

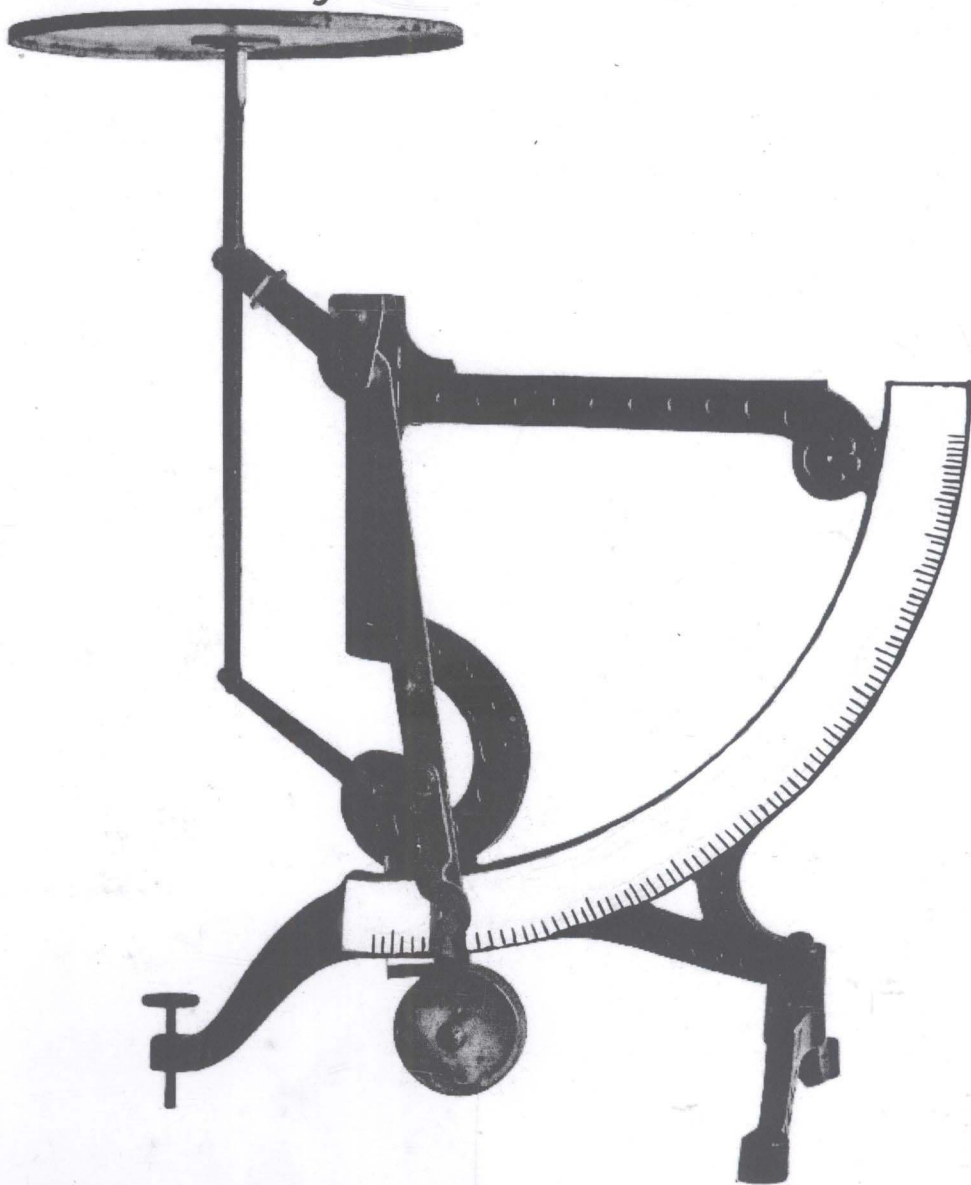
The Weight of Images

Affect, Body Image and Fat in the Media



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Katariina Kyrölä

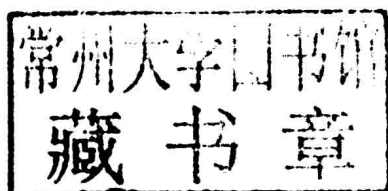


GENDER, BODIES AND TRANSFORMATION

The Weight of Images

Affect, Body Image and Fat in the Media

KATARIINA KYRÖLÄ
University of Turku, Finland



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THE WEIGHT OF IMAGES

Gender, Bodies and Transformation

Series editor: Meredith Jones,
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This series explores the intersection of two key themes in relation to scholarship on bodies: gender and transformation. Bodies are gendered via biology, culture, medicine and society, such that gender, so deeply and intimately connected to identity, is a crucial part of any thorough analysis of the body. At the same time, bodies are – and have always been – sites of transformation, whether through ‘natural’ processes such as pregnancy, illness and ageing, or the more eye-catching, ‘unnatural’ transformations of cosmetic surgery, violence, extreme bodybuilding or dieting, cross-species transplantation, elective amputation or tattooing.

