DIETING TRANSFORMATIONS AND MISS XL CONTESTS: FAT BODIES IN A FINNISH TABLOID MAGAZINE

Katariina Kyrölä, Media Studies, University of Turku

Presented at Gender and Power in the New Europe, the 5th European Feminist Research Conference
August 20-24, 2003 Lund University, Sweden

Starting Points

During the 1980’s and especially the 1990’s the visibility of decidedly fat bodies in the mainstream Western media seems to have increased. A number of wide-spread fiction films and television shows have been based on tensions created through performers’ excessive bodies. Several (Finnish and non-Finnish) documentaries on fatness and/or dieting have been seen in Finnish television, not to mention countless advertisements that make use of fat bodies.

The increased visibility of fat bodies has been mainly connected to the growing power of the fat acceptance activity and the recognition of fat consumers as a great target group (Feuer 1999, 181). I agree that these are important factors, but they can only explain the visibility of fat bodies in ways that are meant to seem positive and non-condemning to the target audiences – growing visibility does not necessarily mean growing acceptance. The fat acceptance movement demands that “the reality” of increasing size of people should be represented more accurately in the media by increasing the visibility of fat people in non-stereotypical ways, but at the same time medical discourses condemn fatness as the most serious epidemic of the Western world. The influence of conscious and unconscious fat-condemning attitudes in the media images of fat bodies should not be belittled.

In the fat-condemning discourses fatness is a sign of physical and mental loss of control which can and must be fought. Medicalization often justifies portrayals of fatness as a negative feature, simplifying the matter to a biological level and ignoring the complex social and cultural structures that produce variations in weight and hierarchies connected to them. However, since thirty to fifty percent of the adult population in Finland as well as in most other Western countries may be defined as overweight, the slim body norm is no longer self-evident. Therefore the norm must be repeated and reconstructed over and over again by setting it against the Other, the fat body, the undesirable “opposite”. When the fat-condemning and fat-accepting discourses clash, as they often do, controversial images of fat embodiment are bound to be produced.

Tabloid magazines are some of the few media arenas, where fat and other non-normative bodies are quite common – therefore, however, the controversy between fat condemnation and fat acceptance is especially prominent in the tabloids. In this paper I compare two most common story formats that employ images of fat bodies in the most popular Finnish tabloid magazine of the 1990’s, 7 päivää (7 days): the transformation-by-dieting stories, and the Miss XL stories. In comparison I also look briefly at an another Finnish tabloid magazine, Hymylehti (Smile magazine), which organized a predecessor of Miss XL contests, the Miss Pullukka (Miss Plump) contest in 1973. The material consists of 7 päivää magazine from the year 1993 (when its publishing begun) to 2002 plus some Hymy magazines.

The transformation-by-dieting stories usually focus on the undesirability of earlier fatness, the “before”, and the idealization of slimness, the “now”. They seem strongly fat-condemning, but some interruptions can be found in their naturalization of the slim body norm. The Miss XL beauty
contests, which have been organized by the 7 päivää magazine from 1999 onwards, seem on the surface level to fall to the category of fat accepting media representations of fat bodies. A closer analysis will show, however, that they are extremely problematic in terms of gendered, heteronormative and white national beauty ideals.

The paper is a part of my in-progress PhD research on popular representations and discourses on fat bodies in the media, specifically in media products perceived as entertainment. As I examine the particularities of representing fat bodies, I also draw connections between fatness and other categories of difference – in this paper gender, sexuality, class, nationality and color. I ask how images of fatness are produced in the tabloid context in certain kinds of repeated narratives and images, and what kind on hierarchies are at stake in the production processes of these images.

**Fatness in Feminism**

Images of bodies named fat, and the acts of defining some bodies fat and others “normal”, can be perceived as an important and violent means of producing power relations nowadays. The media is a central arena in defining one’s social situatedness in terms of bodily experience. It is therefore striking that there is so little analysis of how fat bodies are represented. In feminist cultural studies and body studies the emphasis has usually been on the slender, normative body, although fat bodies are just as much products and producers of body norms.

A large part of the feminist work on weight has been done by so-called second-wave feminists. According to many of these writers, women should accept their “natural” and “womanly” shape and size as beautiful, or resolve certain psychological conflicts or traumas to overcome compulsive eating (Orbach 1978, Chernin 1981). This kind of approach has been proved problematic since it maintains the traditional Western woman-body-equation and takes gender as granted by not questioning the meanings of categories “natural” and “womanly”. The psychoanalytical approaches comply to the pathologization of fatness. Both views often essentialize and universalize “women” leaving the white, welfare society point of view unchallenged. In addition, many feminist approaches place media images as artificial, above-controlled and above-enforced body ideals, and the “real”, unruly bodies as subjected to the ideals (for example Wolf 1991). The complex connections between lived bodies and bodily representations are not taken in account in them.

