



MARTYNA NAWROCKA

Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland

Email: martyna.k.nawrocka@gmail.com

MARLENA WANDA STRADOMSKA

Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in
Lublin, Poland

Email: stradomskamarlena@onet.pl

CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE BODY – RISKS AND PERSPECTIVES

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to indicate the possible consequences of increasing the dietary, cosmetic and medical interference with the human body. The body shifts from a biological domain to cultural, becomes susceptible to deeper and deeper changes. Transforming the body and controlling it are seen as pro-social and even morally correct, in the same time serving as medium to express the self to the world.

This article aims to give some insights on how culture shapes and re-shapes the body, as well as possible consequences – positive and negative – of more and more common interferences in our bodies, by diet, fitness and body modifications.

STRESZCZENIE

Celem niniejszej pracy jest wskazanie możliwych konsekwencji nasilenia ingerencji dietetycznej, kosmetycznej i medycznej na organizm człowieka. Ciało ludzkie przesuwa się z domeny biologicznej na kulturową, staje się podatne na coraz głębsze zmiany. Przekształcanie ciała i kontrolowanie go jest postrzegane jako prospołeczne, a nawet moralnie poprawne, jednocześnie służące jako medium do wyrażania siebie światu. Ten artykuł ma na celu przybliżenie sposobu, w jaki kultura kształtuje i przekształca ciało, a także możliwych konsekwencji – pozytywnych i negatywnych – coraz

częstszych ingerencji w ciało człowieka, poprzez dietę, kondycję psycho-fizyczną i modyfikacje ciała.

KEYWORDS: *posthumanism, orthorexia, body, body modifications*

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: *posthumanizm, ortoreksja, ciało, modyfikacje ciała*

INTRODUCTION

Almost thirty years ago Zygmunt Bauman accused sociology of taking interest in a man *woven of thoughts and feelings*, as if the man did not have a body (Bauman, 1995, p. 70). He asked rhetorically: what if the body, as well as thoughts and feelings, were molded by the society and culture. What if the society *used the raw material given by the evolution to chisel newer and newer personas, using newer and newer models and newer and newer chisels*? In fact, sociology almost ignored the body – with the noble exception of Foucault and very few others – until the end of 20th century. Not so much later, our bodies – their shapes, weights and heights, sexes and genders, their interaction with minds – have become the center of academical interest not only in sociology, but also in cultural anthropology, culture studies, feminist studies, gender studies and philosophy. Bauman's remarks are now considered obvious trivia rather than rhetorical questions.

Michel Foucault (Foucault, 1980) pointed that during few past centuries the coercive methods of control over population, such as military force, decreased, while diffused social control working through self-discipline practice, constantly increases. His theory about biopower regulating our bodies (or rather, inducing people to regulate themselves) via regimes of self-control, fitness, medicine etc., is well known and covered in numerous articles. Hence here we mention only his most relevant conclusion – the obsession with fit, healthy and thin body is, in this theory, a direct effect of internalizing body regimes and adapting them as social, or even moral norms.

Most scholars agree that the self constitutes itself via presentation of the body (Svendsen, 2006, p. 75). The body is the first medium to express oneself, and to communicate with the others. We are our bodies. But in the same time

we use the bodies to present ourselves to the world. Since the body is the material manifestation of the self, a person may try to change body appearance in order to make others think he/she is younger, stronger, slimmer, healthier and generally *better*, that he/she actually is. We all know this tricks and we still agree to be deceived. Moreover, society tends to see the *owners* of unfit bodies as lazy. Good, well-trained, obedient body is the proof that the person claims full control over it. (Foucault, 1980) Keeping body in shape becomes a duty – natural, uncontrolled body is considered lazy and insubordinate, and usually ugly. In the *Perfect me*, Heather Widdows examines how aspirations for a perfect body influence ethics and morality, and how the pressure to achieve an ideal appearance affects individuals and society as a whole, while the book *Fat* by Don Kulick and Anne Meneley offers an anthropological look at the issue of obesity and the impact it has on individuals and society. This issue is very actual today, but will also require our strong attention in the future.

This article aims to give some insights on how culture shapes and re-shapes the body, as well as possible consequences of more and more common interferences in our bodies, by diet, fitness and body modifications.