Interdisciplinary in scope and welcoming work from a range of approaches, including cultural and media studies, sociology, gender studies, feminist theory, phenomenology, queer studies and ethnography, *Gender, Bodies and Transformation* publishes scholarly examinations of contemporary cultural changes that are relevant to both gender and the transformation of bodies, whether in single bodies or between bodies.

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Katariina Kyrölä
Stockholm, October 2013

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Chapter 1

Introduction: The Weight of Looks

When we watch television, read a newspaper or a magazine, gaze at the movie screen, browse web pages, we always act, react, and process what we see corporeally, with our bodies—sensually as well as psychically. Simultaneously, when we look at media images, we essentially look at images of bodies. Our bodies become situated and moved in relation to those imaged bodies, partly due to our own conscious efforts, partly in ways we do not actively notice. We may recognize some images as having a deep and lasting impact on our ways of seeing ourselves and others, but most images we probably pass by without reflecting much on the nature of our encounter with them, on why we relate or do not relate to them in a particular manner.

In this sense, encounters with images are perhaps not very different from interpersonal encounters with people. However, media images are “frozen” in a way living bodies obviously are not: the exact same images and narratives are potentially seen by large numbers of people. We can look at bodies in the media more carefully and closely than we could ordinarily do in an interpersonal encounter with a stranger. We may recognize ourselves or something of ourselves and our bodies in images, or we may look because of the strangeness of the image. Media images can show us bodies we would never see in everyday life, thus expanding our perception of what is possible, or exclude bodies we see in everyday life, which can shape our evaluations of what kind of bodies are significant, valued or devalued enough to become stuff of images. The more mainstream and widely circulated media images become, the more societal weight they can carry, making bodies visible and comprehensible as certain kinds of bodies to vast audiences.

Even though viewers might relate to images very differently from each other, they are also addressed and invited into encounters with images in collectively shared ways. Relations between viewing bodies and imaged bodies forge, repeat, and transform relations and materializations of social and cultural power relations. From gut reactions to careful reflections, from feeling haunted by one image and forgetting the next, we move between categorizations and evaluations, difference and similarity, familiarity and strangeness, proximity and distance.

Media images thus weigh on our bodies, invite us to direct our attention towards certain directions rather than others. This weight of images can sometimes appear a burden. However, the ways images press upon viewing

bodies can also be light, pleasurable, or fleeting. Media images have no weight on their own: their gravity is materialized only in our encounters with them. Be as it may, we cannot refuse the weight of images, even if we turn our heads and look away, as in that instance we already recognize their potential to move us.

This book scrutinizes the very relations between viewing bodies and media images as weighty, affective engagements in which structures of power materialize and move. As such, this study participates in the long-running debates in media and cultural studies as well as feminist research on how bodies become audiovisualized and media images saturate bodies, and what kind of role media imageries play in deeming some forms of corporeality desirable, acceptable, and pleasurable, others threatening, removable, and shameful. In feminist studies, these questions have most commonly been examined through images of ideal or norm-abiding bodies which dominate western mainstream media imageries.¹ Corporeal forms that are commonly excluded or pushed outside of beauty, ideality or normality have received far less attention.

In today's Western culture, one bodily quality has become perhaps the most central and readily available signifier for loss of corporeal, mental, and moral control, lack of culturally desirable characteristics, and anxieties for excess of various kinds. This quality is fatness. In contemporary media, fatness is claimed as the most serious threat for the health and economy of various western nations, the necessary starting point for heroic transformations into proud and happy slimness, the common corporeal sign of comedy, a signifier of ordinariness as well as sensationalistic tragedy. Bodies are related to, valued, judged, desired, accepted, rejected, and imagined fundamentally in terms of their weight, size, and shape. However, in comparison to many other categorizations that are also understood as embedded in the body and centrally locate people in cultural hierarchies, such as gender, skin color, or disability, weight and body size are deemed much more easily changeable and mostly one's own fault. Therefore, size hierarchies are often seen as justified, or at least not as problematic as gendered, sexual or ethnic asymmetries although these axes of difference are thoroughly enmeshed. In this study, fat corporeality in the media functions as a specific and previously rather unexplored viewpoint but one which also opens up questions of bodily hierarchies and embodied ways of engaging with media images more generally.

