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The Body as Capital

Understanding Brazilian Culture

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Introduction

While carrying out research on new forms of conjugal life and sexuality among men and women of the urban middle class of Rio de Janeiro¹ over the last decade, I have been constantly surprised by the frequency with which the category of the body made its way into the discourse of my interlocutors.

It is important to recognize that it is not possible to generalize the idea of the body in Brazilian culture as a whole. This idea is present in a very particular segment of the Brazilian middle class and, in particular, among the residents of Rio de Janeiro. This is a very small segment of the Brazilian middle class which can be described as: predominantly whiter than average, heterosexual, college-educated, with a high income according to Brazilian standards, residents of the Southern Zone of Rio de Janeiro and especially of the richest neighborhoods (Leblon, Ipanema, Gávea, Lagoa, Jardim Botânico, Botafogo, Copacabana, Humaitá). These people constitute a small economic, intellectual and cultural elite in Brazil. However, as anthropologist Gilberto Velho (1981) highlights, they are also often the vanguard for behavior in Brazil, given that what they do is valued and imitated by other segments of the population. This group is thus composed of individuals who are imitated by others. Their behavior and their bodies are constantly portrayed as normative in the media and especially on television soap operas etc. These individuals have economic, political, cultural and symbolic power and they can

¹ I started laying out the result of this reflection in my book *Nu & Vestido* (Naked and Dressed, 2002). Focusing on gender relations I have tried to comparatively analyze the desires expectations and affective-sexual stereotypes of men and women from different generations. On the assumption that the worldview and the way of life of this social stratum has a multiplying effect that goes beyond its social boundaries which suggests that it may be instrumental in revealing in broader terms the transformations presently being experienced by Brazilian society, I have tried to pinpoint some general trends in the transformation of values and behavior in this group.

therefore create and reproduce bodies that are socially legitimized. They also shape their bodies in order to be attractive, envied and imitated. We thus cannot say that this group's bodies are "typical Brazilian bodies", but we can say that the body-capital displayed by this group is far and away the most imitated body by Brazilians in general and especially by Brazilian women. When women were presented with the question: what do you envy most in other women? Their most common answer was beauty, with "the body" coming in second, and intelligence in third. When men had to answer what they most envied in other men, the answers were: intelligence, financial power, beauty, and "the body."

Another question made to women was: what most attracts you in a man? The answer: intelligence, "the body", and the way he looks at you. When the question was made to men about women: beauty, intelligence, and "the body." "The body" comes up with even greater emphasis when I asked women: what most attracts you sexually to a man? The answers were: the chest and "the body". For men in relation to women: the buttocks and "the body".

I will not elaborate much on the different weight that the concern with "the body" has among those surveyed, or how they articulate this difference. What matters here is the reoccurrence of this category as an object of desire, something that is admired not only by women but also, expressively, by men. The most interesting of all is that "the body" usually is referred to unaccompanied by an adjective; it is as if it were an autonomous, abstract, independent, entity. Only on one question of the survey in which I invite subjects to describe how would they, hypothetically, put out an announcement for a partner, how would they describe themselves? How would you describe the partner you are looking after? "The body" is accompanied by the words sculpted, well-defined, athletic, healthy, good-looking. Here are some illustrative examples of the "ads":

I am thin, young, pretty, sexy, and blonde. Not to mention very hot!

I am looking for a *sarado* body, a very masculine and sexy man!

I am tall, dark, athletic, well-endowed, intelligent and very caring.

I am looking for a blonde with long hair, thin waist, firm breasts, and a nice butt – a beautiful body and very romantic.

The body also appeared in responses to the questions on envy, admiration, attraction and in the “ads” for a partner. When reacting to what they envy, are attracted to, or admire, “the body” is unaccompanied by adjectives – it is simply “the body.” Only in the ads does the term become predicated. Only then do we become more aware of what this ideal of the body actually consist of when those surveyed are referring abstractly to “the body.” It is not an indistinct body given by nature. It is the *sarado*, worked out, sculpted, healthy body; a paradoxically “cultivated nature”, a culture made natural (Bourdieu, 1987). The culture of beauty and physical appearance, based on certain practices, transforms the natural body into a distinctive body (Bourdieu, 1988): “the body.”