ORTHOREXIA – STRIVING FOR THE PERFECT

Orthorexia involves the exclusion of extensive food groups and eating only food that the person considers healthy enough. This leads to a restriction of most foods and focusing on the quality of the food, with taste and quantity not being significant. The person suffering from orthorexia focuses on achieving an optimal physical state in terms of aesthetics and health. Classified as an eating disorder, the term orthorexia was introduced by a US physician Steven Bratman. Orthorexics have their own dietary standards to which they adhere. Conrad made an observation on individuals suffering from orthorexia to express their beliefs and came to a conclusion that they strongly believe in the expression made by Crawford ... *thinness is believed to be an unmistakable sign of self-control, discipline, and will power. The thin person is an exemplar of mastery of mind over body and virtuous self-denial* (Crawford 1984, p. 70).

What is more Kałedkiewicz, Doboszyńska (2013) said that orthorexia is possible to hide for a long time – for at its core the pursuit of health and the legitimate desire do adhere to good nutrition (Kałedkiewicz, Doboszyńska, p. 307).

The onset of the eating disorder known as orthorexia is hard to observe. Introducing healthy habits, checking the calorie content of food or its characteristics are not alarming behaviors. Orthorexia starts mildly. Improvements in physical fitness, avoidance of illness despite the absence of symptoms may be the cause of orthorexia. An example is the attempted diagnosis of food intolerances. The affected person discards products with the problematic factor after consuming lactose, resulting in a significant improvement in well-being. Seeing the temporal positive effects, the person begins to exclude further food groups. People who have previously experienced an eating disorder are at greater risk. Factors that predispose a person to orthorexia are: an abnormal relationship with food, obsessive-compulsive behavior and higher BMI values.

Orthorexics often plan meals in advance and take up to a few hours to prepare them. The meals prepared must meet their requirements in terms of: the origin of the food, the method of preparation, the absence or low number of preservatives, the naturalness of the food packaging, the least possible processing of the products. Foods with artificial additives, pesticides or heavy metals are excluded from the orthorexics diet. Each ingredient is then collected and weighed. This is caused by intrusive thoughts about healthy food. Food preparation becomes a ritual. Products are only bought from places that are trusted and previously identified as safe. Eating in restaurants is impossible as the orthorexic will not know how the dish was made, where the products came from and how much they weighed.

By over-excluding foods, physiological changes can be observed. By restricting the body of micro and macronutrients, the orthorexic may struggle with: headaches, dizziness, nausea, chronic fatigue, anemia, osteoporosis, intestinal disorders, increased susceptibility to infections, difficulty concentrating, problems with memory or sleep disorders.

In addition to the physical effects, a deterioration of the whole well-being of the person can also be observed. Through intrusive thoughts about healthy eating, a person starts to isolate himself and loses his social support network. Anxiety, feelings of guilt or self-loathing are caused by the conviction

that the diet the orthorexic is following is not strict enough and they fall into deeper stages of exclusion. Feelings of guilt can turn into anger; in such cases the person sets a punishment for themselves. This can be physical exercise or refusal to take meals.

Through a lack of micro – and macro-nutrients, orthorexics are at risk of hypertension and heart disease, and deepened behavior can lead to depression. The following are also listed as effects of orthorexia: weakness, weight loss, hypothermia, metabolic acidosis, subcutaneous emphysema, mediastinal emphysema, pneumothorax, rhabdomyolysis, iron deficiency, vitamin B12 deficiency, protein deficiency. Women may lose their menstrual periods as the body will not produce adequate amounts of estrogen.

Treatment of orthorexia begins with the introduction of a diet prescribed by a doctor or nutritionist. In extreme cases, vitamin and mineral supplements are also introduced. The most important thing in the first stage of treatment is to select the missing ingredients and to discipline the patient. The biggest problem is to convince the orthorexic that his or her behavior is only apparently healthy and leads to a weakening of the whole organism. If the sufferer cannot accept this statement and refuses to implement the recommended diet, psychotherapy should be used. Bulimia, anorexia, orthorexia and other eating disorders are treated with therapy.

BODY AS A CANVAS FOR CONSTRUCTING THE SELF

We are used to thinking that our bodies give shape to the clothes we wear. Clothes are flat and empty until we fill them with flesh. But it is possible to reverse that impression. Ann Hollander, the author of the book *Seeing through clothes* noticed that the nudes painted in any given historical period, mirror the shapes of the dresses worn at that time. In other words, art presents the nude body as the negative of its clothes. Or, as Kenneth Clark put it, the body is *clothed in culture* (H. Koda, 2001, p. 8).

