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The perfect female body, a socially constructed individual obsession?

Flavia Jurca



It is always a risk and a challenge to scientifically discuss beauty and its associated themes. The very concept of beauty varies ad infinitum across epochs, cultures and from one individual to another. Even from early childhood we learn from observations on those surrounding us how to classify objects and beings as “ugly” or “beautiful”. The aesthetic reference points an individual acquires are the result of a continuous process of assimilation and internalization of significances the culture he/she belongs to assign to the notion of beauty.

Why is there a concrete preoccupation with a beautiful female body?

1. First of all, because the image of the female body occupies a significant space within all kinds of public discourse. Femininity and beauty form an inseparable association of terms within the public sphere, and this association is mirrored by the constant presence and high frequency with which female nudity is legally and desirably presented. In short, a beautiful female body is unveiled and nobody raises any objections to that, as opposed to male nudity which is, more often than not, censored, as it is automatically condemned by the public.

2. Secondly, feminine beauty represents the most frequently used means of promoting and selling things in our society (despite the sexist

content of such practices), from the Pirelli calendar to the publishing *Playboy* empire, built on the basic idea that beautiful women can sell anything and in any quantity.

3. Due to the “over-exposure” of the female body and to the saturation of the market with images of female beauty, nowadays there exists the tendency to state that this field holds no more secrets and that the significances attached to it have already been analyzed and classified.

4. As a consequence of three waves of militant feminism which have swept and left their mark on Western civilization, and which “sanctioned” the social imaginary focused on the female body and its beauty, the physical aspect still remains the primary (and the most comfortable) means to evaluate women, while to them this aspect is still the most problematic relationship they build with themselves and with the world.

This analysis of *the social image of the perfect female body* and of *the way in which it influences the lives of the subjects of the study* is built on the premise that this product of Western culture (i.e. the perfect female body) is far from being completely understood and, if we were to use a term coined by Antoine de Saint-Exupery, also far from being completely *tamed*. Although deeply steeped in the collective imaginary never to be eliminated, the image of the perfect female body gives birth to a series of lifestyles, be-

haviours, and visions of the self and of the world which range from the realm of relative sanity to mental illness. The reason for a sociological preoccupation with an otherwise rather frivolous topic resides precisely in its being delimited by the above-mentioned realms ...

The interest in the image of the perfect female body and in the manner in which it influences human behaviour (especially female behaviour) may be demonstrated by referring to the evolution in the field of public services offered on the Romanian market:

1. the cosmetics and body-care products industry has developed immensely during the past years;

2. the existence of a section dedicated to dieting, bodyline, and food hygiene in every women's magazine;

3. an increase in the number of young girls experiencing eating disorders (after 1990);

4. younger ages at which such disorders appear;

5. the considerable increase in the number of advertisements for miraculous products promising a rapid weight loss, both on TV and in women's magazines;

6. the apparition during the 90s of an impressive and rapidly growing number of aesthetic surgery clinics and of assisted weight loss medical centres.

7. the presence of at least one type of treatment for losing weight in most beauty salons.

While eating disorders are identifiable due to a diagnosis grid used by psychiatrists and represent the object of medical research and treatment, body-image disorders represent the study object of the present paper. They are brought about by the contact young girls take, from increasingly younger ages, with beauty and social desirability standards which are present in the groups they belong to and in the media. The body-image disorders represent the object of in-

terest of sociological studies precisely because they account for the manner in which culture and its disseminative strategies influence the individual, turning a repetitive and essential physiological act (i.e. eating) into a social ritual laden with a host of significations.

Roland Barthes¹ notices the fact that the passage to a consumer society in the West of Europe represented a major psychological break, as it changed the way in which people viewed food. Famine disappeared from the daily reality of the Westerner, and fear of starvation and the need to fight for food were quick to follow and were replaced by the certainty of plenitude. The ancestral fear of starvation was replaced by its opposite, namely by the fear of obesity, and the success of dieting as a lifestyle and as a solution to individual problems demonstrate the existence of a series of penitential values (an inheritance of religious ethical values) which condemn hedonism (in this case, indulging in eating pleasures). That is why "healthy" food products are more successful on the market nowadays, as they offer a higher moral comfort than those which only induce pleasure (people are willing to pay more for "healthy" food and to spend more time looking for them and selecting them). Moreover, nowadays it is almost a sin to indulge in the Rabalaisian pleasure of eating in abundance.