Understanding the Brazilian body

In the 1980s, Freyre, perhaps Brazil’s most well known anthropologist and as ever a pioneer and polemist, set out to reflect upon the female body in Brazil and its transformations. In his book *Modos de homem, modas de mulher* (1987) Freyre asserted that:

“It could be said of women, regarding the fashions that govern their dresses, shoes, hair styles, that they tend to leap on the bandwagon. That is, they conform to what is most uniform in fashion. But another feature of female cunning is the ability to react against this form of absolute uniformity by acting according to personal traits that do not submit to the impositions by this or that fashion. In this regard, one must recognize the right of the Brazilian brunette to rebuke northern-European fashions aimed at blonde, white women.” (p.33)

For Freyre, actress Sônia Braga epitomized the Brazilian ideal of beauty: short, dark skin, black, long, wiry hair, a slim waistline, large buttocks, and small breasts. He critically noted that this ideal of the body and beauty were at peril due to the impact of “north-Europeanization or albinization,” or, simply put, “yankee” influence. This had become clear with the success and popularity attained by beautiful women such as the winner of the Miss Brazil contest of 1969 and later by actress Vera Fischer: tall, fair-skinned, blonde, straight-haired (“Arian straight,” as Freyre would say), and a less curvaceous body.

This new body for the Brazilian woman, an imitation or “aping” (as he liked to say) of foreign models, has become the standard for beauty. As Veja

magazine commented: “Brazilian women don’t get older, they become blonder,” which has made them one of the largest consumers of blonde hair dye in the world. Vera Fischer – still a paragon of beauty – has been joined by others: Xuxa, the host of a children’s TV show and, more recently, top model Giselle Bündchen, as models – icons of “north-europeanizing”, according to Freyre, – whose looks are coveted and imitated by Brazilian women.

Freyre had always glorified the body of the Brazilian woman. He extolled “miscegenation,” a “body of well-balanced contrasts” and proposed a “Brazilian consciousness,” suggesting that Brazilians should follow fashion trends more adequate to its tropical climate, instead of “passively and sometimes grotesquely pursuing fashions that are altogether European or North American.” He had in mind that this attitude should apply to all things falling under the rule of fashion: from commodities such as clothes, shoes, jewelry, hair styles, perfumes to the behavior of women, that is, the sway in the walk, the proper way to smile, embrace, and kiss. To this list I would add one feature: the body. Freyre was aware that fashions and trends did not affect only clothes or hair styles. As much as these, fashions also affect ways of thinking, feeling, believing, imagining and so on. Moreover, these subjective fashions could influence other fashions. He pointed out the excesses incurred by those Brazilian women more anxious to follow fashions, especially “the youngest, for whom new fashions would always come to their rescue in their battle against aging” (p. 25).

Already two decades ago, Freyre was aware of the fact that the creation of new articles in women’s fashion corresponded to “a desire borne by these not so young ladies: that of rejuvenation” (p. 25). According to him, the truth was that: “there are new fashions competing to be the one that carries out the task of rejuvenating such appearances, notably favored by cosmetics, dyes and plastic surgery.”

The anthropologist thus showed that fashions arise in unison with a central concern for Brazilian women: staying young. This concern has increased enormously in the last decades, bringing along new female models to be emulated: they are increasingly younger, prettier, and thinner.

Marcel Mauss (1974) argued that individuals of different cultures build their bodies and behavior through a process that he called “prestigious imitation”. According to Mauss, the set of habits, customs, beliefs, and traditions that characterize a culture also refer to the body. Therefore, it can be said that

there is a cultural construction of the body, which involves the valuing or de-valuing of certain attributes and behaviors so that each society has its typical body. This body, which may vary historically and culturally, is acquired by members of society through “prestigious imitation.” Individuals imitate acts, behaviors, and bodies that are successful and prestigious in their culture. In the Brazilian case, the most successful and “imitable” women today are actresses, models, singers, and TV hosts. All of them have their bodies as the principal or at least one of their most important assets.

An example of what Gilberto Freyre was trying to put his finger on was the controversy caused by the Miss Brazil 2005 contest. Journalist Jamari França (Globo Online, 15/04/2005), in an article entitled “In search of the Brazilian woman in Miss Brazil,” noticed that: “[the contest] could have well taken place in a European country. They [the contenders] were presented in bikinis and made their appearance in the same order as the states they hailed from . . . One by one came out the contestants, fair skinned as if untouched by the sun that shines over the river beaches of the Amazon river . . . Even Miss Bahia had the white skin of a European descendant . . . As they approached the south the sight of yet more blue and green eyed blonde or brunettes no longer caused surprise. The point is not to turn prejudice upside down and aim it against whites but the incontestable truth is that the contest comes short of reflecting the diversity of types among Brazilian women. Many times when a new contestant entered stage we had the impression she had already done her round. This is how much they looked alike. Our mixtures that result in green eyed *mulatas*, Indian and Negro beauties not afraid to embrace their own race [sic], can leave those other women in the dust. One gets the feeling that these contests are open only to the elites of each state, small clubs, excluding women who truly represent our diversity. Brazilian women are world renown for their beauty, a wealth I daresay – however excessively patriotic this might sound – no other country can claim for itself. It is a pity not all of them make it up to the runway. There is not enough of Brazil in Miss Brazil.”