Good example would be Eve painted by van Eyck. Her slender arms, wide hips and round belly seem to be created to wear A-shaped medieval dresses. The typical example of that kind of dress is worn by Arnolfini's bride. If

we look at Eve exactly after looking at Arnolfini's wedding, we notice that Eve's naked body shares the exact shape of Arnolfini's dress. In the same manner, Titian's nudes fits the clothes worn in late Renaissance. Clothes rewrite the body, gives it a different shape and different expression (Hollander, 1993).

The most obvious example of clothes shaping the body are of course Victorian corsets, which could make significant changes in wearer's anatomy. Valerie Steele claims that the corset never truly disappeared, it is now replaced by the regime of fitness (Steele, 1999, p. 38). Svendsen asks: *is one free of the corset when one no longer shapes the body by means of it and has shaped it instead by realizing the same norm via endless hours in a keep-fit studio or gym?* (Svendsen, 2006, p. 83). In this context, shifting from *outside* to *inner* corset indicates internalization of the control, as in Foucault's argumentation about regimes. Keeping the body in shape is simply yet another regime.

Obviously, in van Eyck's and Titian's times, the bodies couldn't really change that much; it was the idea of beauty and women in artist's imagination that evolved. The Victorian era introduced modification of the body by corsets and invented diet as a method of achieving the aesthetic ideal, while the second half of the 20th century saw the body modifications and plastic surgery becoming a common thing. Over time, the body becomes more and more of a variable rather than a constant. It is more made and less created. In Levi-Strauss nature/culture opposition, the body shifts from nature to culture.

Becoming something changeable, body falls inevitably into fashion's domain. The second example I'd like to discuss is well known and widely disputed – the cooperation between avantgarde fashion designer Alexander McQueen and athlete Aimee Mullins. As a child, Mullins has had both of her legs amputated just below the knees. For the spring/summer 1999 show McQueen had a pair of hand-carved wooden legs made for Mullins. The artificial limbs had the shape of high boots, engraved with grapevines and magnolias. Tall and slim, Aimee Mullins blended in with other models – nobody realized there's something special going on – everyone thought they were just boots. A few years later Mullins spoke at the TED conference and presented the publicity her twelve pair of legs. She explained how changing legs allowed her to achieve different height and different interaction with the ground. She noticed that prosthetic limb does not have to resemble the body part. The wearer can theoretically design any

kind of limb he or she wishes. *I started to move away from the need to replicate human-ness as the only aesthetic ideal. So we made what people lovingly referred to as glass legs even though they're actually optically clear polyurethane. Then we made these legs that are cast in soil with a potato root system growing in them, and beetroots out the top, and a very lovely brass toe. And these, look like jellyfish legs, also polyurethane. And the only purpose that these legs can serve (...), is to provoke the senses and ignite the imagination* (Mullins, 2004).

Mcqueen together with Mullins became the pioneers of the conception of fashion designers as body designers – a new occupation that may emerge from artists or plastic surgeons. In Plato's Atlantis – last collection shown during his life – Mcqueen changed the figures of the models so that they resembled post-human beings. The concept of the collection was to show a future in which the ice cap would melt and life on earth would evolve in order to live beneath the sea. Humanity would *go back to the place from whence it came*, as the press note stated. The fashion show was spectacular. The hair-do of part of the models were 40 cm high, and shoes were almost 30 centimeters high. That gave the impression that the catwalk was full of creatures almost 2,5 m high. Some of the dresses had organic feeling almost as if the model was an insect and the garment was her hardened shell. Iridescent enamel paillettes looked like an armor. Reptile skin patterns were everywhere. Shoes were completely unanatomical in shape. In other words, Mcqueen fully succeeded in creating the impression of the other race, the successor of man. He wasn't the only one of course, or even the first one. In Haute Couture show f/w 1997 Thierry Mugler presented a gown inspired by mythological chimera. Sequined dress with feathers and horse hair, *is so impractical and untouchably precious that it does, in fact, seem as if it might endow its wearer with superhuman powers.* (Koda 2001, p.81) . Haircut made of feathers and yellow contact lenses completed the look of un-human being. For now, fabulous fashion creatures are just a fantasy, but the example of Mullins proves the designers might want to move further. As Mullins stated; *A prosthetic limb doesn't represent the need to replace loss anymore. It can stand as a symbol that the wearer has the power to create whatever it is that they want to create in that space. So people that society once considered to be disabled, can now become the architects of their own identities and indeed continue to change those identities by designing their bodies.* A beautiful, yet dangerous idea.

TOO MUCH FREEDOM?

