The Contemporary Construction of a Perfect Body Image: Bodybuilding, Exercise Addiction, and Eating Disorders

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Contemporary life has transformed the body into an object of growing interest. The real emphasis of our culture is not on the body as a “material substratum” of the person, but on the body as both an ideal appearance and the very depository of social rules and norms. The consequence of this is often the triumph of a body without a name that tries to hide its internal emptiness, unable to accept its real and concrete nature, and which is probably in any case a sick body, incapable of perceiving its own natural desires, impulses, and needs. In this sense, the aim of this paper is to both point out the dynamical similarities between anorexic and addictive exercise behaviors and show that the final consequences of a strong manipulation of our real body may be a pathological behavior. In such a way, many bodybuilders and anorexic persons may be seen as “victims” of the extreme control of their bodies and of the contemporary construction of an ideal body image.

At a first glance, a philosophical reflection about the human body as a perfect image and then as an object of construction can seem pointless. Life, in fact, apparently imposes our body on us every day so that our relationship with it may be seen and analyzed as a completely instinctive one. Nevertheless, there are different ways for a body to exist and different ways for people to live their relationship with their own body. In this paper, I am not interested in all the phenomenological ways a body can be a body, nor in all the different relationships between persons and bodies. Instead, I am interested in the analysis of a particular body-person relationship, the one we have with our body when (and if) we accept to construct it according to some ideals and models proposed by our contemporary Western culture. I am also interested in whether we consider our body an object, a

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mere fetish, rather than what makes the worldly involvement of a unique living human being possible.

My starting point, therefore, is a critical analysis of our contemporary Western culture according to what it views as the value of the human body and how it is immediately linked to its cultural construction so that the body’s value increases as it conforms to the perfect and ideal advertising models (Cf. Benthall, 1976; Bourdieu, 1980; Featherstone, 1991; Turner, 1994, 1996). I then intend to show that by accepting to construct their own body according to cultural patterns and by means of strict diets and compulsive training, people sometimes arrive at pathological behaviors such as exercise addiction and eating disorders. In this sense, I will show that some consequences of the social and cultural construction of the perfect body image are not only negative but also dangerous. I realize I cannot argue that these consequences are necessarily linked to (and then must necessarily follow from) the social construction of the body. I also know that any claim of necessity may be challenged because of its blindness to the specifics of different cultures and societies. But here I am not interested in the specifics of different cultures, nor am I interested in arguing that some pathologies are necessarily linked to the cultural construction of a perfect body-image. I am only interested in our Western consumerist culture in order to point out some of the consequences linked (even if not necessarily linked from a logical or causal point of view) to this ideal construction of a perfect body. In particular, I am interested in a philosophical critique of the undue influence of culture on people, by showing in what sense we could say that bodybuilding and anorexic behavior are similar and may be considered two “pathological” consequences of cultural influences. Nevertheless, even when using Foucault’s analysis of the body as a docile construction, I do not think that the “naturalness” of the body is illusory and thoroughly culturally produced. This is why I am using the concept of “body’s nature” by assuming both that the human body exists and is understandably apart from the social construction of reality, and that each person, in that embodied being, has not only historically and culturally contextualized needs and desires but also many “natural” needs and desires.

A Critical Inquiry of our Contemporary Society:
The Myth of a Perfect Body

The Body: A Depository of Social Rules

Contemporary life has transformed the body into an object of growing interest so that today we can speak of a sort of widespread and almost obligatory body creed. The body has never been quite so present in daily life reflections as it is today in the mass media, advertising, and medical debates, nor has it ever been quite so idealized and well groomed. Never before in history have images of people who meet the latest cultural ideals of beauty, health, and physical performance been so often presented to so many people. The real emphasis of our culture, on the other hand, is not on the body as the real “material substratum” of the person, but rather on the body as an ideal appearance, as a fetish, as an object we can sculpture and perfect (see Glassner, 1992; Jeffords, 1994; Dutton, 1995), and finally, one we can use to construct our life as we want and desire (Glassner, 1992;
Klein, 1992). For instance, after training for the movie *Staying Alive*, actor John Travolta commented, "I now look at bodies almost like pieces of clay that can be molded."

Widely accepted current forms of objectifying one's own body include treating it primarily as an instrument for accomplishing goals; regarding it as a physical object to be viewed, used, and manipulated; and treating it as a material possession to be exploited and traded. "They all assume and require considerable control of the body in order to maintain its suitability as an object of that type. Observing and participating in constant cultural objectification of other people's bodies encourages us to objectify our own" (Wendell, 1996, p. 86).

