

THE COMMODIFICATION OF THE BODY IN WOMEN'S MAGAZINES

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The social ideal of the slender body (or the ‘new’ woman myth) is mediated through the ads and editorials in women’s magazines that define the body through product usage. In *Elle* (March/ 1999), for example, the cosmetics used in order to acquire a certain ‘look’ are minutely listed on one side of the page.

Similarly, the discourse of fitness appears as central in the feminine culture of the ‘90s. The magazine reader is encouraged to see the fit body as a “sign of feminine self-esteem, a mark of self-control and autonomy”¹. For the contemporary woman, ‘self-worth’ definitely resides in the body: ‘Respect your body and it will respect you in turn’ proclaims one health editorial in *Lumea Femeilor* (Nov./1998).

H. Radner thinks that this new position of is one privilege although it is based on a paradox that allows the emergence of a ‘new’ type of femininity from a reinterpretation of the ‘pre-feminist’ one:

The old model, the pre-feminist model, is retained, in fact reinvented, replacing the feminist model of a woman-centered culture that rejected a femininity grounded in patriarchy and consumerism.²

Instead, the new feminine culture of the ‘90s, including fashion and body care industry, integrates the successful women model in economic terms without demolishing the patriarchal structure. In fact, femininity is the result of “disciplinary practices that produce a body which in gesture and appearances is recognizably feminine”³.

Both the health section of *Vogue* and the beauty section of *Elle* instruct their readers on what to eat and do in order to acquire/preserve good

looks: one should cut down on coffee, alcohol, red meat, and eat instead white meat, fruits and vegetables, take half an hour aerobics, walk. The approach to health and beauty is quite hi-tech and, consequently, authoritative, e.g. ‘anti-depressant drugs’, ‘tryptophan’, ‘serotonin’, ‘carbohydrates’, ‘5HTP’, ‘DLPA’ (*Vogue*), ‘UVA filters’, ‘collagen’, ‘elastin’, ‘estrogens’, ‘microcirculation’, ‘(de)hydrate’ (*Elle*).

The role of the anti-ageing cosmetic products is to supply in an artificial mode, with lab-produced substances. An *Elle* editorial about ‘Remedies against Aging’ (*March/1999*) states that the cosmetics produced for 50-years old women, with their “rich and concentrated formulas”, are aimed at “restoring the necessary hydrating and nutritive elements: water, lipids, essential fat acids, vitamins”. The more or less subversive message is that the aging body passes through a natural process of decay and consequently it cannot synthesize that stuff (be it hormones, proteins or whatever) by itself. For example, SHT (substitutive hormonal treatment) is praised by the same editorial because it “compensates for the loss of estrogens”, “improves the production of collagen” and leads to “skin fortification”. As it can easily be noticed, the notions used by such ads are from machine-building area, their effect being that of a further objectification of the body.

Commenting on the aging body, I. Stuart underlines occurrence of multiple organic changes:

At the tissue level there is a *loss of collagen* (a protein); at the cell level, a *loss* in the efficiency of the *mitochondria* (which generate energy within the cell); and at a molecular level, DNA may mutate, leading to *inefficient* cell replacement, or indeed its *cessation*.⁴

The same rhetoric can be detected in anti-ageing cosmetic advertisements. The *Elle* editorial discussed above also warns women about muscle flabbiness and asks them to “intervene with intensive toning products” in a persuasive tone.

The basic idea is that female beauty is not naturally given but something any woman can achieve if she respects the indications prescribed.

As beauty is something to work on, advice is given for maintaining each part of the body: legs, hair, lips, eyes, skin, etc.

The technology of power employed by the discourse of the media is founded on a discipline of the body that fragments and thus easily controls it. The practice is similar to that of the bricolage: while working out/dieting, the practitioner identifies herself with the image in the magazine that does not mirror her image, but represent another body. In order to ensure the body-image relationship as a controllable pattern, fitness workouts follow a highly ritualized and formulaic procedure. The step-by-step procedure of the workout is common with the dieting instructions, too. Here, the recurrent verbs are ‘to weigh’, ‘to control’, and ‘to measure’.

As a rule, the idea of slenderness associated with beauty is reinforced by the visual support represented by the photos of actresses, models, career women, successful women in general from whom readers can learn “an appropriate technology of the image”⁵.