In media studies and feminist theorizing, discussions on corporeal spectatorship and affect have become more prominent than ever during recent years. It has indeed become commonplace to argue for the necessity

1 These include studies on images of dieting, eating disorders and beauty (e.g. Chapkis 1988, Wolf 1991, Bordo 1993a, Kilbourne 1994, Saukko 2006), on images of muscular and surgically modified bodies (e.g. Schulze 1990, Holmlund 2002, Davis 2003), on beauty pageants (e.g. Cohen et al. 1996, Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2006), on star and celebrity bodies (e.g. Dyer 1986, Negra 2001), and on makeover television (e.g. Heyes 2007, Gill 2007).

of addressing viewing, reading, and/or academic research as embodied, material encounters, not only as signification practices, psychical processes, or disembodied rationalizations. In feminist media studies—and in feminist scholarship more broadly—bridging the gap between images and bodies, representation and materiality continues to be one of the most pressing questions (e.g. Shildrick and Price 1999, Thornham 2000: 164). In addressing questions of affect, this book participates in the discussion on a turn in cultural and social studies, named respectively as “affective,” “ontological,” or “new materialist” as references to a renewed² interest in bodies, experiences, and materiality in the 1990s and 2000s (e.g. Koivunen 2001 and 2010, Hemmings 2005, Tyler 2008b). I will return to these discussions in more detail later.

Still, there are surprisingly few actual studies of how, exactly, media images may touch, move, and affect viewers corporeally, how viewing bodies may encounter imaged bodies, and how cultural hierarchies become forged and dismantled in the push and pull of these encounters.³ Media studies have tended to focus either on images or on spectators, in other words either representations or audiences, often employing textual or discursive analysis to both (e.g. Stacey 1993). If studies employ audience ethnography and interrogate viewing experiences, the powerful pull of affective and narrative positioning implicated in media images may fade to the background. Corporeality of spectatorship has also been approached from the viewpoint of media analysis, asking how images engage viewing bodies. Often in a feminist context this has involved considering the gendering and sexual power of spectator positions. However, variations within and across these positions—the personal, material, and cultural components of viewing experiences—have not been the focus (e.g. Williams 1991, Pisters 2003). In some studies, viewing bodies lose their specificity and “the body” becomes a universalized entity, to the point where particularities or collective differences between bodies fade from view (e.g. Shaviri 1993). Viewing bodies may also appear too specific, accounting for a corporeal viewing experience but failing to analyze what enabled and produced that experience in the wider spectrum of socio-cultural locations and movements (e.g. Kuhn 1992, Sobchack 2004: 53–84).

The research at hand tackles both of these dilemmas and examines how imaged bodies invite viewing bodies into affective engagements in culturally and personally located ways. This means that in order to scrutinize the powerful ways in which images of fat bodies weigh on viewers and viewers weigh on them, media imageries need to be carefully analyzed, but also viewing bodies have to

2 To frame directions of discussion as “turns” is unavoidably a strategic construction (e.g. Koivunen 2008: 5).

3 Important studies which do address the “how” question in various ways include Williams 1991, Stacey 1994, Pearce 1997, MacCormack 2000, Marks 2000 and 2002, Sobchack 2004, Skeggs and Wood 2012.

be considered both as specific and as constituted in larger cultural contexts. Encounters with media images of fatness are especially useful in examining spectatorship as affective and corporeal, since viewers are habitually invited to engage with media images of fat bodies in highly charged ways, questions of fat and weight being an increasingly fraught topic today.

The key proposition of this book is that such engagements between imaged bodies and viewing bodies can be most fruitfully approached through the combination of two concepts: *affect* and *body image*. By intertwining these concepts, if understood as I suggest, it is possible to critically unpack the potential effectiveness as well as the apparent ineffectiveness of media images in relation to viewing bodies. Even if viewers would not be affected by watching certain images in an immediately visible way, something about them may still gradually and very materially change. This is where the concept of body image becomes necessary, when seen as a zone that forms and transforms in the push and pull of affects. Furthermore, the concepts of affect and body image allow interrogating how media images can train viewers into valuing some bodies or bodily characteristics over others, and how viewers themselves can train their bodies to encounter images differently.

In addition, throughout the book questions of affect are connected to media studies discussions on the cultural significance of various media genres and forms, as that forms a crucial part of how images engage viewers audiovisually and narratively. Proposing a shift from images, narratives or discourses to the relations between imaged bodies and viewing bodies, I examine the persuasiveness of various generic modes of addressing viewers, ranging from news to tabloid publicity, from comedy to horror, from internet pornography to makeover television. However, instead of considering genre-specific forms of persuasion, a tendency familiar from much of media genre research, this book focuses on cross-media and cross-genre similarities. Since media images' tendencies of addressing viewers may not follow genre boundaries, overlaps and crossovers highlight important questions of why similar bodies can be viewed as fearsome in one context, but desirable in another.