Treated with due humility, modern methods of interfering with the body, such as aesthetic medicine treatments and plastic surgery, can bring a lot of good, as long as they are performed by qualified personnel. Nevertheless, it is important to provide some less optimistic examples of how the power over the body can be exercised in practice. Apart from the good that can be done with interfering with the *making* of human body as it was with Aimee Mullins, a lot of dangers can also be distinguished. A Korean model who was obsessed with aesthetic medicine injected a standard kitchen oil under her face. After that home treatment that she prepared for herself her face changed drastically. She has had to have over 10 surgical treatments and yet her face wasn't the same. Currently, she actively spoke to young women to give them a warning of what can happen when someone obsessively chases after high beauty standards.

A 22 year old woman from Poland wanted to look like her favorite celebrity Popek. She almost lost her sight after a badly done tattoo to her eyes which consist of injecting tattoo specifics straight in the eye to make the white of the eye black. After the procedure she stopped seeing on her right eye and significantly lost sharp vision in her left eye. Her right eye never gained sight and her left eye is cataract as well as she is dealing with glaucoma (<https://gaze-tawroclawska.pl/wroclawianka-pozwala-tatuazyste-po-jego-zabiegu-prawie-stracila-wzrok/ar/c14-14817548>).

A 30 year transsexual woman was arrested in Florida after a couple of years of pretending to be a plastic surgeon. She offered her unaware clients injections for magnifying their buttocks. The injections were made with a mix of toxic substances such as cement, mineral oil and glue for car repairs. The whole situation came out when one of the clients paid 700 dollars for such a procedure and then started to feel sick. She didn't want to tell the doctors what happened at first but after her health got worse she came out with the truth and the police were able to catch the fraud (<https://tvn24.pl/swiat/powiekszala-posladki-cementem-klejem-i-olejem-ra191551-3531655>)

With the social media constantly promoting *perfect beauty* and *perfect body* as well with highly evolved plastic surgery and aesthetic medicine many people are able to change completely how they look to meet the social standards. As

it is okay when some uses this treatment rationally some people become obsessed with wanting to look like their favorite celebrities. The perfect example is the living and breathing Barbie and Ken wannabe. The 49-year old Barbie wannabe spent over 35 000 pounds on 112 procedures to make her look like a real Barbie doll. On the other hand real life Ken spend over 800 000 dollars for 780 cosmetic procedures to make him look like the perfect Ken doll (<https://kobieta.wp.pl/wstrzyknela-sobie-w-twarz-olej-spozywczy-5983121501303425g>)

SUMMARY

Since the body is an essential element of an identity, the fact that technology and medicine provide a growing number of opportunities to reshape the body must interfere with a sense of the self. By moving the bodies from the *natural* constant to *cultural* variable, we've become responsible for them, what results in neurotic fear of losing that control and express in many kinds of compulsive behaviors – with anorexia and plastic-surgery addiction among them. We live in the times of constant transformations, and the kinetic, eager to change personality is the personality which best fits to postmodern society. Perhaps we may expect the body to become an object of constant change – when a person will be able to choose and construct the body shape according to newest fashion. Perturbed, changed, modified bodies create an allegoric image of the future, anticipation of our future re-inventions of ourselves – and their appearance is both alluring and frightening.

The issue discussed in this article becomes the beginning and inspiration for considerations. An important element is not only orthorexia, but also bulimia, anorexia or other manifestations of body control in the psychological aspect (Stradomska, 2019a, Stradomska, 2019b). When the issue related to human emotionality becomes disturbed, it may lead to a number of negative consequences that may end tragically for the individual – regardless of age. Topics related to aspects of eating disorders are an important topic for human functioning in nowadays. Due to the number of difficulties and problematic issues, phenomena such as bulimia, anorexia or orthorexia cause

many hospitalizations. Peer help is also an important issue, as it can help in coping with difficulties. For example, there are guides that contain tips on how adults can undertake various interventions for children and teenagers in emotional crisis. The issues described in it include knowledge of how to recognize an emotional crisis in a young person, how to communicate with him or her and how to build positive relationships. The advantage of the guide is its practical dimension, allowing for immediate application of the tips during everyday contact with children and young people. The more recommendations of this type and knowledge about difficulties, the greater the chance of improving mental health in a multidimensional aspect (<https://zwjr.pl/artykuly/pierwsza-pomoc-emocjonalna>).

The lack of help nowadays may result in consequences such as suicide, mental illness or psychosomatic diseases. This is undoubtedly a problem of the 21st century, because it is associated with a number of difficulties, because despite the development of technology, medicine or other fields of science, it is still difficult to self-destruct or ineffective methods of dealing with difficult situations.

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