

85 - BODY, HEALTH AND FASHION: THE FEMALE IMPRISONMENT

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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between body and health is a recurring theme of studies, papers, and articles from journals and all types of magazines, such as mass circulation and female-targeted magazines. Their relationship with fashion, however, is still a subject rarely addressed, perhaps because this is a very recent area of research in Brazil, since the first college of fashion in the country was created in São Paulo in 1987.

If in the 19th century there was a “garment medicine”, which sought to remedy the problems that fashion brought to women, currently there is “aesthetic medicine”, which seeks to correct the problems that women believe to have so that they can conform to fashion trends. Therefore, this article aims to analyze the relationships between female body, health and fashion.

FASHION AND HEALTH

Women's health has been tightly controlled by fashion, mainly through the influence of the corset, which was introduced in the 16th century and became a compulsory piece of women's apparel until the 19th century. It tapered the silhouette, shaped the waistline and accentuated the breasts, representing the ideal of femininity at the time. Despite being harmful to health, the consequences of wearing this garment were accepted by women, who, in general, did not rebel against its discomfort for several centuries.

Since ancient times, women's bust and waist had some type of support, usually strips of cloth tightly laced to the body. In the Middle Ages, women began wearing garments of stiffened material laced even tighter to the body, but it was from the 16th century of the modern age that the form of corset that we know today began to be defined.

Until the 18th century it was believed that the body was a volume of circulating fluids that, once stagnant, would lead to disease and death. The corset was one of the pieces of female clothing most prone to these woes, since it was a source of oppression and distortion of the breasts, in addition to negatively affecting breastfeeding (RAINHO, 2001).

The “garment medicine” also condemned the bustles, high heels, crinolines, and any accessory that could harm the female body and, consequently, affect its basic function, motherhood.

Corsets, however, were deemed acceptable for older women, because, according to a thesis presented at the Medical School of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1855:

When women wither with age, and their once beautiful body shape becomes bigger, the doctor may even recommend the corset, especially when dealing with a lady who has given birth several times and whose breasts, becoming larger and flaccid, might interfere with walking, even causing her pain, and somehow mask the grace inherent in her sex. [our translation] (RIBEIRO apud RAINHO, 2001, p. 126).

Brazilian doctors condemned the adoption of European fashion by Brazilian women because of its health hazards, but mainly due to the perverse effect of fashion that, according to doctors, made women vain and more preoccupied with the worldly life than with the family and children (RAINHO, 2001).

Similarly, cosmetics were considered the greatest enemies of women, because, in addition to spoiling the skin (soap and water was all that women needed), they were “the tricks of courtesans and actresses [...] and of some old women who want to present themselves as girls.” [our translation] (RAINHO, 2001, p. 128).

Fashion and its tricks were considered the “moral infection of society”, since they externally manifested and socialized the woman at a time when her role should be limited to that of wife and mother. Fashionable women were “evil women”, since:

She only thinks of jewelry and luxury, dresses to rival those of other women, in ruining her husband, adorning her head (acting so foolish), going out, dancing and enjoying the bustling life of the rooms, which then fills her with boredom and weakens her feelings. [our translation] (Revista O Sexo Feminino apud RAINHO, 2001, p. 131).

However, doctors could not avoid the allure of fashion and failed to deter women from following the fashion, which became one of the most visible manifestations of women's externalization. For women, fashion represented the possibility of self-affirmation within a group; men, in contrast, had other ways to distinguish themselves in society, such as proper education and schooling.

Over the years, women gradually freed themselves both socially and literally (the corset was no longer used in the first decades of the 20th century), since clothes became more comfortable.

However, in the 1960s and 1970s, the role of women underwent a major change and their true liberation began with the use of contraceptives, entry into the labor market, etc., and gradually the relationship woman/fashion/health started changing.

With regard to the aesthetics of the body, we can observe that women are currently failing to target their health in favor of physical fitness. Many women are more concerned with appearance (being young and beautiful) than with health, as if their appearance was crucial to approval within the different social groups in which they live.

In most modern societies, physical beauty can be characterized as a social fact, since there is, notoriously, a collective search for a beautiful body, despite the different constructions of this body.

According to Andrade (2003), the image of what health is and what beauty is underwent a shift in the 20th century in relation to the concepts presented in earlier periods. Gaining a healthy and beautiful body became an individual goal to be achieved. To do so, an intentional self-control exercise is necessary, involving willpower, restraint and constant vigilance. Andrade (2003) illustrates this search by observing that, during the last decades of the 20th century, sugar consumption decreased significantly. Moreover, on supermarket shelves (and on the table of a significant portion of the population who feels challenged by the discourse of good shape) light and diet products that promise a healthier body appeared, since fat and sugar have long been regarded as harmful to the desired physical shape.