The Romanian specificity of this phenomenon

Speaking of the post-1990 Romanian context, we may safely state that the traditional way in which woman has been viewed and socially valorized coexists with the Western model. The vast majority of Romanian women have for certain adopted numerous elements and practices belonging to the lifestyle and modes of thinking of Western women. The smashing success of the hypermarket magazines in Romania is proof of

¹ Barthes R., 1970, *Pour une psychologie de l'alimentation contemporaine*, Paris, Seuil, pg. 307-315.

the fact that Romanians too have begun to celebrate mass consumption as a public ritual invested with multiple significations, some of which having been assimilated together with the Western consumerist society pattern. Compared with the communist period, when consumption was controlled and restricted by the totalitarian state, the present day consumption market, especially that of food products, has grown progressively larger and diversified. We may speak of the existence of over-abundance on this market, even if this is not counterbalanced by an equally strong financial power and by an increase in the level of consumption. Another major change which we must take into account is freedom of speech and the diversification of the mass information (and entertainment) sources. On the symbolical market of public communication, nearly every message may be spread to the remotest corner of the country. The limits in the field will soon be settled, legislation in the domain of mass communication still allowing the existence of aberrant phenomena (for instance, the production of advertisements offering misleading information about miraculous products, such as sachets with plants which cause an effortless loss of body weight). Apart from these two pieces of evidence of social change, during this period we have also been able to notice that there are consequences to the assimilation of the Western consumerist-society pattern and of the lifestyle which accompanies it¹: on the one hand, we are facing the multiplicity of eating disorder problems (where we take into account the cases which have been recorded and treated by physicians and psychologists, and not the actual number of cases) and the apparition of body-image problems, on the other.

In an article published in *Eva* magazine²,

which referred to the obsessions regarding the image of the body and to the cult of weight loss developed by the Romanian society, there is a paragraph which represents a valid synthesis of the particularities of the Romanian context. "Nowadays the desire to be healthy and to feel comfortable in our own skin is not experienced unless it is dictated by fashion. We take up yoga or martial arts but the aim is not spiritual fulfillment, but the hope that this will change our lives and that this change will lead to a weight loss. We do not want to enjoy our embellished bodies; we simply desire somebody else's body, preferably one belonging to a celebrity. That is why beauty deserves any sacrifices. But beauty is still such a subjective issue that no matter how many sacrifices we end up making, we'll never manage to please everybody".

As I have mentioned earlier, there is no universally valid pattern of the perfect female body, the interviews taken to various young women have revealed the fact that each of them *has an extremely clear mental image of what the perfect female body looks like*. In most cases this image is described by reference to a celebrity or to a friend. We must also take into account that this individual model of the perfect female body comprises elements which do not belong to the image of the body proper, but are necessarily associated with it and they are even given a body of their own. Thus, when they think of this model, young women evoke not only physical details, such as height, waist width, the aspect of the abdomen, but they mention attributes, such as "radiant", "mat and smooth skin", "gleaming", "happy", "at ease" etc. E.D. expresses this quite suggestively: "I instantly think of Angelina, Angelina Jolie. Of course, she's unquestionably gorgeous, if you measure her, she'll turn out standard-perfect, but her image wouldn't be complete without the feel-

¹ *Consumerism* is the American term for the Romanian "consumism". The author prefers the latter, a borrowing copied after Pascal Bruckner's French word, because the explanation he attaches to this concept in "Tentația inocenței" (Romanian translation) is closer to sociological requirements than the American version which defines an economic reality. [the present translation will use the American term, because the word "consumism" as such does not exist in English].

² Jurca, F., *Slabă-Frumoasă? (Is Thin Beautiful?)*, *Eva*, nr. 18, July 2005, p. 23

ing she's giving you, namely that she's comfortable in her own body, that she celebrates it as a precious and unique gift". The name Angelina Jolie, an American actress nominated by *People* magazine as the most beautiful Hollywood actress, is almost stereotypically associated with the image of the perfect body young women have in mind. Other celebrity names that are mentioned, such as Sharon Stone or Charlize Theron (both are actresses), send to the one and the same reality. The individual pattern of the perfect female body bears a strong emotional characteristic: the people whose bodies are considered perfect also possess attributes which young women desire for themselves. P. L. remarks: "there are many women with beautiful bodies that anybody would love to have; still, I don't think a body is truly perfect unless I desire it for myself, unless the possessor of that body arouses my jealousy through more than just a couple of physical characteristics which any surgeon can provide for you".