The human body has always been the center of social interest and it has always been influenced and molded by cultural values. Nevertheless, today, cultural patterns are becoming increasingly abstract and unattainable. Slimming diets and prostheses, make-up and accessories, gymnastics and bodybuilding force the body far away from its "nature" and indict our defective and imperfect bodily reality. Even if the body, as Butler has trenchantly put it, is "never free of imaginary construction" (Butler 1993, p. 71), it is not a cultural construction with no "nature" at all. Nevertheless, today, far from being some fundamentally stable and permanent entity to which we must contrast culturally relative forms and norms, the body's nature is constantly "in the grip" of cultural practices, as Foucault puts it (Foucault, 1979, p. 13). The myth that the body can be controlled as an object, without any dangerous consequence, is part of the general assumption of the modern Western project that nature can be controlled:

Everyone is subjected to cultural pressure to deny bodily weaknesses, to dread old age, to feel ashamed of and responsible for their distance from the ideals, and to objectify their own bodies at the expense of subjective bodily awareness. These pressures foster a desire to gain/maintain control of our bodies; conversely, the myth that we can control our bodies encourages us to strive to meet body ideals. (Wendell, 1996, p. 91)

In this sense, like many myths, the myth of control contains a significant element of truth; we do have some control over the conditions of our bodies, for example, through the physical risks we take and through our care for our health. What makes it a myth is that people continue to cling to it even where there is overwhelming evidence against it and that most versions of it are formulated in such a way that they are invulnerable to evidence against them.

The body has thus become the depository of social rules and order. Its reality springs from the shape and proportions that society imposes on it so that it becomes a sort of cultural support and an instrument that society uses to show itself (Bernard, 1975). As Susan Bordo puts it, "we are surrounded by homogenizing and normalizing images—images whose content is far from arbitrary, but is instead suffused with the dominance of gendered, racial, class and other cultural iconography" (1993, p. 47).

Within this context, there is an enormous number of cultural images that we could analyze to show this phenomenon. They can, nevertheless, be easily classified into two main groups: on the one hand those whose main feature is to stigmatize the "absence of bodily control" and, on the other hand, those whose main feature is to propagate the positive value of bodily control. Many images of bodily
eruption, for instance, frequently function symbolically in some contemporary horror movies such as *Alien* or Cronenberg’s remake of *The Fly*. In Cronenberg’s movie, in particular, a new, alien, and uncontrollable self literally bursts through the seams of the victims’ old flesh. On the other hand, many images of bodily control function symbolically in contemporary adverts where the enemy is constructed as bulge, fat, and flab. A typical ad runs “get rid of those embarrassing bumps, bulges, large stomach, flabby breasts and buttocks. Feel younger and help prevent cellulite build-up... Have a nice shape with no tummy.” And to achieve such results, a violent assault on the enemy is usually required: bulges must be “attacked” and “destroyed,” fat “burned,” and stomachs “eliminated.”

The widespread positive icons are that of the bodybuilder, whose body is constantly controlled by exercises, and that of the perfect model, whose body is constantly in the grip of rigid diets. This is why it is so easy for contemporary images of attractiveness to oscillate between a spare and “minimalist” look and a solid, muscular, and athletic look. The ideal to attain is the same: a flesh that does not wiggle. “The coexistence of these seemingly disparate images does not indicate that a postmodern universe of empty, endlessly differentiating images now reigns. Rather, the two ideals, though superficially very different, are united in battle against a common enemy: the soft, the loose, the unsolid, excess flesh” (Bordo, 1993, p. 188).

### The Homogenizing Role of Cultural Images

Trying to work on these images and their meaning, there are two main points to analyze. First, the homogenizing aesthetic power of these images and second, the normalizing ethical power of the model proposed by means of the rhetoric of free choice and personal autonomy. The strong emphasis in our contemporary culture on the ideal appearance of the body is such that we are supposed to control and alter our physical appearance and attain an “ideal look” (Fiske, 1987, p. 19). In fact, body ideals include not only ideals of appearance, which are important for both women and men, but also ideals of strength, energy, movement, and proper control.

