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Connected Bodies: Technologies and Activities of Showing oneself in Fat Acceptance

In my presentation, I will discuss the social and technological dynamics of body knowledge in regard to the case of fat acceptance activities. In my understanding of body knowledge, I refer to the classical understanding developed by Helmut Plessner, as well as Simone de Beauvoir's and Michel Foucault's critique of modernity.

Bodies are sites of one's own experience, they can be experienced as other people's bodies, but they are also subject to external evaluations, often professionally. There are thus three positions of the body, which I will, in the tradition of phenomenology, call ego, alter, and tertius. All three together constitute what can be called, with Barbara Duden, body knowledge.

The relation between the ego and the alter is not purely social; it is *mediated*. This mediation can obviously be human.

The mediation can also be non-human, organised by things, as when a narrow path makes people walk together, in a night train where the reservation system determines next to whom you sleep, when you buy clothes and the affordable price range and current collection influence how your body will feel like and look like to others, or when a dating website algorithm suggests possible romantic partners.

And then there are mixed cases, which provides the majority of cases.

The body knowledge often remains tacit, but it can become relevant, especially in crises, such as illness or when the body does not fit properly into hegemonic interaction orders and orders of visibility. I will concentrate on such visibility orders. So, in trying to understand how body knowledge becomes fixed through the constructions of its images, it becomes necessary to study the media infrastructures which constitute visualities through arranging ego, alter, and the third.

I situate this research in the communicative and sociomaterial construction of boundaries of and within the social world. A discussion which has been led in the context of the Sociology of knowledge and science and technology studies. These boundaries define ontologically and practically what entities belong to nature or to culture, to the social world or to technology, to rationality or to irrationality. Following recent debates in visual studies, I assume that these boundaries are created in conflictual dynamics between visualities and countervisualities, as Nick Mirzoeff puts it.

These boundaries are not ethically neutral; they organize inclusions and exclusions. Recently, Gesa Lindemann has based her theory of social order on the competence to impose such boundaries, which she calls "Ordnungskönnen", being able to order. It is obvious that experts strive to create orders, but in my presentation I want to explore how amateurs and activists can challenge and transform such orderings.

So, I want to specify this notion of boundaries in an empirical analysis of the construction of body knowledge. Whereas the boundaries between nature and culture have in modernity been believed to be categorical, boundaries within the domain believed to be human are more gradual, as between healthy and neurotic, careful and paranoid etc., but similarly harshly detected and enforced, with an arsenal of testing, measuring, differential diagnostics, categorisations and visualisations which render the fine differences first noticeable, then relevant, then natural. But what happens to those aspects of bodies which are neither nature nor properly culture, which seem uncultured and de-natured?

Bodies can be trusted to incorporate subjects, but they can also be abject, that which is cast aside, a term brought up by Julia Kristeva in her essay "the powers of horror." The abject is what is considered distasteful, not presentable, to remain as invisible as possible. The abject is mainly the result of boundary regimes in normalist regimes.

I assume that body knowledge mainly emerges from boundary regimes, installed in the triadic relation, which produce sensibilities and insensibilities for the bodies of others. Which bodies appear desirable, which are expected to embody legitimate speakers, by which bodies and their fates we let ourselves be touched is produced in such boundaries. These regimes are constructed in communication, which is performed in media infrastructures.

Thus, the more precise question is: in which ways do constructions of body images reproduce and transform boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate bodies, and which materialities and media are involved in this construction? The part about materiality serves to unpack what is in sociology often lumped together as norm, value, hegemony, rule,

habitus, etc.

For our pilot study, we analysed English and German-language websites. The websites were selected for their relevance as indicated by the metadata (website addresses, names, description by the authors, comments, etc.). To interpret this material, we used a visual discourse analytical approach, essentially a technique of mapping inspired by Aby Warburg's cultural theory, expanded by notions of STS and software studies. These approaches from the artifact side were supplemented by ethnographic field research. When I approached people from the field, I asked myself, where am I in this research, on which side of boundaries do I myself stand on? I am suggesting that, in the manner of the disabilities studies slogan "nothing about us without us," only the affected community can really decide how to deal with the situation. As a white, tall and non-fat person, I am rightly considered privileged. But then, my own body can and does also become abject, like everybody's. For instance, when I talk to my field contacts, I stutter. It happens to me since I am ten. I am – sometimes – verbally abject. With the help of very good therapists, this got much better on an individual level. But I never got organized, never became part of a collective, because – I think – there was none. So, I believe, by speaking about one's own issues, it becomes possible to undo privilege and to relate to a community's problems without being part of it, but also without distancing oneself completely through appropriating a privileged 'scholar' identity.