The work of French anthropologist Stéphane Malysse (2002) is another interesting source for discussing the uniqueness of the Brazilian body. While comparing the body of the Brazilian woman with that of the French, Malysse came to the conclusion that “whereas in France the production of personal appearance remains focused essentially on clothes, in Brazil it appears that

the body is center stage in dressing strategies. French women try dressing up with clothes whose colors, patterns, and shapes that artificially restructure their bodies, hiding some parts (particularly the buttocks and stomach) due to their form; Brazilian women are at ease exhibiting their bodies and frequently render clothes into nothing else than a means of enhancing them; clothes are, ultimately, no more than an ornament" (p. 110). Malysse emphasizes the tendency French adolescents have to dress like their mothers. Thus, in France, clothes are part of a process of ageing of appearance. In Brazil, quite to the contrary, the tendency is to dress as a young person until a much older age. It is the mother who borrows her daughter's clothes. In some families I researched in Rio de Janeiro, three generations – daughter, mother, and grandmother – would shop at the same stores and share clothes. The body and young looks in Brazil constitute a form of capital. (Bourdieu, 1987). Analyzing Rio de Janeiro, Malysse shows that the distinction between beachwear, casual wear, and sportswear tends to disappear: "clothes play around with the parts that can be hidden/exposed without demanding much further covering in the transition from the beach to the streets. Here, the feminine figure is not camouflaged by suits, overcoats or other more generous fittings; quite the contrary it is emphasized: women wear skirts and pants with low waistlines, emphasizing hips and buttocks, putting them into relief, into center stage . . . In Rio, clothes are used above all else to emphasize the female figure, to showcase it; the waist is marked, the bust is projected . . . These females bodies that have been molded into shape and sculpted in gyms can only support clothes that show the body under the cloth" (pp. 112-113).

In Brazil, and particularly in Rio de Janeiro, the sculpted body untouched by unwanted signs of age (wrinkles, age lines, stretch marks, cellulite, and spots) and excesses (fat, flaccidity) is the only one that, even without clothes, is decently dressed (Goldenberg and Ramos, 2002). In this sense, it might well be that, not only is the body more important than clothes, it is itself the true clothing; the body – and not clothes – is what must be displayed, molded, manipulated, sculpted, sown together, chosen, built, embellished, imitated. It is the body that falls in and out of fashion. Clothes, in this case, are merely an accessory feature in the exhibition of this tuned (and toned) to fashion body.

According to American anthropologist Alexander Edmonds (2002), in the last two decades, Brazil has experienced a boom in the "beauty industry." Employment in the beauty services sector has almost doubled, and women in

Brazil spend a hefty amount of their salaries with “beautification.” Brazil is the world’s fourth largest market for cosmetics. *Veja* magazine (July 14, 1999) reported that “nine out ten girls in Brazil want to be a model.” In January 2001, another piece in *Veja* titled “Brazil, empire of the scalpel” informed that Brazil had surpassed the United States as the country with the largest number of plastic surgeries per capita.

How do we explain this boom in the beauty industry and the ever growing popularity of plastic surgery? Edmonds cites structural changes in working conditions, such as the increase of the number of women in the workplace and the greater competition and discrimination which has followed. These conditions have stimulated both “vanity” and “fear of growing older.” Also, competition in the sexual and dating market has been extremely unforgiving for women past 30 years and contributes to explain the increase in plastic surgeries in Brazil as well (Goldenberg, 2006). Plastic surgeons tend to favor “objective” explanations for the surge in their specialty. Many of them attribute the increase to innovations in surgery techniques, the renown achieved by Brazilian surgeons, the many payment options and in some cases the climate: high temperatures lead Brazilians to expose their bodies on beaches almost all year long.