Over the last years, women have been exposed to a clear image of female beauty that is young and extremely slender; to be feminine is to be youthful, to be firm and sexy, and to look good. Today the average model, dancer, or actress is thinner than 90% of the female population (Dutton, 1995). The mass media, while portraying women in an increasing range of roles, emphasize performers who are young, thin, and attractive women. Women realize that models are heavily made up and that great effort goes into creating these appearances. However, women may still view these models as realistic representations and try to attain the ideal with firm discipline by means of rigid diets, compulsive exercises, and plastic surgery. Expanding upon Michel Foucault’s account of the disciplinary practices that produce the docile bodies required by modern social institutions, Sandra Lee Bartky has provided a detailed examination of “those disciplinary practices that produce a body which in gesture and appearance is recognizably feminine” (1990, p. 65). Moreover, she has argued that because these disciplinary practices, which include dieting, exercise, the removal of body hair, and plastic surgery, are not forced upon women by anyone in particular, they appear to be voluntary, even though they wield tremendous power in women’s lives.
Whereas cosmetic surgery was once mainly the province of wealthy socialites, aging movie stars, and strippers, it is now an equal opportunity proposition, complete with TV commercials and low-cost financing plans hawked on the World Wide Web. The American Society of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeons reports that, over the past five years, the rate of breast augmentation surgery has more than tripled (Rogers, 1999), liposuctions have grown by 200%, and liposuctions performed on men have tripled. Cosmetic surgery in general has increased by more than half since 1992 and now more and more people are having operations or what Living Fit refers to as “lunch-hour surgery: non-invasive or minimally invasive wrinkle-fighting procedures like laser skin resurfacing; Retin-A treatment; chemical peels; and Botox, collagen, Fibril and fat injections.”

Nevertheless, in this way, not all racial and ethnic differences are completely accepted (Hooks, 1992, 1996). There is just one single model that everybody is assumed to accept and that forces people to change their characteristics only because fashion requires an ideal body. And even if Essence magazine has tried to promote diverse images of black strength, beauty, and self-acceptance, the magazine’s advertisers continually play upon and perpetuate the consumer’s feeling of inadequacy and insecurity over the racial characteristics of their body. They insist that, in order to be beautiful, hair must be straightened and eyes lightened. They almost always employ models with fair skin, Caucasian features, and “hair that moves,” thus creating an association between their products and fantasies of becoming what the white culture most prizes and rewards. As Bordo states, increased social, professional, and economic opportunities are now available to women of color, especially to those women who can conform to the dominant White culture’s norms. Consequently, women of color may become vulnerable and conform to pressure to be “perfect” in the context of upward social mobility. This perfection may be pursued by shaping their body to fit the mainstream culture’s female body ideal. Indeed, Bordo’s analysis of television commercials for DuraSoft colored contact lenses clearly illustrates the homogenizing power of some contemporary images. The commercial concludes with the slogan “DuraSoft colored contact lenses. Get brown eyes a second look,” showing how racist standards of beauty can work by denying the necessity to propose brown contact lenses for blue-eyed people: “The creators of the DuraSoft campaign clearly know that not all differences are the same in our culture, and they continue, albeit in ever more mystified form, to exploit and perpetuate the fact” (Bordo, 1993, p. 49).

The Normalizing Role of Diet and Exercise

The real force of this ideal model is linked to the connection between the aesthetic perfection of the body and the ethical evaluation of a person. In fact, the ideal body is not only an aesthetic marker but also an ethical one. In a society that idealizes the body, people who cannot come close enough to the ideals, and those whose bodies are out of control, become devalued people because of their devalued bodies (Hannaford, 1985). And this is particularly clear in the case of those who are not able to follow diets or train and practice sport. Diets and physical activities are presented as the best way we have to control our body and our life. To gain control of life is identified with getting control over the body, while the control of body is qualified as an ethical activity, the only way to reach moral integrity. Training regularly and “working out,” in particular, are not neutral activities but
glamorized and sexualized activities. A person of class and success must choose to follow a diet and always remain thin.

The meaning of both the muscled and the slender body has changed a great deal over the last years, and it has assumed a real ethical connotation. If, in the past, muscles have been associated with the insensitive, unintelligent, and animalistic (think of Marlon Brandon as Stanley Kowalski in A Streetcar Named Desire), now muscles are a cultural icon and a symbol of the “correct attitude” toward life. If, in the past, a plump and buxom female body has been associated with motherhood, beauty, and service to home, husband, and family (think of Sophia Loren and her image as a sex goddess), now a slender body symbolizes self-containment, self-mastery, freedom, and control. To have a muscled or slender body means that we “care” about ourselves and have the ability to “shape our lives.”

