# 15 - THE CONSTRUCTION OF A DEMANDED BODY IN THE LATE MODERNITY: IN SEARCH OF A NEW IDENTITY

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**Introduction**

The reflections which this article brings come from discussions concerning body and the formation of the subject in a course called *Body and Diversity* offered as part of the Master's Degree Program of the Physical Education School in the Federal University of Juiz de Fora (UFJF). The theme of body, as well as the ways to reach plenitude and happiness, has always brought questionings: victories and frustrations.

In order to understand the subject in formation, it is necessary to point out facets which comprise it in the frenzied search for an ideal, and sometimes unreal, "identity." Late modernity, or post-modernity is seen as the emergence of globalized ideals, as well as of reactions and interactions of the "I" (subject) with the society. It is inevitable that, from a process of restlessness and questionings, some sort of change of concepts is proposed. It is a process which is being imposed by the neo-liberal politics implemented in Brazil.

Therefore, in order to talk about cultural identity, one must first tread the paths and see the facets of this search for *social identification*. The changes of the subject's identity are related to his/her transformations and movements. In order to understand how this evolutionary process of identity and utopias (of the young people) takes place, it is of foremost importance to understand the process of society's mechanisms of acceptance from being part of a group. So, one can say that not only the break of paradigms, but also the popularization of medical hygienic and social body techniques, are the political problems of today.

**1 Theoretical Presuppositions**

1.1 The body throughout the history of culture

In order to reflect upon the circumstances which take place in the body today, it is important to take the evolution of the history of the construction of somatic and social identity of this body as a basis.

This article - a theoretical essay - tries to approach the cultural and identity aspects of the body and the subject. The reference to the body comprises all forms of manifestation - physical, social and cultural - responsible for the formation of the subject. However, one cannot look at this body just from the biological or anatomical point of view, for it has an incredible power of not only creation and storage of ideas but also to break paradigms.

The body is up! High quotation, high production, high investments... high frustration. Target of the ideal of fullness and perfection diffused in post-modernity, the body seems to serve, in a privileged way and by means of the valorization of thinness, of fitness and of perfect health, as the supporter of a time marked by the anaesthetized linearity of ideals (FERNANDES, 2003, p. 13).

Currently, communications are very fast due to technological advancement and, therefore, it can be said that the media contribute to this process of discoveries, changes and proposals. The new social organization causes great changes in people's lifestyles. The latter are necessary in order to meet the demands of this late modernity. According to Giddens (2002), post-modernity is linked to risks and dangers, which is why it needs a strong and closely-watched (re)organizational force.

In the book entitled **The Crisis of Paradigms and Education**, Brandão (1994, p. 7) adds new data to this discussion. Society (represented by the post-modern era) suffers from emerging changes of a crisis of paradigms. The new concept, or the attempt of it, will differ according to the field of study. The failure of the scientific truth is one of the elements which contribute to this process of tensions. The author clarifies it,

The shaking of certainties (previously sought for by those who intended to make science), the flexibility of the frontiers between the different scientific traditions, as well as the mistrust of the great theories which were intended to be perennial are just some of the characteristics of a moment that is being typified as a crisis of paradigms.

The number of definitions of paradigms, the hidden fear of losing what has been built and that is solidified by the science of theories and interpretation of the new changes, fascinates the scholars as a set of premises which contribute to this process.

It is important to emphasize that beauty today is the background of many ways of life. Everything that is disseminated in different forms of media is linked to the ways of attaining success by means of one's good looks: "The body has become an undertaking to be managed. in the best way possible, according to the subject's interests and aesthetic views." (LE BRETON, 2003, p. 31). The logic of the media is to expose the body to the demands of the market. It is also important to remember that, for each social niche, there is a pattern to be followed. In this context, as a consequence, the body cannot be considered dissociated from the subject who is symbolically expressed as a body. This body, however, can be shaped and conceived by the individual so as to please the modern man. These changes will contribute to the affirmation of cultural forms: "[...] the body is the expression of a culture, therefore, each culture will express itself by means of different body forms because that means they are distinct cultures" (KOFES, 1985 apud DAOLIO, 1995, p. 39).