Women's need to compare themselves with other women is no novelty. What is truly new is the result of the manner in which the identity of the female individual is constructed, namely through the socially induced idea of a competition for success and for getting men's attention which remains fixed in the blueprint of female personality.¹ From what I have learnt from my young interviewees, it appears that both those who suffer from eating disorders, and those who do not have turned comparison with other women into a constant mode of interaction with the surrounding world. These comparisons are not selective, as the young women do not refer themselves to only one model, but they rather represent a total "score" of the body-image in the match between themselves and those they compare themselves with (women from their entourage, women on TV or in magazines). But if this aspect seems to be rather commonplace, the psychological consequences it entails are less so:

I discovered that, the more frequent they are, the worse the temporary psychological state gets, negative aspects prevailing in most cases. T. B. explains this: "Sometimes, when I leave home, I happen to like what I see in the mirror. But I eventually get to the subway and see all those scantily-dressed skinny teenagers who look the way I'll never ever look. I open a magazine and see an actress whom I admire. I usually think to myself: "look at her, her legs are just like yours – no, hers are much more beautiful and smoother!" The visible result after a while is that I begin to cover my body more and more. I'll end up going out in the street with a bag on my head, and that will be the day when I've grown totally depressed by the way I look. I don't know, but I think I'm obsessed by the fact that I'll never look as good as the women and girls around me. Sometimes I wish I were invisible".

Comparisons are made partially – thighs, waist, legs, bust, face etc – but also on the whole, the results being always negative for the woman who draws the comparison between herself and the bodies of other women. This sounds illogical because it is self-evident that the women she sees present solely their public image. If she could see them at home, in front of the mirror while they are attending to themselves, would the result of the comparison still be negative for her? E. D. makes a surprising remark: "I don't think there's anybody in the world that looks worse than I do, firstly because the others are more inclined to ignore their little imperfections. I saw women wearing no make-up when they were going out ... there's nobody that can convince me that they were not actually better looking than me ... even without any make-up on; it's not like they had put on another layer of make-up under the street make-up, right?" The negative attitude towards their physical aspect is a constant element in the 11 cases I have considered for my analysis. The differences are only subtle,

¹ Festinger L., 1957, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, chapter "Social Comparison"

but the cause for this surprising attitude may be explicitly identified in the general preoccupation of society and of the media with the image of the perfect female body. The severe and constant evaluation young women subject themselves to is the result of a preventive, formal reasoning: “the more strict I am with myself, the better my chances to discover and maybe correct my shortcomings before others get to notice them”.

Looking for a way to get the perfect body has become part and parcel of the moral Decalogue of young women nowadays, as they think that it is their duty to make any necessary sacrifices in order to get closer to the socially desirable ideal through the individual pattern of bodily perfection. The successful image of the beautiful woman who makes no efforts in getting what she wants and who represents the focus of everybody’s attention has become irresistibly attractive. Some women are even experiencing a pressure which increases with the passage of time. S. N. is worried by the awareness that “if I don’t do something now, while something can still be done, in a few years’ time, it will all be in vain. Did you know that after the age of 25 your bones stop growing and skin begins to lose its elasticity? That’s why this is the best time to start doing something, not when, after I lose weight, I begin to look as if I were wearing the skin of a larger person”.

The health these young women are enjoying now is taken for granted as something which allows them to imagine and then apply their personal plans to modify the image of their bodies. This means that, more often than not, they resort to solutions which promise rapid and amazing results. In all earnestness, L.N. describes her plans to change herself: “I am currently struggling to eliminate sugar from my diet. Bread will be next. Salt I gave up a long time ago. The next on my list is meat, although I can’t remember the last time I had pork. To make my ordeal bearable, I ordered Mihaela Tatu’s miraculous herbal diet. All I have to do is add those herbs to my food and I lose weight, while I still enjoy tasty