The muscled body, in such a context, is presented more and more often by the mass media, popular movies, and television commercials as the only means we have to become the persons we decide to be and the only means to finally obtain success, power, money, and love. The play bill of the Manhattan Sports Club, for instance, depicts a bodybuilder who says “Now it’s easier than ever to reach a position of power in Manhattan.” The play bill of another Sports Club, on the other hand, says “You don’t shape your body, you shape your life;” while the ad of “Designer protein” says “87% of women say the first thing they notice about a man is his eyes. Liars. Here’s the truth. We all know women love to touch muscles. Biceps, quads, back...” (Men’s Health, September, 1999). A perfect body is clearly presented and viewed as the only means we have to reach a position of power as if the fact of shaping our body is the equivalent of shaping our lives: “In popular teen movies such as Flashdance and Vision Quest, the ability of the (working-class) heroine and hero to pare, prune, tighten, and master the body operates as a clear symbol of successful upward aspiration, of the penetrability of class boundaries to those who have ‘the right stuff.’ These movies are contemporary ‘quest myths;’ like their prototype, Rocky, they follow the struggle of an individual to attain a personal grail, against all odds and through numerous trials” (Bordo, 1993, p. 191). The hero’s and heroine’s commitment, will, and moral integrity are therefore shown through the metaphors of weight loss, exercise, and tolerance of physical pain.

And similar considerations may be made about food and diets. Often, a slender body is presented as the female symbol of moral integrity. In this sense, diets have become a form of competition among women in order to reach love, power, and consideration. Women’s social value has become associated with their bodies and expressed through ideals of appearance (see Table 1). Appearance is important for every woman as a means for achieving status, popularity, friends, and a possible partner. Thinness has not only come to represent attractiveness, but it has also come to symbolize success, self-control, and higher socio-economic status (69% of female television characters, for instance, are thin, while only 5% are overweight). Excess body weight, on the other hand, is now seen as reflecting moral or personal inadequacy or lack of will. The size and shape of the body operate as a marker of personal, internal order (or disorder) and as a symbol for the emotional, moral, or spiritual state of the individual. As Marcia Millman documents in Such a Pretty Face, the obese elicit blinding rage and disgust in our culture and are often viewed in terms that suggest an infant sucking hungrily and
Table 1. Women’s Social Values Expressed Through Ideals of Appearance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aesthetic judgment</th>
<th>Beauty: slenderness, muscles</th>
<th>Ugliness: obesity</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethical judgment</td>
<td>Self-control, will-power → moral integrity and confidence</td>
<td>Absence of self-control and will-power → moral inadequacy and rebellion</td>
</tr>
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unconsciously at its mother’s breast: greedy, self-absorbed, lazy, without self-control or willpower.

The ideal male and female bodies have become more and more powerful, and they have the power to indict and criticize real bodies on account of both their aesthetic mediocrity and their ethical inferiority. In such a context, it is interesting to recall that these two cultural icons (the perfect, slender body of top models and the muscled body of bodybuilders) have also entered the toys market for children. Baby dolls have been replaced with Barbie and Ken, the perfect career girl and the successful perfect young man (in 1996, John Greenwald reported that 99% of all girls between the ages of 3 and 11 in the USA have a Barbie doll). Barbie is the exact image of what Rogers has recently called “anything-that-you-wantta-be-as-long-as-you-are-an-anorexic-and-sexy-girl” (Rogers, 1999, p. 16). Ken, on the other hand, is the exact image of what we could call “anything-that-you-wanta-be-as-long-as-you-are-a-bodybuilder-and-successful-man.” “Perfect,” “dream girl,” and “image” are the terms of many girls’ engagement with Barbie. And it is not surprising, therefore, that these very terms are, for some people, the terms used for their own self-assessment and self-deprecation. These terms ensure that they can never measure up.

The “Pathological” Consequences of the Contemporary Western Myth of Control

The Body as a Place of Practical Control

The moral coding of the fat/slender body in terms of its capacity for self-containment and the control of impulse and desire represents the culmination of the social construction of the body. Being able to control our body is presented as the real aim of life, as a way of controlling internal conflicts as well as public life, as a way of denying bodily weakness or dreading old age, as a way of feeling ashamed of and responsible for falling short of any distance from the ideals, as a way of becoming a “hero” if somebody is ready and prepared to work for it (Loland, 1999).

