



Weighty Matters; Heavy Going

A Review of

The Weight of Images: Affect, Body Image and Fat in the Media

by Katariina Kyrölä

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Reviewed by

Marianne LaFrance 

Psychologists might find *The Weight of Images: Affect, Body Image and Fat in the Media* heavy going, although there are various rewards in sticking with it. Yes, its subject matter is familiar to psychologists—namely, how media images of fat bodies affect viewers—but its conceptual territory is squarely situated in cultural studies rather than in psychological science.

In practice, this means that the rules of evidence are so unlike those with which most psychologists are familiar that the author's "truth claims" cannot be assessed according to the usual criteria. There are no experiments or statistics. Research participants have not been recruited nor have controls been applied. Hypotheses have not been tested nor conclusions tempered by a host of caveats. That is not to say that archival resources have not been investigated, for the author has drawn on multiple sources: newspaper reports, television series, tabloid exposés, comedy routines, films, and pornography. And it is not to say that the conclusions are divorced from data, for the author "reads" her "images" very closely, and her illustrations are vivid and compelling. It is rather to recognize that this book's mode relies on persuasion, conviction, and personal disclosure rather than on empirical verification.

The Weight of Images originated as a PhD thesis by Katariina Kyrölä presented to the Department of Media Studies at the University of Turku in Finland. The core idea is that the media "train" (p. 4) viewers' bodies through a focus on fatness. The author is not interested in the causes or consequences of fatness; instead, she aims to point to the "consequences of popular ways of imaging fat bodies and ways of relating to these images" (p. 10). The ways of relating to these images are especially emotional, what the author calls *affects*, namely fear, disgust, shame, pride, anger, and laughter. The author also deals with changes in body image that emerge through the "corporeality of spectatorship" (p. 3).

The author eschews the familiar social science approach wherein images in the media are analyzed for their predicted unidirectional effects on body image. Rather, her approach is dialectical and recursive. Bodies and images affectively constitute each other. Body image for this author is not the body image in psychological studies of eating disorders but is taken

from feminist philosophy; to wit, "body image refers to the boundary where viewers' histories and shifting positions meet affectively condensed modes of address and structures of audiovisual and textual narration" (p. 19).

Between an introductory chapter and a concluding one, there are five chapters, each of which describes relationships between a particular medium and one or more affects. For example, in the second chapter, Kyrölä argues that obesity is continually promulgated in the news as risk, as threat, as epidemic. Such repetition, she argues is typically cited in the absence of credible or even any factual evidence ("facts" come from conclusions of other reports) and has the effect of creating an image of consensus and credibility. The resulting affect is fear, the outcome of a broad "culture of threat" (p. 40). "This connection between fatness and illness has been so often repeated that fatness has come to be seen as illness in itself" (p. 43).

The next chapter takes on representations of fat people in tabloids and on reality television shows like *The Biggest Loser*. The "before and now" narratives, according to the author, are seductive even though the affects they generate and appeal to in viewers are disgust and shame with the outside possibility of vicarious pride when presented with examples of transformed bodies, which begins the sequence once again. "The ugly-duckling turned swan fantasy . . . that inner selves can only become recognizable through outer visualization—is deeply inscribed into our bodies and psyches" (p. 63).

The fourth chapter turns to laughter at fat bodies in film and on TV. The author notes that the fat female body as a site for comedy is long-standing in popular culture. The fat suit in movies is a familiar contrivance—slim actors posing as fat are comic. The author helpfully describes some audiovisual conventions designed to produce laughter at fat bodies. They include showing close-ups of people's faces watching a fat person in horror, disgust, or awe or the screen-filling close-up of a supposedly big butt. The accompanying music is designed to help viewers get the point.

It is important to note, however, that the author is of several minds about laughter. Laughter reflects not only ridicule. Laughter instigated in the context of film and television comedy can be used to invite viewers into many kinds of engagement with the material. The relationship can be "blasphemous and hurtful or relieving and pleasurable" (p. 198). However, the particular conditions predicting which one will occur are not discussed; it's enough to note that laughter can and often does break the mold.

The final two chapters before the concluding one are graphic and disturbing. In the fifth chapter, "Intruding Explosions: Stretching Bodies and Death," fat bodies are presented as on their way to death or already dead, conditions brought on by the fat bodies themselves. Readers learn, for example, about movie characters (typically in supporting roles) with very fat bodies who literally explode on screen, often but not exclusively in horror films.

Chapter 6 for its part would appear to be about its title, "Affirming Positivity: Desire and Fat Acceptance" (p. 157), but the author does not take refuge in the current attempts in media representations to present positive images of fat bodies. Rather, she sees in "nice," "normal," and "cheerful" images the reiteration and stabilization of hierarchies of body size. And with respect to supersize fat bodies, the only way they are represented in the media as desirable is in pornography and especially in the fetish section of pornography websites and magazines. One form of this is known as *feederism*, which is "intentional weight gain for sexual pleasure" (p. 178).

The Weight of Images is definitely not light reading, but psychologists who have been primarily interested in media representations of thin bodies and not fat ones will find that this focus is revelatory. So, too, will people from public health, sociology, communications, media studies, women's and gender studies and, of course, from cultural studies. It is not that psychologists have not examined media images of obesity (Rothblum, 1999), but thin female bodies in the media have actually captured most of the attention (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002). This book instead throws open media doors to show a profusion of images of fatness and an abundance of ideas about their psychological concomitants. It's not an easy read, but it is worth digesting.

References

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