It is, however, a commonly shared view of most feminist theorists (in the 1990’s as well as in the late 1960’s and 1970’s), that fear of fat is linked to fear of femininity and the potentially uncontrollable maternal body. What causes most anxiety today is not body weight *per se*, but bodily bulges, unevenness and flab, which remind of the instabilities of the maternal feminine body (Bordo 1993, 187-189). In today’s consumer culture the firm, worked-out body suggests willpower, control over impulses and managed sexual ability. The success and worth of individuals is not only dependent on the ability and willingness to desire and consume, but also to repress and delay those desires in order to be a productive member of the society. Fatness and bulges are signs of laziness, lack of will and ability to move upwards on the social ladder, and fatness in women is tolerated much less than in men. (Bordo 1993, 191-195). Controversially, fatness is thought of as a problem caused by material overabundance and its uneven distribution between societies, but also as a problem of the less powerful. To some, fatness may function as an accusing reminder of the world’s hunger problem, but it often demands much more resources and free time to eat healthily and “stay in shape”.

**Tabloid Tolerance?**

Clearly, fat bodies do not appear in the media randomly, but they function in specific and calculated ways to produce certain kinds of affects. The ways of perceiving fatness depend centrally on many other characteristics of the body in question. In the media the fatness of a fat person still usually seems like her/his central attribute, and fat bodies are more likely to be seen in some narrative formats than in others. In mainstream film, for example, fat bodies typically appear in genres of bodily excess, such as comedy and horror.
In the printed press, tabloid magazines are especially connected to sensationality, excessiveness and “bad taste” as opposed to, for example, traditional newspapers. This can be seen on the level of bodily representations as well: the body is a terrain on which distinctions between taste and tastelessness, the sensational and the proper are enacted and naturalized. In tabloid magazines fat and other excessive bodies are more likely to be seen than in newspapers or other “respectable” printed press. (Glynn 2000, 109-110).

However, tabloids do not only make some excesses possible, but they also bound the range of those excesses. Fat is often represented as something extra, a burden, not belonging to the body - “matter out of place” or dirt to use Mary Douglas’ phrases. According to Douglas matter is never dirty or impure “by nature”, but it becomes coded as impure when it threatens the boundaries of the social order. (Douglas 2000). The fat body, exceeding the margins of the contained “normal” body, poses such a threat. Judith Butler suggests, referring to Douglas, that since boundary breaking seems unavoidable in culture to a certain extent, it must be assigned a controlled space and/or time (Butler 1990, 131-135). What would be more appropriate than to limit the representations of fat bodies to the field of the cultural “low”, tabloid magazines, where they can safely become just another form of sensational excess among other excesses.

Still, 7 päivää magazine is quite tame compared to many British and American tabloids. The magazine refers to itself as an “entertainment magazine”, and it is generally spoken of as a “gossip magazine”. Even though there has been an upsurge in the number of tabloid magazines in Finland during the last few years, 7 päivää is still clearly the market leader with a weekly circulation of over half a million issues. 7 päivää concentrates mostly on Finnish and international celebrity stories just as other entertainment press does, but in every number there is also at least one but usually a few so-called human interest stories. These introduce “ordinary extraordinary” people, everywomen and everymen, who suffer of rare or disfiguring diseases, overcome exceptional hardships, or provoke pity, sympathy and/or amazement in some other way. Stories of present or previous fatness form a subgenre of human interest stories. The context of 7 päivää may in part contribute to perceptions of fat embodiment as freakish or comparable to a disability, but tabloid conventions also enable forms of celebration and rebellion that are not too common in other media.

Tabloids tend to concentrate on the personal and the private, and 7 päivää is no exception. Accordingly, fatness is portrayed first and foremost as a personal issue, and fat people are always given a voice of their own. In contrast, Finnish major newspapers usually present fatness as a non-personal, national or international public health issue, as a problematic matter in health system funding or as a result of or reason for changes in consuming habits. Occasional pictures of fat bodies are typically exemplary, not personified.

