ABSTRACT

MISS XL VERSUS THE DIET HEROINE: FAT BODIES IN FINNISH TABLOID MAGAZINES

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During the last two decades the visibility of decidedly fat bodies in the mainstream media seems to have increased, but in ambiguous and limited ways. On one hand the medical discourses consider fatness a serious disease and set limits to positive representations of fat bodies, but on the other hand individualistic discourses demand fat acceptance, since “we come in all shapes and sizes”. When these discourses clash, as they often do, controversial images are bound to be produced – not only in terms of body size, but in terms of gender, sexual orientation, “race”, age and class. Many feminist studies have shown that body size is a thoroughly gendered issue deeply rooted in controversial demands of consumption and control in today’s welfare societies, but still there are very few analyses of how fat bodies are culturally represented.

Tabloid magazines and television are some of the few media arenas, where fat and other non-normative bodies are quite usual – therefore, however, the controversy between fat condemnation and fat acceptance is especially prominent in the tabloids. In the paper I compare two often-repeated story formats in Finnish tabloid magazines, the Miss XL beauty contest and its predecessors, and transformation-by-dieting stories. The latter group usually focuses on the monstrosity of earlier fatness and the glory of the transformation, but the Miss XL contest seems to promote the ideology of fat acceptance. How do the gendered, heteronormative beauty norms work or break in the contest? What part may nationality and “race” play in the contest as well as in the transformation stories, considering the history and contexts of Finnish ideals of feminine beauty? Where are the roots of these story formats and how have they changed through time?

From a theoretical point of view it is also interesting to consider how fatness differs from other vectors of difference, such as gender, race, nationality, class, sexuality. Fatness is thought of as a more transformable quality than most others, which may offer potential subversiveness as well as enforce the body norms’ oppresiveness.