Recent data shows that the Brazilian woman is the front-runner in the quest for the perfect body (Edmonds, 2002); Time magazine brought attention to this fact in the edition whose cover featured Carla Perez, a dancer, with the following caption: “The plastic surgery craze: Latin American women are sculpting their bodies as never before – California style. Is this cultural imperialism?” *Veja* magazine followed-up with a cover headline of its own: “New Faces: as surgery costs decrease, fixes are available for almost anything and great doctors are at work; Brazil has become the first in the world in plastic surgery.” According to the Brazilian Society of Plastic Surgery, Brazilians, especially Brazilian women, have become, close behind the Americans, the people who most undergo plastic surgery in the world. Women compose the large majority. Between 2002 and 2003 there has been a 43% increase in the number of young people who have undergone surgery – 15% of them are under 18, something that drew the attention of the International Plastic Surgery Society. But what makes Brazilian people special in this area is their impetuosity when it comes to deciding to undergo this type of surgery and how quickly they are able to decide. There are three main motivations behind the

decision: toning down the undesired effects of ageing, correcting physical defects, and sculpting a perfect body.

In 2008, according to numbers presented by the Brazilian Plastic Surgery Society, 629,000 plastic surgeries were conducted in Brazil: 33% of these surgeries were breast surgeries and 20% liposuctions. Women compose the large majority: 88%. In the last ten years, there has been a 300% increase in breast implants for teenage girls. Brazil is also ranked second in the use of Botox and breast implants, trailing only the United States. In the last 12 years silicone implants have increased 360%. In the last ten years, there has been a 300% increase in breast implants for teenage girls.

A worldwide research conducted by Unilever showed that 63% of Brazilian women would like to have plastic surgery (this was the largest percentage, Americans, for example, came in fourth, 25% wanted to have plastic surgery). 89% of women stated there is something in their bodies they would like to change; 7 out of 10 women in Brazil say they will stay at home rather than going out when they are feeling ugly (they will not go to the beach, to parties or even to work). Out of the ten researched countries, Brazil surfaced as the one in which women are most concerned about conserving a pretty face, healthy-looking skin, a fit body, and a sexy image. It is also the largest consumer of nail and hair-dying products as well as body moisturizers. Another impressive figure: 58% of Brazilian women declared that they would not think twice before undergoing a procedure, were there no charge for plastic surgery. It is not surprising then that Brazil comes second only to the United States – where women have an income fourteen times larger – as the country with the most plastic surgeons. Among all those surveyed, Brazilian women are the ones who claimed they felt most fat, chubby, and unsexy. Only 2%, said they thought they were pretty.

Brazil is the country in which fashion models are valued the most. It is important to remember that the world's best-paid model is Brazilian.² Brazilian models have run into considerable success in the international stage, making modeling one of the most sought after careers for children and teenagers. Once again I refer to the concept of “prestigious imitation” coined by Marcel Mauss. In Brazil, models are imitable for they are prestigious, successful, and rich.

² Brazilian model Giselle Bündchen is the 16th richest woman in the entertainment according to Forbes magazine. Gisele earned US\$ 70 million in 2006.

Their principal asset is a lean, young, and beautiful body.

Another fact worth pointing out is that data compiled by the Unilever shows that Brazil is world's largest per capita consumer of weight-loss medication. Brazil, according to the UN, is also number one in appetite inhibitors. 12.5 out of 1000 inhabitants take appetite inhibitors on a daily basis, whereas in the United States, ranked fourth, this figure is only 4.8. Overdoses, common in Brazil, are dangerous and may lead to panic attacks, increased aggressiveness and even hallucination, respiratory problems, convulsions, coma, and death.

Pierre Bourdieu (1999) described "male domination" as that which entices men to be strong, potent, and virile, which probably explains why the men I have researched value height, strength, chest size and penis size), while women tend to claim to be delicate, submissive, and overshadowed (which corresponds to the model of thin women now predominant). In Porto Alegre, which is the capital of the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul, from where most internationally prominent Brazilian models come from, 13% of female teenagers are either anorexic or bulimic. One of the causes of these illnesses, according to specialists, is the "weight-loss frenzy." Due to a combination of psychological problems and, not least, social pressures, teenagers develop from constant dieting to an uncontrollable refusal to eat and exaggerated exercising. But anorexia seems to have evolved from a pathological condition to a "life style." Countless personal websites pitch "pro-anorexia" and "pro-bulimia" movements and hand out tips for those who want to follow this life style of absolute thinness.³

Bourdieu (1999) showed that men tend to be unhappy with parts of their bodies they consider "too small" while women are critical towards parts of their body that seem "too big." He thought that male domination, which constitutes women as symbolic objects, ends up subjecting them to a state of constant insecurity in relation to their bodies. In other words, they are placed in a situation of symbolic dependence: they exist first and foremost through, and for, the viewing of others as receptive objects, both attractive and available. Femininity is expected from them, which is to say they are always supposed to be wearing a smile, welcoming, attentive, submissive, discrete, and contained even to the point of dullness. In this case, leanness contributes to

3 In 2006, the death of six teenagers as a result of anorexia made headlines nationwide.

this conception of what “being a woman” is. Under the keen eye of the public, women find themselves pressured to experience constantly the distance that separates the real body – to which they are inevitably attached – and the ideal body they indefatigably pursue.