Thus, in order for this body to be accepted by society, the subject changes and, sometimes, (re)writes his/her own culture. When referring to today's culture, one must bear in mind a set of premises which surrounds its basis of understanding. So, the study of a culture should start from the concept of culture as well as that of Social Anthropology.

Marcel Mauss, a Frenchman who revolutionized science because of the idea of body techniques and the concepts concerning the wholeness of the individual, can be considered one of the founding fathers of Social Anthropology. He believed that the human being should be seen and analyzed as a whole, "a total social fact", by means of the wholeness, in a biological, psychological and sociological dimension. According to his theory, the tradition, and the culture of all body movements are considered as techniques and, one should observe its effect rather than its dimension of efficiency.

In the second half of the twentieth century, Geertz (1989, p. 36) deepened the symbolic issue as a way to see culture. He defended Interpretive Anthropology, which is closer to the reality lived by the body. The author states that, "on studying of culture, the meanings are not symptoms or a set of symptoms, but symbolic acts or sets of symbolic acts; and the objective is not the therapy, but the analysis of the social discourse." On the scene are also the semiologists, who give a basis to this conception which refutes the stratigraphic conception according to which the study of man is divided into the following parts: biological, psychological, social and cultural. According to this conception, man can be segregated into superficial layers until getting to the core.

The body, in Geertz's conception (1989), would be the set comprised by the human condition itself which can affirm this culture as public, once the meanings are public as well. He says, "Culture, this document of operation is, therefore, public, [...], but non-physical and not a hidden identity" (Ibid., p. 20). The discussion takes us to questioning whether culture is subjective or

objective. The author describes his belief in the definition of culture by means of the constraints of threads of meanings, of an interpretive science and of "an experimental science in search of laws" (Ibid., p. 15). This way, each case to be studied in this frame of culture has a set of symbolic meanings and theoretical peculiarities which are analyzed from the social discourse.

1.2 The body: today's scene

Today, the body is influenced by technological evolution There is something called "cultural hypochondria", which is defended by Costa (2004 apud DAOLIO, 2006). According to him, the formation of the body identity is being "bombed" by signs that emphasize the intangible aspect of the perfect body. The author says that Mauss and Geertz's collocations are lost in this numerous cultural focus called body culture, or characterized by what was called "performance ethics." Thus, by means of this process, man is capable of making any sacrifice in order to keep fit as a sign of success and of pleasure. One can say that narcissism and hedonism prevail in today's society. In this scene, the eating disorders and diseases related to the ingestion of substances to improve one's performance and which bring a short lasting sensation have emerged. A new concept of identity is recreated, then - the bioidentity - which happens by means of the bioaesthetics, i. e.,

In the obsessive process of the attainableness and maintenance of the physical shape by means of intense work-out sessions in the gyms, looking for specialized clinics, plastic surgeries, exaggerated concern with foods and shopping compulsion of goods which, supposedly, offer the pleasures of bioidentity (DAOLIO, 2006, p. 60).

In this process of creation and affirmation of bioidentity, the subject has the "power" to punish, watch and please himself/herself. All of the forms of success and pleasure are within reach, technology and the novelties are at people's service. The body is always seen through the eyes of others. However, the risk and the sensation of omnipotence prevail, creating a conflict hidden by the hedonistic sensation. This body is a sign of a society/culture shaped according to current guidance. We must remember that, throughout this historic process, it took on an important role and is (re)defined according to the times. Thus, culture guides this symbolic process, managing this "merchandise" in the best way possible. Currently, that is done in an aesthetic way.

To Le Breton (2003), today there is a formation of mechanisms so that the ego is satisfied, resulting in pleasure and acceptance within a certain group. Thus, in modernity, we can see body piercings, tattoos, body builders, body art and surgical interventions. This way, it is possible to understand that the subject's body is something ephemeral, shapable, and desired. The idea that this body should not be changed because it is this way God created it does not exist anymore.