The act of eating, which was once one of the greatest pleasures of life, is now constantly monitored in order to avoid

unnecessary consumption of calories. In addition to this restriction, a need to “burn” calories through physical activities in gyms has emerged, a requirement that culturally falls more on the woman's body.

The pressure for an aesthetic body shape

Since the cult of the body is increasingly present in the society, the beauty industry has improved over time by introducing technological innovations so that men and women can get closer and closer to “perfection”. The number of gyms has tripled over the last decade, and every day new methods arise to suit every lifestyle.

According to Vargas (1998), those who do not share the complicity with physical fitness in a gym certainly do it in other ways, such as in what they wear, diets, plastic surgery, etc.. Our current code of (social) ethics is the aesthetics, since it eventually assumes a role of social “tie” by establishing that a “well-toned female body” is worth more than a “brilliant mind”.

Women aestheticize their own body more than men, as for their clothes, makeup and accessories, sculpting the body by exercise and diet. By physical activity and body control, women construct their image and set the reading of their own female identity.

According to Queiroz (2000), several characteristics related to male and female sexual attractiveness have been highlighted by fashion as well as by plastic surgery – breast implants, liposuction, etc..

Another reason that causes frustration in people is the overvaluation of thinness. The fashion market produces its clothing collection based on the bodies of models that are increasingly tall and thin, ignoring that most of the people parading through the streets do not have the body of a model. In this context, women are the ones who suffer most, becoming obsessed with thinness and dieting, which, in most cases, is unsuccessful. Ullmann (2004) states that the effects of diets based on the use of amphetamines, laxatives, diuretics and even gastric bypass surgery increase the number of cases of anorexia, bulimia, and depression.

On the other hand, it is important to note that clothing is an extension of the body. Thus, clothes can temporarily represent what the body wants to communicate and easily shape the desires of the individual. These temporary oscillations are called fashion. Castilho and Martins define the relationship between fashion and body as follows: “Fashion, after all, is governed by continuous operations to transform the appearance of the body to the detriment of the being (biomorphological body).” [our translation] (2005, p.83).

Fashion/clothing reshapes the body not by constriction or physical restructuring, fashion trends subject individuals to achieve their best body shape so that they can carry these clothes and show their bodies. Previously, the body was squeezed up, clothes were adjusted, and the body expanded through clothing to obtain and maintain the desired silhouette. Clothing was once synonymous with status and power; currently, the body reflects the status of people and sets them apart.

The body is influenced by fashion in various ways, especially visually, since fashion is based essentially on aesthetic values. Nevertheless, not only fashion trends are responsible for body changes. Considering culture as a relation of moral and aesthetics values, these same cultural values can be said to be largely responsible for such decisions, as they represent images imposed by society. Therefore, in order to be accepted, individuals are subject to these values. However, aesthetic requirements change from time to time, introducing new trends. Considering the body as a language, it is currently claimed that what changes is the body, clothing seeks only to adapt to it in order to represent this body in a coherent manner (CIDREIRA, 2005). At present, the body is seen as vulgar, sexualized and “aestheticized”, an image heavily advertised by the media and endorsed by the society's culture.

In contemporary society, the body is constructed and built based on aesthetic ideals dictated by society itself. The reconstruction of these bodies is driven by aesthetic values inherent in the society and by the inner need for beauty that individuals possess, thus resulting in a movement of belonging within this group. Therefore, this individual makes use of tricks to be accepted in a malleable and adaptable environment, thus achieving this ephemeral feature.

This question becomes clearer when we mention a recent article, published in a local newspaper in March 2010, warning that corsets are back with a very strong fashion appeal, promising help in reducing body measurements. According to the newspaper, the corset is made of several layers of stiffened linen and reinforced by aluminum or stainless steel stays, pressing strategic areas (the last two pairs of ribs) when tightened by back laces (Figure 1). That is, to modify the natural shape of that body part, the corset should be worn daily and for long periods of time (<http://www.estadao.com.br/noticias/suplementos,a-volta-do-espartilho,523325,0.htm>).