Nevertheless, according to Bourdieu, the structure imposes its weight on both sides of the relation of domination/submission, that is to say it exerts itself also against the dominators, who “are dominated by their domination,” leading them to “desperately and pathetically attempt in their triumphant unconsciousness to do what every man has to do in order to live up to his childish ideal of manhood.” Thus the obsession with height, physical strength, power, virility, and particularly, penis size, can be seen as an example of domination to which the dominator is subjected to.

French philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky (2000) analyzes the “beauty-thinness-youth fever” which implacably tyrannizes the condition of French women. For this thinker, “the obsession with weight, the proliferation of diets and of body sculpting activities, which requires the reduction of fat surrounding the thighs and even the modeling of noses, testify to the normative power of models, how a greater desire for aesthetic conformity frontally collides with the individualistic ideal and its exigencies as per the differentiation of subjects” (p. 143). Lipovetsky adds that, even if contradictorily, the imposition of the ideal of individual autonomy is followed by the requirement of abiding to social models of the body.

I return then to Freyre (2002) and his idea of “opposites in equilibrium” or the “equilibrium of antagonisms.” The anthropologist used to say that in Brazil it is possible to find the “the balance between deep-rooted and traditional realities: sadism and masochism; masters and slaves; doctors and illiterates; European-minded individuals and others culturally influenced by African and native Indian traditions.” “Perhaps nowhere else” he said “is it possible to witness with so much liberty the encounter, intercommunication, and even the harmonious fusion of different, or even formerly antagonistic, traditions as in Brazil” (p. 123).

Freyre’s notion of “opposites in equilibrium” sheds additional light to the paradox identified by Lipovetsky. In Brazil, the development of individualism and the intensification of social pressures over the body go hand in hand. If the body of Brazilian women became emancipated from its more ancient form of servitude – whether it be related to sexual/reproductive functions, or

to dressing habits – it is also currently subjected to more regular aesthetic coercions, more imperative and more anxiety producing than before. We thus live in “an equilibrium of antagonisms”: one of the moments of greatest female independence and liberty also happens to be a time in which there is a elevated degree of control over the body and the appearance of Brazilian women.

In his classic work *Casa Grande & Senzala*, published in 1933, Gilberto Freyre analyzes the prominent role played by the body in the shaping of Brazilian identity since the beginning of colonial times as soon as the hypersexed Portuguese colonizer started lusting for and interacting with the nude bodies of Indian women, or the strong and beautiful bodies of slaves. Therefore, as Freyre has already shown, the body and an exacerbated sexuality are crucial elements in the construction of a Brazilian identity.

The picture of Brazil as a tropical and sexual paradise, an image shared by foreigners and Brazilians alike, still survives. This image is reinforced by the increasingly more frequent reports of Brazil as a sex-tourism destination. Several surveys have given Brazilians the title of sexual champions (or runners-up) in terms of frequency and performance (which is measured according to number of partners, frequency or duration of foreplay). This image is also reinforced by pictures of almost naked and free bodies at the beach and during Carnival, especially bodies of mulattas and black women, like the Brazilian Carnival icon Valéria Valenssa, called Mulata Globeleza because her naked body is exhibited during the Carnival on the biggest TV in Brazil: Rede Globo.

The Washington Post from June 2009 affirmed that Brazil’s where more people watch television than in any other country save Great Britain, soap operas which have become very much a part of the fabric of Brazilian society have a lasting effect by influencing lifestyle choices. It is indeed hard to think of contemporary Brazil without thinking of its soap operas.

The Inter-American Development Bank released two studies this past year that found a link between the consumption of novelas produced by Rede Globo, the network that dominates the industry, to declining fertility rates and rising divorce rates in Brazil. The fertility rate in Brazil fell sharply over the past half-century, from more than six children per family in 1960 to about two by 2000, the study noted. This drop is comparable to that of China, but without any government family-planning measures. An analysis of 115 Globo novelas between 1965 and 1999 showed that 72 percent of main female characters had no children, and 21 percent had only one child. The novelas

portrayed the small, beautiful, white, healthy, urban, middle and upper middle class consumerist family. Novelas have been a powerful medium through which the small family has been idealized.