To unravel the weight of images, we must not place particular affects in particular kinds of images, as if affect was something to be simply excavated, not about relationality. But media images do offer affective invitations that are possible to recognize, even if one's actual reactions do not comply with what is expected. Invitations to affective engagements may partly take the form of explicit suggestions (like encouraging viewers to diet), but even more forcefully images press upon viewers through implicit audiovisual and narrative strategies that may appear to call forth "natural" or unintentional reactions in the viewing body—which are, nevertheless, also a product of how images train bodies to react to and engage with them. The structure of the book points to the forms of engagements I explore: those that call for and build fear; the triangle of

shame, disgust, and pride; laughter; stretching; and finally desire. These forms thoroughly interlace and they all are discussed in more than one chapter and context, but with each of them I ask the crucial question: how do media images engage viewers through affective forms of invitation, and what kind of power relations are at stake?

As the emphasis of the research is particularly in the relations that media images of fat bodies pull viewers into, we must also ask quite simply: how are fat bodies represented in the media? Contrary to the studies that place affect outside of representation (e.g. Sedgwick 2003, Massumi 2002), I am interested in how affect circulates, intensifies, and is attached to or detached from bodies through representations. Audiovisual structures and narrative formations, as they are repeated, may connect affects to fat bodies to the extent that they gradually start to appear as if naturally evoking and containing such affects. Images also delineate fat bodies to be recognizable as fat, which often varies and intertwines with other categorizations, such as gender, class, “race,” and sexuality. Simultaneously, hierarchical lines are drawn within imaged bodies, for example to charge some parts of the body with more pressing affective weight or less value than others. In other words, this question concerns boundaries of and within fat bodies in media images.

Approaching relations as engagements—invitations that implicate both parties to a high degree—necessitates looking at imaged bodies and viewing bodies at the same time. Although media images direct viewers’ affective engagements with them to a certain extent, engagements can never be reducible to images. Therefore, we must finally ask: what can happen to viewing bodies when they engage with media images of fat bodies? The concept of body image becomes especially crucial through this question, since it allows conceptualizing ways in which viewing bodies become affected through their relations with media images without reducing those relations to causes and effects, or immediately perceivable changes. Viewing experiences may comply with but also defy and spill over the invitations of images, especially as images of fat bodies often seem to assume that their viewers’ body histories and relations to fat are unproblematic and uniform. Such assumptions might not even become recognizable unless some viewers/readers fall outside or consciously push against the pull of images. In other words, there is no way of studying affective engagements without locating them in embodied experience. To weigh this dimension, I use autobiographical accounts of my own viewing and analyzing experiences—in other words, a strategic “I”—as a resource for grounding the analysis at the intersection of the cultural and the personal. The aim is to think through ways of looking and processing media images of weight in ethically sustainable and politically fruitful ways.

To summarize the three-fold focus of this book: I scrutinize ways in which media images of fat bodies address and engage viewers affectively and

corporeally, and the possibilities of these encounters to fix or open our body images. To formulate this in yet another way: I ask how do media imageries of fat become “sticky” (Ahmed 2004) for viewers both because of components in images themselves and because of particular viewers’ cultural locations and personal history, and with what potential consequences.

As the key emphasis of the study concerns embodied spectatorship I will, towards the end of the introduction, locate my approach more carefully in relation to previous approaches with a similar emphasis as well as to recent feminist debates on representation and embodiment. Through these latter discussions my use of the two central concepts, affect and body image, becomes further motivated. Moreover, concerning the viewing body and actual viewing events, I ponder the possibilities, potential pitfalls, and feminist epistemological background behind my methodological employment of the strategic “I” (Pearce 1997: 25–28, 2004: 85–107). I conclude the introduction by presenting the media material examined and highlighting the specific focuses of each chapter. Before engaging with these tasks, however, I want to contextualize my definition of fatness in this work in relation to critical scholarship on cultural and social constitution of “fat,” namely Fat Studies, as I see this emerging field is and continues to be an important context for my research. While I examine questions of corporeal spectatorship partly on a meta-level, I find it ethically and epistemologically crucial for such an interrogation to be carefully situated and ask questions in the context of specific kinds of bodies—in this case, fat bodies in media images, and my own viewing body—not just on embodiment “in general,” if such embodiment is ever even plausible.

What Counts as a “Fat” Body in the Media?

The focus on various forms of engagement with media imageries of not just any bodies, but fat bodies in specific, makes this book the first extensive study on how fatness is currently represented across different media and generic forms. However, despite the ample amount and diversity of the media material, the purpose of the study is not descriptive, and “fat bodies in the media” are not the research object in a traditional sense. Instead, imageries of fat bodies raise compelling questions on the nature of affective engagements into which they invite viewing bodies. Nevertheless, as “fat” is no simple term to use and can be understood in multiple conflicted ways, I find it necessary to contextualize and justify my employment of “fat”—which also characterizes the political motivations of this research and raises questions on how researchers always participate in outlining, capturing and “freezing” the object of their study, no matter how fluid they try to keep their definitions.