We are all subjected to cultural pressure and are expected to objectify our bodies at the expense of subjective bodily awareness. This pressure fosters a desire to gain and maintain control of our bodies; conversely, the myth that we can control our bodies encourages us to strive to meet body ideals. Nevertheless, the
result of this cultural pressure is that our body is no longer the symbol of our human condition but it is rather a place of practical control. Its sensations are controlled and denied, while its energy is regulated by social norms.

Therefore, the phenomenon of bodybuilding is particularly significant when showing how and why people act upon their bodies as well as showing the consequences of the acts. As we have seen, the technological precision of body sculpting, once the secret of Arnold Schwarzenegger and some other professional body builders, has now become available to anyone who can afford the cost of membership to a gym. Consequently, more and more people today are convinced that their bodies are just a simple “object” to build, better, and modify. We are constantly told that we can “choose” our own body and that we can make a dream come true that is the dream to create an ideal body and thus to become a hyper-hero. We are constantly being convinced that if we desire something, we can obtain it without any problem. As Evian explicitly claims, “The proper diet, the right amount of exercise and you can have, pretty much, any body you desire.” And if we consider some journals like Men’s Health and Muscular Development, we can find not only a clear connection between physical training and a perfect body, but also articles about the power we have to construct the body we want in the time we have (“The body you want in the time you have,” Men’s Health, September 1999; “Forever young: biceps and triceps for men over 40,” Exercise for Men Only, October 1999).

These messages speak of a perfect body that can be easily constructed, either by gymnastics or by diets. And all these messages make the myth of control more and more powerful. Nevertheless, the dark side of the practices of body rearrangement reveals botched and sometimes fatal operations, exercise addiction, and eating disorders. And, of course, despite the claims of the Evian ad, you cannot have the body that you want: “The very advertisements whose copy speaks of choice and self-determination visually legislate the effacement of individual and cultural differences and circumscribe our choices” (Bordo, 1993, p. 47). The ideal body is presented as the only means we have to become the persons we decide to be and, finally, the only means to become morally autonomous and free. Nevertheless, even if autonomy rightly expresses the independence of people from each other so that we can no longer speak of the power of somebody over somebody else, or even of hierarchy, this concept is today used more and more frequently to hide the fact that we are not really autonomous and free. Even if autonomy is rightly considered to be an extremely important value, it cannot be used as a justification without recognizing the importance of the context in which decisions are made. Actually, people do not enter life’s interactions as independent and interchangeable units, and few operate according to the abstract principles of rational decision theory. Often people’s particular social, political, and cultural backgrounds influence both the type of decisions they are faced with and the sort of factors that shape their behavior so that, within the term “free-decision,” there are often many constraints and many dangerous consequences.

In the second part of this paper, I discuss some of these dangerous consequences and, in particular, I focus my attention on the similarities between bodybuilding and eating disorders (in particular, anorexia). Even if these two phenomena appear to be quite distinct, they can both be seen as a “pathological” consequence of the contemporary Western myth of control over our bodies (see also Klein, 1995). When people embrace the myth of control and believe that it is possible, by means of human actions, to have the bodies they want, they really refuse
to come to terms with the full reality of bodily life, including those aspects of it that are rejected culturally. Nevertheless, they cannot avoid illness, pain, and sometimes also death. Between the media images of self-containment and self-mastery and the reality of constant, everyday stress and anxiety about appearance lies, as Susan Bordo writes, “the chasm that produces bodies habituated to self-monitoring and self-normalizing” (Bordo, 1993, p. 297). Obviously, I do not intend to prove that the pathological relationship between people and bodies is a causal consequence of the ideals imposed by the mass media. Nevertheless, there is a sort of necessity which links together the contemporary exaltation of a perfect body and the diffusion of pathological phenomena like sport addiction. When we speak of necessity, we are not obliged to speak only of a causal or logical necessity. As many feminists have shown (cf. Held, 1993; Belenky, 1986; MacKinnon, 1989), there is also an “existential necessity,” which everybody can experience in everyday life and which strongly influences our behavior and our conduct.

The real problem is that the reality of a body is so very different from the contemporary ideal and the image of a “performative” body. Our real human bodies are exceedingly diverse—in size, shape, color, texture, structure, function, range, and habits of movement—and they are constantly changing. This is why the result of this “strict” and cultural construction is often the triumph of a body without a name that tries to hide its internal emptiness. It is unable to accept its real and concrete nature and is probably, in any case, a sick body completely incapable of perceiving its own natural desires, impulses, and needs. The body we have to construct and mold becomes a real fetish and, as a mere fetish, it is transformed in a material object, completely opposed to the self and without any link to a person’s real needs.