So, in the second half of my talk I will present my case study:

It is common knowledge that for a very long time in the history of humanity, being fat was a rather appreciated quality of human bodies. Fat has been problematized for a very long time, back to antiquity. The boundaries, however, have been shifted many times.

The modern discourse on obesity begins in the medical literature of the eighteenth century.¹⁵ The British medical Doctor William Cullen (1710-1790) lists symptoms associated with fatigue and breathing difficulties. However, it took three hundred years for obesity to be considered a general medical and moral problem of populations. In 1905 the American doctor William Osler (1849-1929) attributes obesity to "overeating, a *vice* which is more prevalent than and only a little behind overdrinking in its disastrous effects [...]" But still, throughout most of the nineteenth century and well into the early twentieth century, medical opinion held that carrying an extra 20 to 50 (!) pounds of excess "flesh" was healthy (Eknoyan 2006: 424). The American Writer and scholar Laura Fraser notes that between

1880 and 1920, “that pleasant image of fat thoroughly changed in the United States” (Fraser 2009: 11). She quotes Woods Hutchinson, a medical professor who wrote for women's magazines. Hutchinson educated his *Cosmopolitan* readers in 1894 that “Adipose, while often pictured as a a veritable Frankenstein, as really a most harmless, healthful, innocent tissue” (ibid.). 30 years later, in 1926, the then former President of the American Academy of Medicine President warns that: “In this present onslaught upon one of the most peacable, useful and law-abiding of all our tissues, fashion has apparently the backing of grave physicians, of food reformers and physical trainers and even of great insurance companies, all chanting in unison the new commandment of fashion: 'Thou shalt be thin'” (ibid.) The biopolitics of body fat articulates itself vividly here, with discourses around body tissues becoming associated with issues of citizenship, race and class, which I do not have the space to talk about here. I will now skip some decades.

Since the early 1990s, there has been a marked increase in the number of medical papers on the topic of obesity defined as an illness. and being overweight or obese has been described as an epidemic by researchers and anti-obesity activists (Saguy/Riley 2005: 893). The mass media have taken up this metaphor, which soon became equated to a truth made plausible by the standardisation of measurement methods. Body mass index (BMI) is the main measurement used in discourse on obesity – this simple figure, a non-human intermediary, is defined as an individual's body mass divided by the square of their height. Anti-obesity researchers express criticism of eating habits and call on individuals to take responsibility for their health and exercise self-discipline. Medicine and psychology interpellate subjects to develop rational styles of eating, exhibiting self-control and to manage their failure of attaining ideal weight by accepting feelings of shame; they teach us to feel abject.

Also, obesity discourse is tied into biopolitical strategies, where individual contributions to collective body politics are framed as part of citizenship. After 9/11, in the USA, obesity was even framed in terms of a immunitary politics: Former U.S. Surgeon general (Gesundheitsminister) has repeatedly called it the “terror within” (Carmona 2003).

But the shaping of body ideals is not only a scientific endeavor. The garment industry also plays a decisive role. The clothes they produce is a mainly non-human tertius in the construction of body norms, as i would like to demonstrate.

When confection clothing became the standard, the slim body became favored. This is less an effect of cultural norm than of economic calculation. Fatter bodies have a wider

range of shapes than slim bodies, requiring more adapted garments, which the garment industry is not prepared to produce. This means that generally speaking, most clothing for fatter people will not fit any individual. The same, btw holds true for tall bodies, by the way.

The fashion figurine is the institutionalized graphic and spatial medium for the construction of garments. A standardized body materializes in the figurine, which is product of industrial and aesthetic normalization.

A practitioner of fashion drawing writes: “The proportions of a fashion figurine are often exaggerated and stylized, especially in drawings of women's garments. This can be confusing to the untrained eye, but in fashion it stands for an ideal and not for the real body shape” (Hopkins 2010: S. 50). These proportions have prevailed since the late 1960s and today still influence most fashion drawing. 3-D Figurines, so called dress forms or mannequins, are more realistic, but still do not represent either the reality or the variation of people's bodies. The garments modeled on such a figurine is merely scaled up and down for mass production, without consideration for the variation in proportion. The materiality of the figurine provides a template, an image-body in Gabriele Klein's terminology (Klein 2005: S. 83).

In comparison, Haute Couture tailors make personalized figurines for their costumers, again, privilege comes to help against shame and abjection. One of my informants, who works as a coach for fat people tells me the variation of garments for women of all sizes and thus the need for storage is a actually business problem for plus size fashion stores.

We can conclude that the normalization of the body and the shaming of obesity is not simply a cultural phenomenon. It is a product of the human sciences in combination with the garment industry, and is thus less cultural than infrastructural.

