people are equally able to make free choices about their health.

At the core of this new brand of health management is the socially pervasive association between health and lifestyle (Gomes, 2005b). Health promotion obscures peoples' differential capacities to purchase goods that involve healthy behaviors. When

access to sporting goods is unequally distributed by class, the real winner of the ideology of «healthism» is the educated middle class. Lifestyle and self-improvement are components of a predominantly middle-class *habitus* that contributes to acquiescence to the logic of inequality (Gomes, 2004). It also exemplifies the replacement of public concern with individual choice as a form of legitimate spread of disciplinary body techniques. Previously confined to disciplinary institutions such as the school in the form of physical education, contemporary individuals are encouraged to live as if they are making a project of themselves. They are encouraged to take responsibility of their bodies, to work on them as a health guardian, and to invest in a lifestyle that will maximize the worth of their existence to themselves.

While the public educational politics of European states have depreciated physical education in the schools, the marketplace alternative goes on: increase in the number of gymnasiums as a direct result of the body consumer culture; and/or the domestication of physical activities by means of personalized machine forms of exercise (Gomes, 2005a). The co-option of fitness by the marketplace has displaced several physical activities, like aerobics, to the isolation of DVD's and videos that are used in the home. Evidence suggests that the implementation of such private projects is constitutively linked to the rise of expert languages and the media through which to spread them. The proliferation of new magazines, self-help packages, and exercise videos has resulted in a new alliance between professionals, claiming to provide rational answers, and individuals, seeking to shape a lifestyle in the hope of personal recovery. State bureaucracies are no longer needed to enjoy healthy exercise habits. The ethic of lifestyle has infused a private domain that long appeared resistant to the population rationale. This new relationship operates through the cultural technologies of advertising and marketing that have employed a constant and intense self-scrutiny in terms of images of the self. Contemporary self-identities are largely constituted through image construction of goods and services with varying identity values located in the spheres of culture, leisure and consumption. The plasticity demanded by the role-playing and the images of health are, however, strongly mediated by other cultural sources of self-identity which emphasize contrasting values like the danger, risk, toughness, and unhealthy products.

In a medicalized society, physical activity is presented as the best way to control the body and in turn life. Bodies in control and bodies out of control become not only a physical marker, but also an ethical focus, the only way to reach self-responsibility. The attribution of social responsibility to the proactive pursuit of health has moved forward since the healthism of the early 1970s when themes of individual effort, discipline and will came together with the deregulation of public health programs. Experts have indicated how to be healthy by means of exercise and prudent behavior. The normalizing ethical power of the model is proposed by rhetoric of free choice and personal autonomy. Such thinking is typical in countries which are attempting to replace old models of regulating health. Instead, individuals are encouraged on the assumption that they want to be healthy and can freely choose the ways of living most likely to promote their own health. Part of this political reasoning is based on the social body metaphor, the view that social illness may be repaired by disciplinary action on the individual body.

6. Conclusions

80

The *techniques of the self* are voluntary reflection practices through which individuals try to change themselves, establishing behavior rules, and modifying their unique form of being. It is a self-government device used by individuals, carried out continuously without the necessity to directly govern their own behavior. To this government mentality it is enough that there are some who feel governed and therefore act as if they ruled themselves. That demands a particular way of building new subjectivities.

Body education and the search for physical shape are suitable contexts to the expression of pedagogical ways which spread a certain set of experiences of the self. This experience has in the body practices context, being that of self care, self maintenance, self recovery, self activation, self dominion or self knowledge, an especially important way of development of the contemporaneous subjectivities built upon a specific medical sensibility.

Many of the physical exercise practices suggested nowadays, including those promoted by means of food advertisements, concern getting to the bottom of the conscience exam and to the use of registry techniques. Sports practices include pedagogical devices, understood to this effect as the means which contribute to set up or transform one's own experience. If we take as an example the physical maintenance practices proposed by the advertisements analyzed we will verify that these include : 1) optical devices oriented to self-observation and self-vigilance on which is determined what is visible from the subject to him- or herself; 2) discursive devices oriented to establish what the subject should say about him- or herself; 3) moral devices where the ways on which a subject should judge him- or herself are given according to a rule; 4) self-regulatory devices that establish what a subject can and should do with him- or herself.

- 1) *Self observation*: Using mirrors and technical instruments which measure cardiac frequency, caloric consumption, distance covered and exercise intensity, are examples of optical devices made for the individual to see, be seen and see him- or herself; the use of individual registry cards, where the individuals should make a certain balance of the frequency, intensity and quality of exercise is a example of the self vigilance mechanism. Centered in the autonomy of the sportsman, the evaluation and, specially, self-evaluation assumes a nuclear role in this autonomy regimen. The suggested training practices concern the use of registry techniques which make the individual to face himself. Confronting himself and of submitting to his own will is the obvious purpose of the evaluation technique.
- 2) *Discursive devices*: The contemporaneous techniques of expression, concentration and relaxation imply a self-reflexivity and a speech of the own body. We use the notion of psy-activities as ways of aggregating very dissimilar activities which have as common point the self-knowledge techniques that are built upon a therapeutic sensibility such as bioenergy, tai chi, yoga, body expression, massages, psychophysical, anti-stress therapies, gestaltherapy, etc. We are looking at the rediscovery of the "conscience movement" through the body as way of intensification and incorporation of the world in us. This body

appropriation by the conscience implies learning to unveil its emotions, express intimate feelings, exposing in its primary corporeity. It is about a quest for personal truth which has in the concept of the self the articulation knot of all remaining discourses: a internally regulated construction, that takes the shape of each one's a explicit narrative about the self.

- 3) *Moral devices*: The present interest about the body also obeys to aesthetics, dietetics and hygienic imperatives which establish rules. Side by side with the self-control techniques, there is an instance that induces, incites or imposes. So, for example, in stress management programs «*there is the need of a frequent reflexivity about the used thought strategies*», «*stimulating the sense of self-overcoming*» «*accompanying the practicer on his reflexivity about existential problems that worries him*». On this conscience exam, the relation between the subject with himself suffers a folding so that the discovery of the real self can be possible, not as much as a moral punishment relation but as appreciation of a completed work. On this device, the performing self is in front of is intimate self; the acting self is exposed to the scrutiny of the self which reflects throughout and after the action.

- 4) *Self-regulatory devices*: Physical exercise, through the scrupulous attention that it gives to the body and through its permanent worry with optimized functionality, makes the old ascetic logic fall and reveals a new culture of the Self, in the modern version of the progressive control of the «true» being. The body is available to all experimentations (the slogan *Just do it* from the Nike advertisement is in regard to this very significant) in the quest for the means to really be itself, healthy, slim and eternally young. The authoritarian rule is replaced by the indicative rule in which each one seems to be the origin of options that would only take some practical advices, sensitization campaigns or made to measure exercises. As such, the proliferation of magazines and self-help books with advices and prescription about food, exercise, health and sex is very important.

Taking care of oneself can be useful to appearance, but it has its limitations. In the future, everyone will hope to determine themselves by acting over the causes of appearance. But nowadays, these causes can only be found in the genetic and molecular projects. Genetic and neurosciences, surgery and the biophysics of new materials enlarged by far the possibilities of redesigning the body. From the psychological “essence” we pass to the biological “essence”, and so, it seems to overcome the true obsession of decadence. Target of deep transformations, the body is a place of both dreams and nightmares, and gives signs of obsolescence as any other object of consumption.

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