Tabloid magazines seem to have a strong status in promoting pluralistic values in the Finnish society by letting the “ordinary extraordinary” people speak for themselves. Of course, the possibilities for pluralism are always limited according to the cultural atmosphere of the time in question. For example, as Tuula Juvonen has shown, tabloid press was central in constructing pathologizing and threatening images of homosexuality in the 1950’s and 60’s Finland, but the scandal magazine Hymylehti was also the first medium to allow homosexual people their own voice (Juvonen 2002, 114-115).

The experience-based tabloid representations of fatness contrast interestingly with Finland’s status as a Scandinavian welfare society. Finland has a strong and protective national health system which emphasizes health education, and medical obesity studies are one of the system’s greatest priorities. Hannele Harjunen, who studies Finnish women’s experiences of fatness, says that the strong medicalization of fatness often naturalizes open judgmental attitudes towards fatness, which was experienced as very painful by her interviewees (McGill 2001a). In the private dieting stories of 7 päivää the physical health point is almost always pushed to the background: health is emphasized only in cases when fatness is presented as a serious threat to the person’s life. Aesthetic or social issues are usually given as primary reasons for dieting. In Miss XL competition the health of the participants was never questioned – the emphasis was on proving that not only slim women can be
beautiful. In comparison, in America body size is largely thought of as a personal issue which has to
do with individual choices and should not be considered a public health problem (MSU Press Release
2003). Paternalistic public control does not seem to work very well for the “obesity problem” in
Finland, either. Tabloids offer voices from “below” that may question official policies, although they
are necessarily shaped in relation to those policies.

The pluralism of tabloids is also quite controversial, since the values of the magazine obviously serve
commercial ends. Mainstream commercial media companies, like the influential Scandinavian Aller
Group that publishes 7 päivää, face an economical dilemma when handling weight issues. They can
not only consider what the readers want, but what the advertisers want, since much of the funding
comes from selling advertisement space. On one hand many global and national food, diet, sports and
cosmetics companies depend on the fear and problem status of fatness. Even if they apparently wish
to fight this “problem”, the financial losses would be huge if the problem were solved. On the other
hand, as said, fat-accepting fat consumers have become an influential consumer group. Many fast
food and beverage corporations, among others, rely on the growing consumption of foods. Protesting
against beauty norms may also be a good advertising tactic. The content and the target groups of the
magazine are of course central, when advertisers choose their media.

This controversy materializes well in the case of a short-lived women’s magazine Me Naiset XL. In
its mother magazine, Me Naiset (Us Women), there was an effort to produce visibility for “XL-sized”
women, to break the convention of presenting slim women as the norm of femininity. Me Naiset XL
was launched in the spring 2000. In spite of very positive reader response, Me Naiset XL was only
published three times in 2000-2001, before the publishing company Helsinki Media stopped its
funding due to insufficient sells of advertisement space. Minna McGill, one of the editors of Me
Naiset and Me Naiset XL who also studied the meanings of the latter, believes that one of the reasons
for the magazine’s closing down was their decision not to take any dieting advertisements and not to
speak of dieting at all. (McGill 2001b, 8-9). In 7 päivää magazine the absence of dieting stories
would probably be an economic impossibility just as well.

Even though women’s magazines can make varying efforts to make their portrayals of women more
diverse, really excessive, “fat without doubt” bodies can not appear in them except under special
themes and even then with limitations. It is not surprising that also in tabloid magazines the story
formats, in which fat bodies appear, follow often but not exclusively quite strict structures. If the
story breaks body size norms, gendered and heteronormative hierarchies are often enforced even
more.

**Dieting Transformations**

Stories or pieces of gossip concerning dieting are a crucial part of any entertainment magazine, from
women’s magazines to tabloids. In 7 päivää dieting stories vary greatly, featuring diet secrets from
Hollywood celebrities, speculations of whether celebrities have lost or gained too much weight and
why, and stories where an everywoman or –man, sometimes an “ex-fat” celebrity, tells of her/his
dramatic weight loss. The more dramatic the better – less than 10 kilos does not usually suffice for a
story (except in cases of celebrities, whose bodies are under very concentrated surveillance). I
concentrate on the last type of stories, since the other types do not actually give visibility to fat
embodiment, even though they give an idea of how central the diet topic is in entertainment and
tabloid press.