The most important Rede Globo novela “Viver a Vida”/Live the Life, which started September 14, 2009, has a black/brown woman as a protagonist for the first time in Brazil. In the soap opera, she plays the role of a beautiful and very famous Brazilian top model. Every newspaper and magazine emphasizes the fact how important this change is to black people in Brazil, especially to black woman. Even now Brazilian black woman are still associated with Carnival, prostitution and as house maids. However, nowadays a Brazilian black woman can also be a famous actress and possess the most imitated body in Brazil.

The Brazilian body: liberty or slavery?

Less than a century ago, despite the tropical heat, men in Brazil donned long-coated suits, vests, stiff collars, stockings, and women typically covered their body up to the neck with black or grey clothes. Exposed anatomy nowadays seems to confirm the idea that we live in times of unprecedented moral slackness. Brazil is internationally known as a haven for sexual freedom. The increasing flow of sexual tourists and sexual laborers of both genders further confirm Brazil’s image in the popular imagination. Brazil is seen as a sexual paradise for foreigners scavenging for boys and girls they can feast on during their vacations.

However a closer look at what seems to be the freeing of the Brazilian body shows that there is not only evidence of a surge in codes of obscenity and decency but also signs of an entirely new morality which beneath a sheen of physical and sexual liberation preaches conformity to a certain aesthetic standard, conventionally called “good shape” of “fitness.”

In his book *The Civilizing Process* (1990) Norbert Elias provides the basic elements needed to reflect upon this aesthetic moral at a moment in which it seems that the bodily freedom achieved by women is something unprecedented. In order to sustain his hypothesis that, during the process of the civilizing of customs, there are moments of apparent relaxation in contexts in which a high degree of control is expected – that is, within a “civilized” standard of behavior – he gives the example of bathing suits. According to

him, greater exhibition required greater self-control on the part of women than when decorum kept them covered.

In this line of thought, one might argue that the apparent liberation of Brazilian bodies insinuated by its current ubiquity in advertising, media, and day-to-day interactions hides a “civilizing process”. Under this new morality – “being in shape” -, the exhibition of the body requires individuals not only the control of their impulses, but also some measure of (self) control of their own physical appearance. Decorum, once restricted to the non-exhibition of naked bodies is now concentrated in obedience to the new code of rules for their exhibition.

But it is not just actresses and models who suffer under the stringencies of having to be in shape. Due to the influence exerted by television, publicity, newspaper, and magazine articles, the quest for perfection ends up afflicting “simple mortals” who are bombarded daily by images of perfect bodies and faces, that may be manipulated by computer programs capable of eliminating the slightest imperfections.

It could be said that the underlying rules of body exhibition belong to a strictly aesthetic domain. In order to achieve the ideal body and to be able to show it off comfortably and properly, warn the female and male fitness magazines, it is necessary to invest in will power and self-discipline. Self-control of appearance is increasingly stimulated. Among the many benefits promised: contoured abdominal muscles, hard and cellulite-free buttocks. All of this is within reach as long as one devotes herself and absorbs the litany of information offered up by magazines. In this context, even notions of what is decent or indecent, regarding dress undergoes change. The use of a garment that leaves visible a certain part of the body or even the body as a whole is frequently not considered as indecent as the exhibition of an “unfit” body and the use of clothes that do not match it. Brazilian fashion designers clearly have an aesthetic standard in mind when they explore transparencies, cleavages, forms that highlight and showcase parts of the body explicitly. It is up to those who wear their creations to decide whether or not to fit into this standard or simply not even to try. If they choose to follow the advice of fashion consultants they have to resort to some tricks (models, colors, designs) that may disguise their “forms.”

It can be said that according to “good shape/fitness” morality, a “sculpted body” a “well-tended body” unscathed by unwanted marks (wrinkles, stretch

marks, cellulite, spots) and free from excesses (fat, flaccidity) is the only one that, even undressed, is decently dressed. As Courtine (1995) reminds us with his analysis of the American male body in the late nineteenth century, “the male body, if muscular, is never truly naked” (p. 96).