Bodybuilding, Exercise Addiction, and Eating Disorders

Both anorexic persons and bodybuilders may be seen as “victims” of the extreme control of their bodies and of the contemporary construction of an ideal body image (Bordo, 1993). Just as many bodybuilders do not accept their natural body, try to construct it according to cultural patterns and norms, and are eager for a sculptured body, anorexic persons are not able to accept their own “real” body and are eager for a spatial-temporal emptiness and for an emaciated and ethereal body. Both bodybuilding and anorexia may then be seen as “contemporary products” of our culture and as an extreme development of the capacity for self-denial, the repression of desires, the refusal of the real body, and the construction of a perfect and ideal body. Furthermore, both are deeply rooted in the same contemporary “construction” of desires. Once that construction has been accepted, one can respond either with the bodybuilder’s desire for an extremely muscled and controlled body, or with the rigid repression of anorexia and the anorexic’s desire for a “transparent” and “minimalist” body.

In her analysis of anorexia, Hilde Bruch (1978) explains that anorexic people refuse food, even if they are hungry, in order to subscribe to cultural dictates and to build an ideal body. Their body must be able to negate hunger and to transform alimentation into an activity that is completely planned and no longer natural. Hunger is seen as the first enemy, while the body becomes totally extraneous. Bodily sensations, linked to the natural body, are manipulated and rejected. And
presently, there are more and more girls who wage war on their own body in the name of dangerous and external ideals. Their bodies become thinner and thinner, a skeleton covered with skin only. Alimentary abstinence, hyperactivity, and various other slimming methods are finalized to the defeat of the real body and its need to transform into an ideal that is perfect and without needs, wants, and desires. The real body is not accepted because, in their minds, the real body is the source of all pain and trouble; the ideal body, on the other hand, is worshipped because it is the right body that society accepts. Society teaches that the body has to be seen in a certain manner; it praises slenderness and exalts ideal and emaciated bodies. Anorexic persons have learned these cultural precepts very well. In such a context, anorexics want to lose weight, no matter how thin they are, even if their goal is not only utopian (since losing weight is an almost endless task), but it is also extremely dangerous (since losing too much weight can kill them). The anorexic body is not only a completely docile body whose needs and desires are controlled and negated, but it is also the very manifestation of a sick person, the mirror in which we can verify with horror the triumph of suffering.

Bodybuilders, on the other hand, strive for chest mass and muscular tone. In this sense, their behavior may appear to be the exact opposite of that of anorexic persons. Nevertheless, usually forgotten is that their action upon their body is often linked to a desire to be accepted. In this sense, their muscled body is their way of subscribing to cultural dictates and of building an ideal body (Connell, 1990, 1995). Fat is seen as the first enemy, exactly as food is the first enemy for anorexics. In the same way that anorexic persons want to lose weight, no matter how thin they are, bodybuilders want to increase in size, no matter how big they are. Nina Loland, in her sociological study about sportsmen’s attitudes toward their bodies, refers to some interviews held with bodybuilders and in particular with one of the biggest bodybuilders, nicknamed “Extra Extra Large,” who talked about his body as something that made him feel at the top of a “hierarchy of sizes.” He felt that he had no choice but to search constantly for muscle growth: “It’s like there is a kind of spiritual power in the gym, almost like a god who tells us to obey his goal; to make us big. And exactly that, big and beautiful, that’s what my body is” (Loland, 1999, p. 10).