In the pictures of dieting stories the only temporal situations are “before” (fat) and “now” (slim) –
there is no “in-between” or “after”. Sometimes pictures of times before fatness, of childhood or
youth, are also presented to show that the person was not born fat. The “now” is always the temporal
situation of the interview, suggesting perhaps that fatness was and is such a sensitive, embarrassing
or terrible condition that the moment of speaking up, “now”, must also be “afterwards”. On the other
hand, the most popular interviews in Finnish magazines are exactly those that tell about difficulties in
life but especially of overcoming them (Jallinoja 1997, 78-79), which may in part account for the
“afterwards” format.
In the texts the hard work of the dieting process is still stressed, and the secrets of successful transformation are told in detail – different forms of regular exercise, lighter food, in some occasions even surgery. The transformation itself is often equated with being reborn or “hatching” (7 päivää 16/1998, 33/2001), the fat body opening up to reveal the “the beauty hidden underneath the kilos” (41/1994), “a sparrow turning into a swan” (17/1998). After a dramatic weight loss the interviewees often tell laughingly that many people do not recognize them any more on the streets, so thoroughly they have changed. Even though dieting may be named as a hard process, it seems important to present the transformation as a temporary state between the more stable categories “fat” and “slim”.

The differentiation between the “before” and the time leading up to “now” becomes apparent, as in almost all stories the moment of decision, the last spark or push for dieting is articulated, constructing being-fat and becoming-slim as separate temporal phases. For example, the spark may have come from looking at pictures of oneself (7 päivää 33/2001, 9/1995), from an upcoming wedding (41/1994, 43/1999), from seeing a relative’s example (7 /1999), from reading dieting stories in a magazine (49/1996), or from being hospitalized for reasons that are diagnosed weight-related (16/1998, 17/1998). Through naming the moment of the great turn, the differentiation between life as becoming-fat and being-fat as opposed to life becoming-slim and being-slim further emphasizes the drama of the transformation. Narrative conventions obscure the inevitable continuities and instabilities of the dieter’s or any person’s body size and shape.

The pictures of ”now” and ”before” are obviously quite different, not only in terms of the person’s body size but in terms of their composition. In most pictures of “before” the person is either alone or, in case of women, with small children (I will return to the question of fatness and mothering later). Most “before” pictures have the fat person not looking at the camera and the viewer, but looking down or sideways – sometimes the face is turned away completely. These looks or the lack of looking suggest uneasiness, passivity and distance. Also, in these pictures the fat person is usually shown sitting and not occupied in any activity, whereas in the “now” pictures the person looks more often straight into the camera, and is doing something or in a position that suggest muscular tension or movement. The pictures are clearly chosen from people’s home albums, since the quality is worse than in the “now” pictures, which are taken by the magazine’s photographer. Lack of accuracy or haziness in the “before” pictures is common. Often the pictures also cut the fat person’s body, framing at least the legs out of the picture, but sometimes showing only the face. Most of the picture space is filled with the fat person’s body, as if the fat body would unavoidably cover up everything else and not even fit in the picture as a whole. As opposed to “before” pictures, in “now” pictures the dieter’s whole body is carefully included within the frame. Usually there is only one, no more than two pictures of “before” but always at least two, even four “now” pictures.

One can not know whether the “before” pictures have been chosen by the interviewee her/himself, or whether the photographer and editor have chosen them from a number of options. Not looking at camera can sometimes be explained by the dieter’s unwillingness to be photographed, but I am inclined to believe that the unconscious or conscious conventions in representing and thinking of fatness mean more. The conventions of imaging fatness match the writing in the stories too well: the hazy quality, the turned looks, the passive positions, the excessiveness of fatness in the photographs – they all seem to suggest that fatness is an undesirable and unhappy condition, something monstrous, overwhelming and embarrassing, something so uneasy that it can only barely be imaged. In some cases it is difficult to think that a person would have chosen a particular picture of herself for the magazine, unless she really sees herself as a wholly different person than her fat “before” self. It seems to depend much on the dieter how deep s/he sees the transformation. Some completely abandon their former self; one young dieter woman says she sometimes watches earlier pictures of herself and says aloud “oink, oink”, ”to remind myself of what a pig I was” (7 päivää 41/1994). In contrast, a young man declares that he is still the same person inside and does not think much of people who approach him now but would not speak to him when he was fat (7 päivää 7/1999).