The example of bathing suits, cited by Elias (1990), allows us to consider the force with which this morality imposes itself in places such as Rio de Janeiro, where beaches and high temperatures favor the shedding of clothes, so much so that the city has become noted both in Brazil and internationally for the casualness, liberty, and sensuousness of the bodies being exposed in the sun. However, a more attentive look or simply perusing through newspapers and magazines is enough to realize that *carioca* body culture has much more rigid norms than meet the eye. Based on the multiple journalistic pieces with tips, plans, and suggestions for appearance improvement and physical fitness it could be said that there is a seasonal variation (Mauss, 1974) concerning attitudes towards the body. If in the fall we must make sure to repair our hair and skin from the damage caused by sun, in the winter we should be following the proper dermatological treatment for age lines, stretch marks, acne, and spots. The winter is also the ideal time for liftings, liposuctions, eye and nose surgeries, and breast implants. Spring means it’s time to “catch up,” “make up for time lost” and get into shape for the summer. “For those who dream about entering summer in shape there is no time to lose. To be fit come December, when the hottest season of the year starts, it is time to start moving” (O Globo, 09/16/1999). This is the time of the year when gyms and fitness centers are most crowded.⁴ Those who commit to “seasonal workouts,” mostly women, want to achieve good shape before the summer. They want to “harden up” and “get rid of the fat” so that they can pass the implacable “sand test.” “Everyone wants to look tight and well-defined. Here in Rio there is enormous pressure for a beautiful body: with the heat everyone lives almost naked. And no one wants to look indecent without clothes,”⁵ says the owner of a well-known gym in Rio de Janeiro. Polemical playwright Nelson Rodrigues, many decades ago, had noticed a shift in the aesthetic standard for women and his phrasing of it has become quite well-known: “There are

4 “During this time of year, the amount of people working out at fitness clubs increases 40%” (O Globo, 11/29/1998).

5 “Last summer call for the “sand test”: seasonal gym-goers flock to gym in order to work out and not disappoint at the beach” (O Globo, 01/31/1999).

scarcely any fat women to be seen in the Rio landscape, there are no longer monumental waistlines. One of these days a midwife bitterly confessed to me: ‘narrow hips.’ There, in that succinct accusation, was the judgment of an epoch.” Such a consideration takes us back to Gilberto Freyre (1986) and his comments about “those enchanting female shanks” which represented in Brazilian culture not only an aesthetic signification but also a moral judgment – women possessing such traits were worthy and dignified. Once “dignified,” “virtuous,” as Freyre described them, these prominences seem to be gradually losing appreciation in a very particular segment of the Brazilian middle class and, in particular, among the residents of the Southern Zone of Rio de Janeiro.

Fat is the number one enemy in the battle for fitness – it is almost a disease,⁶ especially for those who want to show off a “buff” body, the icon of workout culture. In this culture, adept at judging, classifying, and ranking people based on physical appearance, not being fat is not enough – one must also cultivate a firm, toned, and muscular body, bearing no sign of slacking off (Lipovetsky, 2000). Fat and flaccidity are considered a tangible symbol of lack of discipline, laziness, messiness, almost a moral shortcoming reflected on the unwillingness to work on oneself. It is interesting to think about the relationship between the *sarado* or “fit” body (in Portuguese the term “sarado” is used to refer to the fit body, its original meaning is antithetical to disease, i.e. when one is cured from an illness he/she is *sarado*, that is, cured. The quest for a *sarado* body is an instance of reproduction of the symbolic battle waged against those who do not conform to the aesthetic standard. As the author emphasizes, societies are capable of driving its components, even if symbolically, to death – by instilling in them a dread for living, making them depressed, making them have nervous breakdowns and by consuming their energies, marginalizing them socially, depriving them from affective reference points “disintegrating them in such a way that in time death itself seems only a mere biological detail (p. 94).⁷

6 Fischler (1995) states that one of the hallmarks of our time is “lipophobia,” the obsession with weight and an almost manic aversion to obesity.

7 “The obsession with perfect form and permanent dissatisfaction with physical attributes may be considered symptoms of a disease called Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD). Those who have the disease are unwilling to accept small imperfections and fantasize about nonexistent defects. For them, anything such as thigh fat, facial spots, or not so prominent muscles tend to become a source of angst and shame. As a result they become addicted to exercise or slavishly submit themselves to diets and surgeries

In a context in which beauty and physical fitness are no longer perceived as “the work of Divine Nature” and starts being conceived as the result of “work” performed on oneself, individuals have thrust upon them the absolute responsibility for their physical appearance. Denise Sant’Anna (1995) notes that, whereas in the first half of the twentieth century, when “Nature” used to be spelled with a capital “N” and it was considered dangerous to interfere with the body in the name of personal objectives and whims ingrained by fashion, today, liberty to act upon one’s own body is incessantly stimulated and reinforced. Through the regular practice of exercise, proper eating habits, aesthetic surgery, cutting edge skin treatment, and cosmetics, aesthetic perfection is now assumed to be attainable.