Figure 1- Madame Sher corset

Source: <http://www.estadao.com.br/noticias/suplementos,a-volta-do-espartilho,523325,0.htm>

The doctors consulted for that article disapproved of the use of this garment. According to a vascular surgeon, Fábio Haddad, the abdomen is highly pressed, thereby triggering the appearance of varicose veins and leg swelling, which in extreme cases can cause thrombosis. The surgeon also stated that “the internal pressure raises the diaphragm, changing the dynamics of breathing. This can lead to atelectasis, a result of reduced pulmonary ventilation, which may lead to accumulation of secretions and even to infection.” [our translation] (<http://www.estadao.com.br/noticias/suplementos,a-volta-do-espartilho,523325,0.htm>).

The introduction of these new corsets leads to a discussion already presented by Del Priore (2000), which recalls that these aesthetic changes are often “copied” from women who do not share the same physical structure. That is, Brazilian women are part of a mixed-race people, but they try to look like European or American women in some physical characteristics. The

author draws attention to the craze for “Barbies”, who are women with large breasts, blond hair, tiny waist, and thick lips.

Contemporary women feel the need to take care of their bodies not only to be healthy, but mainly to look beautiful (following a particular standard of beauty). Therefore, “working out” is the current requirement, through sports practicing or even through plastic surgery or certain clothes that “disguise” the unmanageable body shape of some women.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

We live in a society that advocates the construction of a body image that is beautiful and healthy (regardless of whether it is really healthy). In this process, the media creates icons of beauty and health and produces role models, which are often distorted types of beauty and, especially, of health.

The aesthetic standards advocated in society are sometimes regarded as key conditions for individuals to be considered integrated with a particular group. Interestingly, many people actually let themselves be persuaded by this discourse of the need to be beautiful, slim, tall, to have a small waist, and eventually change their body shape with no fear of any side effects.

The woman of the 21st century, despite all her history of struggle against oppression and for freedom, remains dependent on a consumer society, which refers not only to products, but also to currently desirable body images.

It is also noticed that the current culture in relation to women emphasizes physical appearance rather than their intellectual capacity. It can be understood that the ideal body advocated by our society, and advertised by the media, leads women to an apparent chronic dissatisfaction with their bodies. This dissatisfaction is fueled by constant body transformation, by a piece of clothing that presses, dries, raises, accentuates, reduces their body or by more drastic interference, such as surgery and implants. The body must be beautiful and health is no longer regarded as important by a large portion of the population that wishes for a particular aesthetic image, which is constantly repeated by the media. Thus, everyone feels that they must engage in the fight against time, in the battle against degeneration and functional obsolescence of the body (COUTO, 2001).

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ABSTRACT:

This article analyzes the relationships between female body, health and fashion, reflecting upon the influence of fashion not only on clothing, but also on female aesthetics from the 19th century to the 21st century. Through a literature review, we attempt to understand how medicine has related fashion and health, how the female body has been treated throughout history, and the consequences of such treatment.

KEY WORDS: Female body; health; fashion

CORP, SANTÉ ET MODE: L'EMPRISONNEMENT FEMELLE

RÉSUMÉ:

Cet article analyse les relations entre le corps féminin, la santé et la mode, et plus spécifiquement l'influence exercée par la mode depuis le XIXe siècle jusqu'à nos jours sur l'habillement et l'esthétique féminine. En se basant sur une révision bibliographique, il tente de comprendre le lien entre mode et santé du point de vue de la médecine, le traitement subi par le corps féminin au cours de l'histoire et les conséquences de ce traitement.

MOTS-CLÉS: corps féminin; santé; mode.

CUERPO, SALUD Y MODA: LA PRISION FEMENINO

RESUMEN:

Este artículo analiza las relaciones entre cuerpo femenino, salud y moda, reflexionando sobre la influencia que la moda ejerce no solo en la indumentaria, sino también en la estética desde el siglo XIX al siglo XXI. Mediante una revisión bibliográfica, se busca comprender cómo la medicina relacionaba moda y salud, de qué modo el cuerpo femenino fue tratado en el trascurso de la historia y las consecuencias de ese tratamiento.

PALABRAS-CLAVE: Cuerpo femenino; salud; moda

CORPO, SAÚDE E MODA: O APRISIONAMENTO FEMININO

RESUMO:

Este artigo analisa as relações entre corpo feminino, saúde e moda, refletindo acerca da influência que moda exerce não só na indumentária, mas na estética feminina desde século XIX ao século XXI. Através de uma revisão bibliográfica, busca-se compreender como a medicina relacionava moda e saúde, de que forma o corpo feminino foi tratado no decorrer da história, e as consequências desse tratamento

PALARAS-CHAVE: Corpo feminino; saúde; moda