Adolescence is, above all, a phase full of questioning and doubts when it comes to changes happening in the bodies of young people. The construction of the body identity of the adolescent will depend on his/her mental organization and, mainly, on the identification with the bodies and attitudes of other youngsters. Ferriani (2005) stated that this organization will take place, firstly, by means of the relationship between the adolescent and his/her own body, represented by his/her body image. Because of that, it is necessary to emphasize the importance and the influence of groups of people and of the several means of communication during this time of human life. TV managers make huge investments in marketing which are mainly linked to Strasburger's aesthetics (1999 apud REATO, 2001, p. 38). This author states that the strong link between teenagers and this means of communication is responsible for the creation of "super-groups of buddies" who are co-responsible for the exhibition of behavior. Regarding this medium, the author said, "[...] it is said to be an important source of information on sex, drugs, violence and body image." It must be emphasized that the greatest influence on cultural and bodily changes comes from television, once the individuals are inserted in a globalized world where there is easy dissemination of beauty patterns and behaviors. This fast development of communications has created "[...] a new world-wide lifestyle [...]." (DAOLIO, 2006, p. 56). According to this author, the changes which have happened in the social and economic field since the second half of the twentieth century are responsible for a new view of the body. Currently, this view is something ephemeral and can change in the following fashion season.

1.3 The body and its new clothes: hidden by the eating disorders

Eating Disorders are pathologies described in the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Health-related Problems: Tenth Revision (CID-10) from the World Health Organization (OMS), 1993 and from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV_TR), 2000. Anorexia Nervosa (AN) and Bulimia Nervosa (BN) are their main forms of manifestation. Besides those manifestations, there are other Eating Disorders, Not Otherwise Specified (EDNOS) or Non-Specific Eating Disorders (NSED), for they correspond neither to BN nor to AN. Within EDNOS, we can find Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). According to Galvão et al. (2006, p. 31), "anorexia nervosa (AN), described almost simultaneously by Lasègue in France and by Gull in England, in the second half of the nineteenth century, corresponds to a new disease in modern medicine resulting from Illuminism."

The media have contributed a lot to the dissemination of the idea of a healthy-looking but extremely thin body. This body is in shop windows and fashion shows, in clothing catalogs, in magazines and on TV. According to media logic, the healthy-looking body is a sign of health and success. The media, with its appeals and power of persuasion, jeopardizes freedom of choice, altering people's lifestyles.

In 2006, the whole country was shocked by the news that Ana Carolina Reston Macan - a model who was becoming very successful professionally and whose weight was 40kg (88 lbs.) - had died due to complications resulting from eating disorders.

Ana Carolina Reston Macan, the top model who died [...] as a consequence of problems caused by anorexia, lived her last days under pressure. The angst caused by the excess of vanity and self-criticism that usually affect most teenagers and post-teenagers had added up to problems at work and at home (LINHARES, 2006, p. 79).

It is not rare for anorexia to make fatal victims, i. e., those who lived their entire lives bearing the scars of this fight against their own body image by means of an angst subsidized by beauty patterns. Technology contributed to this process as the agent which spreads the ideas (patterns). On relationship sites it is common to find nicknames for the pathologies: "Mia" for bulimia and "Ana" for anorexia. This use of abbreviations makes it more difficult for families to find out what is happening to a certain member who does not accept they way s/he looks.

It is necessary to observe the paths trodden by youngsters in the struggle for happiness. The signs of beauty and success are on dangerous roads, and, many times, they have no way back. Angst and dissatisfaction are premises for an insecure and unhappy life. Anjos (1997, p. 62) claims that, "[...] satisfaction is never completing oneself, but always having something to achieve." The search of an ideal archetype of beauty tortures teenagers with diseases related to this dissatisfaction with their own *self* seen in a distorted way.

**Final Considerations**

The aesthetic signs are distributed around today's social market, resulting, in a way, into a nuisance for the subjects. As mentioned before, the market looks for certain specific patterns for the body which is built to meet the demands of consumption. Besides, the obligation of consumption and of being beautiful is frequent in the hedonistic and narcissistic phase of post-modernity. Thus, the generation of self-control enters the scene from a view worthy of compliments and acceptance from others. By practicing the bioaesthetic techniques, the body will evolve in a subjective manner. This involvement relates to a personal dissatisfaction with

something that cannot be attained.