The bodybuilders’ goal is also utopian and can also become dangerous, especially if they begin assuming harmful substances to increase their muscular mass. Even if Johansson believes that this obsession with growth could be viewed as a sort of “megarexia”—and in this sense it could be opposed to “anorexia” (Johansson, 1995, p. 20)—the obsession with the body’s chest mass is only the other side of the same problem. Bodybuilders and anorexic people act upon their body in order to be accepted and use their bodies as a way of controlling their lives. The real goal of bodybuilders and anorexics is the control of their bodies and its sensations, as if the control of their bodies could induce the control of their lives and the admiration of all others. By acting on their body, bodybuilders and anorexic persons seem at least to be driven by dominant cultural values. “I wanted people to look at me and see something special,” says a young anorexic girl. “I found out how to do what everyone else couldn’t. I could lose as much or as little weight as I wanted. And that meant I was better than everyone else.” On the other hand, “Extra Extra Large” says “Think about a pyramid. Not many can be on the top... maybe only one, me.”
In a world where everything is seen as the result of correct techniques of training and nutrition, exercises and diets become the key to success. Nevertheless, the extreme control of desires and sensations may induce pain and suffering. Physical workouts act, as Levy (a Lacanian psychoanalyst) has clearly pointed out, upon persons’ bodies in order to make them socially acceptable, but in this way they end up by “losing themselves” (Levy, 1996, p. 45). The physical construction of the body is commonly seen as a means to reach success and to obtain attention and love and, finally, to construct masculine identity. By looking big, bodybuilders also believe themselves to be big; via “megarexia,” they strive for hyper masculine ideals, because muscles are viewed as “the sign of masculinity” (Glassner, 1992, p. 288). Nevertheless, the result is the “loss” of personal identity and an interior emptiness that nobody can satisfy. By constructing their body, bodybuilders “deconstruct” their person and they are no longer able to rest in touch with their real needs and sensations. Pain, hunger, and fatigue are constantly denied. But the negation of these “primary” needs also implies a negation of their authentic self. Some objectification of one’s own body is probably inevitable and not always harmful. For instance, we have all had experience of illness that causes some degree of alienation of the self from the painful body. Therefore, we always try to have a healthy body, just as we want a good car to drive (Leder, 1990). But if the objectification of the body becomes the primary mode of experiencing one’s body, it is a source of profound alienation from feeling, from nature, from the unconscious, and from any other aspect that resists control.

In such a context, it is important to underline that in the psychoanalytic treatment of both eating disorders and exercise addiction, the first aim of psychoanalysts is to let their patients receive, perceive, and accept the natural needs of their real bodies (Selvini Palazzoli, 1974). Anorexic persons and bodybuilders often need to be helped through therapy to develop a psychological and corporeal sense of self where needs for contact, needs for hunger, needs for rest, and other physical appetites can be acknowledged and the acceptability of their satisfaction established. Therapists want to show that desire and its implementation are not in themselves essentially fearful or negative. They strive to provide an environment of emotional reliability where needs get addressed and are thus seen as acceptable (MacSween, 1993). Everybody can speak directly rather than through their bodies or through a perfect body image.

Conclusions

There are probably several conclusions we could draw after such an inquiry of bodybuilding and eating disorders. However, the only thing I would like to point out at this stage is a reflection on the connection between the contemporary body image proposed by the mass media and these pathological phenomena. In my opinion, all these phenomena have something in common in that they are linked to the idea that our real and natural body is something imperfect that we cannot accept just as it is. We have to manipulate and change it according to cultural and social dictates. Both bodybuilders and anorexic persons think that the best way to be accepted is to act upon their own body. They do not accept their natural “defective” body because of the images of perfection shared and imposed by the mass media, they perceive their natural body as an obstacle to their freedom and to their self-realization, and they are convinced that the ideal, culturally constructed body
is the only way to achieve freedom and self-realization. Nevertheless, what kind of freedom can we reach if we have to accept ideal patterns? What kind of freedom can we reach if we have to manipulate our body, to follow strict diets, and to subject ourselves to hard exercise?

The contemporary hyper culturalization of the body affects the very materiality of the body, proceeds against it, and manipulates its needs, wants, and sensations. One of the most important results to be obtained is the elimination of unconstrained desire, unrestrained hunger, uncontrolled impulse, and the elimination of flab (cf. Baudrillard, 1976, 1981; Sennett, 1979; Lipovetski, 1985). Nevertheless, the most probable consequences of this manipulation of our body are, in my mind, completely unacceptable in so far as they imply some pathological behavior. In fact, if body sensibility, necessities, and wants (as well as its reaction to pain or to pleasure) have to be suitable and fit into cultural patterns to be accepted, the “nature” of the body disappears, and the body simply becomes what and how we eat, what and how many exercises we do.11

References


Notes

1I need to point out here that I use the concept of "body's nature" in an ontological rather than empirical or scientific way. In this sense, speaking of the body's nature, I assume that (a) human nature is something given to us; (b) it constitutes what it is to be a human being; (c) it is the same in all human beings (it is universally applicable); (d) it is something fixed over time and transhistorical; and (e) it has normative implications. It is clear that everyone of these theses is controversial and has generated many debates. But in this paper, I am not discussing these claims (cf. Marzano 2000, 2001). I can only say that I am now assuming that the human body exists and that its nature is understandably apart from its social construction.