In this process in which responsibility over the body is placed upon the individual based on the principal of autonomy of building the self, the Brazilian media, and, most of all, advertising have a key roll. The body has become “the most beautiful commodity” (Baudrillard, s/d) and advertising, once limited to bringing attention to a product and extolling its many virtues, nowadays serves, chiefly, to promote consumerism as a way of life. It has created a product of its own: the consumer, perpetually restless and unfulfilled in relation to his appearance (Lasch, 1983). The winners here are, among others, the cosmetics,⁸ plastic surgery,⁹ and working out markets.¹⁰

The images flashed by advertising are not the only ones with the power to engender the obsession with appearance in Brazil. Other mediums (soap operas, TV shows, magazine and article pieces) can also, many times under a

and try to hide at any cost certain parts of their bodies. In its most critical stage, the patient may develop depression, social phobias, and eating disorders, in addition to compulsive behavior.” (Veja, 11/22/2000). See also Pope; Phillips; Olivardia (2000).

8 “Boosting the self-esteem of Brazilians has been fueling the expansion for the last 6 years at a rate of almost 20% yearly of the cosmetics, perfume, and personal hygiene industry. This sector’s growth, whose sales are beyond the R\$ 7.5 billion mark, is four times faster than the average for the production sector.” (Época, 05/21/2001).

9 According to Brazilian Plastic Surgery Society, Brazilians are ones who most undergo plastic surgery. In 2000, for example, 350,000 people underwent at least one aesthetic procedure. This represents 207 people out of 100,000. In the United States, who have traditionally led this statistic, the ratio is 85 out of 100,000. In European countries, such as England and Germany, the average ratio was 40 – a fifth of the Brazilian figure. (Veja, 01/17/2001).

10 “Today there are 4,800 gyms and fitness clubs registered in the national association which represents this industry. However, some estimates say this figure should actually be doubled. The business has allured important businessmen, investment funds, and, now, international chains which are a step away from touching down in the promising Brazilian market.” (Veja, 02/14/2001).

seemingly not self-interested front, sell what Pierre Bourdieu called a “well-founded illusion.” These are illusions that, grounded on the scientific discourse of references (doctors, psychologists, nutritionists, aestheticians, physical education, among others), promise aesthetic perfection, as long as their guidelines (albeit many times contradictory) are rigorously followed.

If during many centuries people were led to believe that their bodies did not truly belong to them, today, after a long period of Puritanism, people have been coaxed to believe that the body is the central object of existence and affection. The new antidote for aging quickly becomes a must-have to all. As put by Baudrillard (n.d.), the cult of hygiene, dieting, and therapy that surround the fixation with youth, elegance, virility, femininity, the cares, rituals, and sacrificial practices connected to “the Myth of Pleasure that encloses it – everything today is witness to the fact that the body has been transformed into an object of salvation. In this moral and ideological function it has literally substituted the soul” (p. 136).

The cult of beauty and physical form is transmitted evangelically (Wolf, 1992), creating a system of belief as powerful as any religious one, strong enough to take hold of the habits of a significant portion of society: the Brazilian urban middle class.

“The body” is therefore covered with distinctive signs. Its public exhibition and denuding would suggest a more free body but in fact, as I have already suggested, it remains bound to social norms internalized by subjects.

It can be said that “the body,” and all it symbolizes, stimulates in Brazilians conformity to a life style and to a set of rules of behavior. Obedience to these norms is rewarded by the sense of belonging to a “superior” group. “The body” is a value that simultaneously identifies one with a group while distinguishing him/her. This “body” which is worked out, sculpted, chiseled, defined today constitutes a sign of a certain human virtue. Under the morality of “good shape” and “fitness,” working the body is an act pregnant with signification. “The body,” more than the clothes, becomes a symbol which consecrates and makes visible differences among social groups. It embodies and synthesizes three interrelated concepts: 1) the body as an insignia (or emblem) of the effort each one has made to control, imprison, and domesticate the body in order to achieve “good shape”; 2) the body as a fashion icon (or brand), which symbolizes the superiority of those who possess it; and 3) the body as a prize (medal), deservedly earned by those

who were able to achieve a more “civilized” physique through their hard work and sacrifice.

My research suggests that among middle class *cariocas* and indeed among poorer Brazilians, the social capital literally incorporated in the body is of enormous importance. For the former, the body is a source of distinction and success. For the latter, it may be viewed as a vehicle for social mobility. For all of them, a cared for body is considered fundamental in the markets of love, marriage, sex and, yes, employment.

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