This body is trapped in the ideal/real dichotomy. It seems that the dream/ideal/cultivated body is far from becoming a subject. “The ideology of the perfect body makes us contemplate the diseases that distort the human figure as a synonym of social failure” (ORTEGA, 2006, p. 43).

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**THE CONSTRUCTION OF A DEMANDED BODY IN THE LATE MODERNITY: IN SEARCH OF A NEW IDENTITY**

**ABSTRACT:**

This text, presented as a theoretical essay, approaches ways to build the social identity of young people who live in a society where there are virtualizations of the body. It is important to note that there is an evolution of the concepts of how to use science as a way to interpret this new paradigm between the subject and his/her will to make his/her dreams come true. The aspect of the subject's body identity has become ephemeral and superficial. The risks to reach beauty and find the ways to build the archetype of happiness are not taken into account any longer. The individual finds resistance to build his/her authentic body. Thus, not rarely do we find cases of eating disorders among teenagers.

KEY-WORDS: identity; body; eating disorders.

**LA CONSTRUCTION D'UN CORPS EXIGÉ A PARTIR DE LA MODERNITÉ TARDIVE: LA RECHERCHE D'UNE NOUVELLE IDENTITÉ**

**RESUMÉ:**

Ce texte, présenté comme un essai théorique, aborde des formes de se construire une identité sociale des jeunes dont la société vivre un temps de virtuelisations du corps. Il y a une évolution des concepts de se faire science comme forme interpretative de ce nouveau paradigme entre le sujet et sa volonté de réaliser ses rêves. L'aspect de l'identité corporelle du sujet a rendu une chose éphémère et superficielle, en rappelant qu'il a passé à non plus calculer les risques pour obtenir la beauté et des formes de construction de l'archétype de la bonheur. L'individu reencontre resistence par la formation de son autentique corps. Alors, constamment, surgissent des cas de Bouleversements Alimentaires entre les adolescents.

MOTS CLÉS: Identité; Corps; Bouleversements Alimentaires.

**LA CONSTRUCCIÓN DE UN CUERPO EXIGIDO A PARTIR DE LA MODERNIDAD TARDIA: LA BÚSQUEDA DE UNA NUEVA IDENTIDAD**

**RESUMEN:**

Este texto, presentado en forma de ensayo teórico, introduce formas de construirse una identidad social de jóvenes cuya sociedad vive un tiempo de virtualizaciones del cuerpo. Se resalta que hay una evolución de los conceptos de hacer ciencia como forma interpretativa de ese nuevo paradigma entre el sujeto y su voluntad de realizar sus sueños. El aspecto de la identidad corporal del sujeto se vuelve algo efímero y superficial, recordando que se pasó a no calcular más los riesgos de la obtención de la belleza y de las formas de la construcción del arquetipo de la felicidad. El individuo encuentra resistencia en la formación de su autentico cuerpo. Por eso, no es raro, que surjan casos de Trastornos Alimenticios en adolescentes.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Identidad; Cuerpo; Trastornos Alimenticios.

**A CONSTRUÇÃO DE UM CORPO EXIGIDO A PARTIR DA MODERNIDADE TARDIA: A BUSCA DE UMA NOVA IDENTIDADE**

**RESUMO:**

Este texto, apresentado em forma de ensaio teórico, aborda formas de se construir uma identidade social de jovens cuja sociedade vive um tempo de virtualizações do corpo. Ressalta-se que há uma evolução dos conceitos de se fazer ciência como forma interpretativa desse novo paradigma entre o sujeito e sua vontade de realizar seus sonhos. O aspecto da identidade corporal do sujeito tornou-se algo efêmero e superficial, lembrando que se passou a não calcular mais os riscos para obtenção da beleza e das formas de construção do arquétipo de felicidade. O indivíduo encontra resistência para a formação de seu autêntico corpo. Por isso, não raro, surgem casos de Transtornos Alimentares em adolescentes.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Identidade; Corpo; Transtornos Alimentares.