In the 1960s, when the slim ideal was firmly in place, fat people began to organize. In the civil rights movement, community radio played an important role. The New York Times reports on June 5th 1967 that radio speaker Steve Post called for a fat-in in the morning show of community radio station WBAI, which still exists today as Free Speech radio organized in the community radio association Pacifica Radio. The fat-in took place in Central Park with 500 people attending, who according to the report held up plakards depicting Sophia Loren. Also, diet books and fotography of Twiggy were burned (Land 1997), and demonstratively Ice Cream was being eaten.

The fact that distribution media and materialities played an important role in the experience of spontaneous collectivity signifies the importance of a whole range of media

infrastructures as opposed to simply speaking of norms or cultures.

A representative of a fat acceptance association tells me, that she was in the 1990s secretary of a society, a legal entity with over 700 members, 80% Women and 20% men, which had the self-described goal to “fight for the acceptance of fat people and to signal that fat people are being discriminated against”. By the way, half of the members were fat men, and the other half partners or so-called fans. This society failed because it became increasingly difficult to rally all members under the banner of this proclaimed goal. After the closure of the society end of the 1990s, she, like many others, founded another society, which is almost entirely web-based, and which she understands to be more of a service provider. The infrastructure through which body images are circulated has changed dramatically. The public space of the streets, is the first public infrastructure used to display fat pride. Today, these stages have shifted into the digital. They are no longer only circulated by the press, and by its counter-visualities such as flyers, posters, brochures and fanzines. So, today, fat acceptance forums, plus size fashion blogs and countless tumblr imageboards populate the networks.

In most FA-Blogs, the audience is invited to contribute through commenting or by sending images and texts. The webmasters of such blogs install options for the participation of an audience, which is invited to collaborate or to confront. These blogs attract hate speech, which is then sometimes proudly displayed. These sites are neither personal websites or digital diaries, but assemblages and reassemblages of selfies, plus size fashion and discussions on sizeism, lookism etc. There are still today radically political organizations, for example the berlin group “fat up”, who are academically active and also involved in fat studies scholarship.

But in the following, I will concentrate on the networked strategies:

The first strategy of such image-blogs is essentially one of re-normalization. They rely on what Jan Passoth calls syndication technologies (Passoth 2010). In the social media website tumblr, a large number of images can be put together effortlessly by mirroring, compilation. This infrastructures allow fat bloggers patch selfies and professional fashion photography into one continual image stream which melts into an alternative visual world. The performance is very specific: In most selfie-images, the portrayed persons are in the centre of the picture, taking up a comfortable portion of the space. The protagonists often face the camera squarely, in the style of portrait photography, often smiling in a way I experience as self-assertive and often inviting, as if to say: look at me, i'm happy to be

here. Very often, they sport vintage and other creative clothing styles, working on the boundaries between beautiful and not so beautiful by re-working the fit between the body and its garment templates. Some Fashion makers and specialised garment makers have discovered these amateur aesthetics and that there is a market for bigger clothes sizes, effectively taking off pressure from the garment industry. By inviting their costumers and fat activists on the runways of plus size fashion, the image streams of tumblr, hybrids of professional and amateur photography, have found their way back to the central official medium of the garment industry. This strategy operates via a re-coding of sexualized bodies and a re-integration of fat into the biopolitics of happiness: medical practitioners have taken up this proposition and called it “health at every size”. Fat again becomes on of the most law-abiding tissues, following the law of wellness and but from a critical perspective.

A second, related strategy is confessional:

The website, fatfromtheside.tumblr.com, only shows full-body portraits taken from the side (see photograph 5). As in many FA blogs, feelings of shame are explored verbally, but they are also enacted visually on this site. The protagonists of these images describe the feelings of shame that they used to have about their weight and state; feelings that they are showing they have overcome by photographing themselves. Selfies are framed by biographical conversion rhetorics (“I used to angle myself... Not anymore.”). In sites like this, the negotiation of visibility is staged in a complex visual and discursive confessional arrangement.

A fourth strategy is squarely pornographic and fetishistic, but it cannot be dismissed, since it squarely addresses the problem of abjection. The formats used here are mainly video-based: belly play, feeding/stuffing, bloating, and, wonderfully bringing all these together, button busting.

They are not trying on other clothes, but destroy normal clothes with their own unruly bodies and recode the hegemonically abject as desirable. Wether these performances disrupt hegemonic visualities or merely confirm the conventional pornographic gaze remains to be discussed.

Conclusion

The media infrastructures of body image production set the stage for visual, discursive and textile practices. These practices confirm and punctuate the boundary regimes of body

knowledge. The formation of body knowledge is a circular process, which gains its momentum by the collaborative work on objects which establish visibilities, which in turn open up new inclusions and exclusions.

Different visual discursive strategies can be supported by media infrastructures of body images: some seek to re-code and re-normalize fatter bodies, others take a more traditional political stance and refuse to embody new beauty ideals, while still others eroticize the body in a confrontative and lustful way.