The articles and ads in magazines for women advocate for a constant monitoring of one’s bodily imperfections, which cannot be treated as natural, as long as they are to be corrected⁶.

In comparison to the British/ Western women’s magazines, the Romanian ones and their readership pass through an ideological process of ‘transition’.

From the structures of authority imposed by the formerly totalitarian politic regime, the female audience—Orthodox in its majority—is schooled in accordance to a different value system that preaches self-worthiness and the Protestant work ethic.

Maybe these ideological differences can explain both the ways representations of the Western body ideal are assigned supplementary meanings, and the appeal to the exterior techniques of body fashioning.

The first problem is explained by M. Nicolăescu by the fact that there is a possibility of overcoming the hiatus existing between the Western and the Romanian societies by imitating the foreign stars’ looks. In addition,

Disciplining their bodies according to Western norms [...] implies an apparently liberating break from the drab and ungainly bodies associated with the socialist period.⁷

However, there is a striking difference in the techniques employed in order to attain a socially desirable body. Unlike the Western women's magazines where the internally regulated technology of control is stressed for its importance in producing a 'good' body⁸, Romanian audience seem to prefer a different strategy of body maintenance. An Unica editorial for example states: 'Lose Weight without Dieting!'. One does not need self-restraint because eating 'macrobiotic'/ fat burner products, rubbing one's body with oils, drinking diuretic teas, or simply wearing a special pair of shorts instantly solve the fat and flabby muscle problems.

Therefore, instead of fitness and dieting practices, through which the body produces itself, the Romanian feminine culture focuses mainly on external mechanisms of control (cosmetics, drugs, medicines) that render the body as a passive surface of inscription.

Paradoxically, woman's representation as fit and slim coexists with an abundance of 'lite' (i.e. low-cholesterol) and not quite low-calorie food ads, indulging the viewers in consuming more and more.

In conformity to Bourdieu's food space schema⁹, light, low-calorie food products and beverages (grilled white meat/fish, raw vegetables, fruit juice, mineral water, yogurt, etc.) prescribed in dieting regimes are a marker of the middle-class lifestyle pursuit. The induced stereotype is therefore that of a higher market valorization of women's labour.

The endo/ectomorphic body types, the aged body, the muscular body are defined as 'devia(n)te' and they are thought menace the patriarchal beauty system by blurring the gender boundaries.

The representation of the body within consumer culture is dominated by the equation of beauty with health and youth, on the one hand, and by the individual's duty of fashioning beauty by disciplining body techniques (dieting, exercising, clothing, and make-up).

The practices belonging to the beauty system are likely to propagate among the male population, too. Not only that it has been shown in

sociological surveys that men can suffer of eating disorders, but it has also been argued that they suffer “as big loss of self-esteem and dissatisfaction with their body image as women”¹⁰.

Given all these data, I think that the body maintenance practices configure a new ‘culture of the self’ which transforms even resistant bodies into disciplined bodies. Indulging in self-control developing techniques,

„The subject resists the domestic discipline of the family by submitting to a public discipline, or another technology or procedure of domination.”¹¹

Notes:

¹ H. Radner, *Shopping Around. Feminine Culture and the Pursuit of Pleasure*, London: New York, Routledge, 1995, p. 64.

² Id.

³ S. Bartky quoted in H. Radner, *op.cit.*, p. 142.

⁴ I. Stuart, *The Psychology of Ageing. An Introduction*, Hamilton:London, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1991, p.17.

⁵ H. Radner, *op.cit.*, p. 53.

⁶ Cf. M. Featherstone, ‘The Body in the Consumer Culture’, in *The Body. Social Processes and Cultural Theory*, edited by M. Featherstone, M. Heoworth, and S.B. Turner, London:Thousand Oaks: New Delhi, Sage, 1993, p. 175.

⁷ M. Nicolaescu, Utopian Desires and Western Representations of Femininity’, in *Replika*, 1996, p.106.

⁸ Cf. H. Radner, *op.cit.*, p.160.

⁹ P. Bourdieu, *Distinction. A Social Critique in the Judgement of Taste*, London Routledge, 1996, p. 186.

¹⁰ R. Thomas quoted in C. Lury, *Consumer Culture*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1996, p.150

¹¹ H. Radner, *op.cit.*, p. 146.