meals”. If the model for the individual image of the perfect female body is a certain celebrity, it is probable that the young woman will go on the same diets as the celebrity in question, as it is the case with E. D. who, imitating Angelina Jolie, has recently begun to eat only proteins – texture soy, tofu, fish, meat, eggs, dairy – and a few other foods, associating her diet with isometric exercises (highly intense physical efforts which stretch the muscles and the bones to their limits, the kind that bodybuilders usually undertake). T. B. chose the British pop singer Geri Halliwell as her role model, not because of the way she looks, of her talent or her success, but for the merit, which T. B. considers amazing, of having managed to lose a lot of weight in a very short period of time. T. B. tells me that Geri’s diet has its risks, among which the most visible are short-term amenorrhea and, in the long run, even sterility. But T. B. does not seem worried, on the contrary: “Even my doctor told me that in time I will become unable to have children, but who wants children these days anyway? It’s very difficult to take care of yourself as it is, but it all becomes an impossible task when you also have to take care of a child who depends on you entirely. I have completely different expectations. I haven’t graduated from faculty just to get married and become somebody’s mother. I want to enjoy all my possibilities while I’m still young”. Her statement is paradoxical seeing that the diet she is subjecting herself to leaves little room for “joy”, the self-imposed restrictions eating up all her time. But it appears that the satisfaction of being in control of what is happening to her body is greater than the sacrifices she has to make.

According to the young women I interviewed, eating is more than just a physiological process, which takes medical aspects and can be reduced to a bunch of descriptive-scientific observations. Eating, through its collective (getting out with friends, parties etc.) and private components, is viewed as a powerful social event regulated by norms and bearing significations which are derived from both the local culture and the rela-

tionship young women have established with their need to eat. Although the sense of personal independence is very strong in the women I interviewed for this study, adherence to social values is equally strong. It can be noticed at a closer look taken at their actual behaviour, the differences between acknowledged and practiced values having to also be considered.

Losing weight has become synonymous with beauty to such an extent that in the messages we receive via the mass media, the two notions have grown to mean the same thing, turning the slim female body into the central object of a cult or rather of an ideology and ordering the world in terms of bipolar and radical terms, such as the slim and beautiful, on the one hand and the rest of a rather undefined world, on the other. The Internet hosts websites of fun-clubs adoring anorexic actresses, forums where young women can discover how to acquire an eating disorder (!) in order to become thinner and to identify with the successful image of their favourite actresses, to win the admiration of their group of friends and to arouse the envy of their girlfriends, how to access the countless pages which offer thousands of diets, most of the times ignoring the warnings which accompany these diets. The whole of society has developed a taste for celebrating self-imposed suffering in view of losing pounds ("the hedonism of self modification"), chatting about the latest diets becoming part and parcel of daily habits, alongside talks about the weather and the latest news. What is more, openly expressing satisfaction about the way in which you look places women in two possible categories: she is considered either a lucky person with a gorgeous body or an obese person who has given up wishing the best for her and is currently fooling herself with slogans. Young women are more susceptible to internalize the cultural pattern of the distorted body image as social necessity precisely because they are young and looking for role models who could help them assess themselves and their relation with the others. Although they are not aiming at becoming part of a mass of identical indi-

viduals, but rather at proving their own uniqueness and individual value, they end up becoming (at least temporarily) serial Guinea pigs for the dieting industry and for the magazines whose target they are. A certain reason for hope is represented by the fact that the higher they reach in the professional hierarchy and the older they get their preoccupation with their body image is pushed to the periphery of their self-image. But until then, young women are assimilated by the social desirability pattern in what concerns the perfect female body, which is necessarily and at all costs thin, the behavioural patterns this voluntary adherence brings about causing serious damage to their future health and well-being.

By being automatically associated with pleasure, food is seen as a threat to the model of the ideal female body which becomes almost impossible to attain, as it involves sacrificing one's temporary comfort. No matter how difficult it may seem to operate with the concept of the "perfect female body", it brings forth a series of behaviours which are easily identifiable and recordable, the term being extremely clearly defined in the collective, as well as individual imaginary.

Engaged in the search for a method of getting the kind of body that is closest to their individual ideal of perfection, young women seem willing to give up the present in view of obtaining future, rather uncertain gratifications. They ignore their present image in favour of the way in which they will look after their efforts have borne fruits. This is how we get to witness what Robin Gerber once said: "Women don't need an Afghan burkha to hide themselves under". With the notable difference that an Afghan burkha is meant to hide a woman's face from the looks of those around her, while the idealized image (the individual image of the perfect body) covers the actual image of the body from the eyes of the woman who denies it and who willingly refuses, in the name and for the sake of belonging to the cult of those devoted to the social ideal of the perfect female body.

Translated by Alina Popescu