2In this sense, I do not accept a position like that of Polhemus (1978) according to which "the human body does not exist in itself" and it is just a metaphor of society. In fact, if we reduce the body as a whole to a purely cultural phenomenon, then we are unwittingly perpetuating the deep modern alienation of our human being from nature.

3Maybe Butler (1993) is right to argue that there is no "pure" body or untouched nature prior to culture, but her solution to the myth of a purely natural state prior to culture is merely to posit a "pure" culture that is always already there. This pure cultural state prior to nature, it seems to me, is at least also a myth.

4Even if the history of idealizing and grooming the body is long (cf. Foucault, 1979), never before have so many persons been forced to observe and participate in constant cultural idealization of the body (see Wendell, 1996).

5The idea of the body as a set of social practices found its most coherent statement in the anthropological work of Mauss (1979). Mauss developed the concept of body practices to understand the nature of the self in its social context. For Mauss, the body is a physiological potentiality, which is realized socially and collectively through a variety of shared body practices within which the individual is trained, disciplined, and socialized. For instance, although the human body has the potential for walking, the particular form of walking produced within a given society or group is the outcome of training and practice. In such a context, see also the work of Bourdieu (1984).

6Today, it is not easy to distinguish standards of physical normality from ideals of health, appearance, and performance. Morgan, for instance, discusses this phenomenon in relation to cosmetic surgery for women and writes, "In the technical and popular literature on cosmetic surgery, what have previously been described as normal variations of female body shapes or described in the relatively innocuous language of 'problem areas,' are increasingly described as 'deformities,' 'ugly protrusions,' 'inadequate breasts,' and 'insightly concentrations of fat cells.'... Cosmetic surgery promises virtually all women the creation of beautiful, youthful-appearing bodies. As a consequence, more and more women will be labeled 'ugly' and 'old' in relation to this more select population of surgically created beautiful faces and bodies" (Morgan, 1991, p. 41).

7Cf. the analysis of Bourdieu points out some problematic consequences for individuals of the contemporary myth of the perfect body: "The chances of experiencing one's body as a vessel of grace, a continuous miracle, are that much greater when bodily capacity is commensurate with recognition; and, conversely, the probability of experiencing the body with unease, embarrassment, timidity grows with the disparity between the ideal body and the real body, the dream body and the 'looking-glass self' reflected in the reaction of others" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 207).

8In this sense, when I say that people are influenced by some cultural models and change their behavior in order to follow such a model, I am not speaking of a causal or logical connection, even if we can hardly say that there isn't any relation between our way of life and all the cultural models given and proposed by the mass media.

9Susan Bordo, in particular, emphasizes the moral connotations that accompany this repudiation of embodied existence, arguing that "food refusal, weight loss, commitment to exercise,
and ability to tolerate bodily pain and exhaustion have become cultural metaphors for self-deter-
mination, will, and moral fortitude” (Bordo, 1993, p. 68). In such a cultural climate, she main-
tains, it is hardly surprising that eating disorders are on the rise, especially among women, nor is
it surprising to find that self-starvation itself has deep spiritual dimensions, which are in turn
nourished by the traditional mind/body dualism that associates the mind with transcendence and
the body with immanence (see also Orbach, 1986).

There is some interesting philosophical literature suggesting a thesis exactly the oppo-
site of the one presented here. For example, according to Elizabeth Grosz (1994), who tries to
demonstrate the influence of social constructionist views on the rejection of anatomy as destiny,
anorexia seems to mark a repudiation of patriarchal ideals of slenderness. Nevertheless, it seems
to me, the analytical researches of Bruch (1978, 1982), Bordo (1993), and Selvini Palazzoli
(1974) have trenchantly shown the existence of very strong links between the contemporary
imaginary construction of a perfect slender body and eating disorders.

The idea that there is a third option, viz. all bodies are subject to societal norms while
they also repudiate those norms in their construction (see Butler, 1993 and her Foucauldian at-
tempts to avoid any “metaphysical foundationalism”) leaves us with a disembodied body in a sea
of cultural meaning production. Moreover, if we reduce the body to a purely cultural artifice, we
are perpetuating the deep modern alienation of our human being from nature. In this sense, the
crux of the matter is, as Bigwood puts it, “to renaturalize the body, truly releasing it from a
dichotomized nature and culture” (Bigwood, 1998, p. 103).

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