There is only one exception in my material: the story of a Swedish, 58-year-old woman, Rut Lundberg, whose story includes three stages: “before”, “then”, and “now”, with a headline of “I like myself better as fat” (7 päivää 36/1995). “Before” she weighed 223 kilos “gained during two
pregnancies” and tells that she lived in social isolation. The “before” picture looks very much the same as in other dieting stories: she does not look at the camera, she is sitting down, and the frame cuts her legs out of the picture. “Then” she weighs 50 kilograms, wears a stylish jacket suit, smiles, and her whole body is within the picture frame. She tells she traveled around to talk about her dieting, that she was “treated like a queen” but became “a walking advertising campaign for Weight Watchers”. “Now” she is again 140 kilos. The picture is the only color picture of the three, again cut at the knees, and she is smiling broadly. She tells she goes to work, uses public transport, and has a regular social life: things she could not do at 223 kilos. She thinks she is “meant to be fat” and that being thin felt strange. Maintaining her thinness also put a lot of pressure on her and caused stress. She still goes to therapy to treat her “eating disorder”, to figure out why she eats too much while she does not want to.

In Rut’s story, a conscious decision to gain back weight is emphasized in the headline, and fatness can be seen as an understandable and emotionally healthier option for thinness. Still, in therapy speech she is seen as an unwilling victim of a “disorder”, which seems controversial but not unexpected: in her case, the fat-accepting and fat-condemning discourses seem to clash especially hard. It becomes apparent that slimness can be extremely stressful, more stressful than fatness, and that the reduced size after dieting is not necessarily a permanent state (according to statistics, it rarely is). The “normal-size” childhood and youth pictures in many other dieting stories emphasize that anyone, especially women, may become fat at some point, that fat people are not “born fat”, and the body can and does indeed change. Mary Russo, who has studied cultural meanings of the grotesque body, notes that even though a differentiation between a grotesque, excessive body and a classical, restrained body is an important binary structure in the Western culture, especially the female body is in continuous danger to become grotesque by gaining weight, aging or acting uncontrollably in some other way (Russo 1994, 53, 56-58, 62-63). The particular risk of gaining weight is often implicitly naturalized as a “feminine” quality in the dieting stories by portraying women as stars of dieting stories much more often than men, and stressing the effect of pregnancies as an unnoticeable way to gain weight.

However, dieting men form a significant part of the discourse as well. In this paper I concentrate more on the representations of women, but some gendered similarities and differences should be noted. The temporal narrative conventions in dieting stories of men and women are quite the same in their strict differentiation between “before” and “now”. Men’s ways of dieting are still usually underlined as “masculine” and extreme. They explain their decision to diet more often with health related causes, not with aesthetic or social reasons like many women. Dieting and concern for one’s looks are traditionally perceived as “feminine” activities, and a dieting man faces the threat of being feminized in the dieting story convention. Often dieting men of the stories have taken up a very ascetic lifestyle and resort to even masochistic sounding measures to lose weight. For example, one middle-aged man had lost 52 kilograms by eating only rye crackers for months (7 päivää 35/1997), one had fasted for over three months by taking in only liquids (24/1998), and one had first been forced on a hospital diet but then began a strenuous exercise program: he has been riding his bicycle for around hundred kilometers daily for four years (28/2002). Only one young man, who had been in Weight Watchers, admitted that he wanted to diet for social and aesthetic reasons. He tells that he has “now” become an enthusiastic shopper for new clothes, and the “now” pictures show him dressed very fashionably and carefully – the feminized position of the dieter does not seem to bother him much (7/1999). Still, the potential homosexual implications of his portrayal are denied by repeating many times that he is “looking for a woman” and that he now enjoys ”women’s attention”.

Heteronormativity is maintained very strictly in dieting stories – in fact, the attractiveness of newly slim women to men and the attractiveness of men to women is underlined almost too enthusiastically, implying that the heterosexual norm is actually seen threatened. According to Judith Butler, the heterosexual order is maintained by giving meaning to all bodies as either “men” or “women”, and constructing these categories as coherent, oppositional, hierarchical and complementary to each other (Butler 1990). Fatness can confuse the traditional, largely unconscious bodily boundaries constructed between the bodies of a “man” and a “woman”. Breasts, probably the most important outer bodily sign of gender in the Western culture, may be seen on a fat man’s body; a fat woman’s breasts as
well as other gendered body forms may disappear into fat. Fat women may be overwhelming in size compared to many men, reversing the naturalized requirement for women to be smaller than men as parties of an ideal heterosexual couple (see Gieske 2000). In the dieting stories of the tabloids, the dieters are portrayed as now successfully fulfilling the heterosexual norms of attractiveness, but their previous fatness must also be given meaning within the heterosexual order.

The role of mothering and the heterosexual family is almost always central in the stories and pictures of dieter women. In a majority of women’s stories, pregnancies (usually more than one) are named as an important factor in gaining weight, as if the signs of pregnancy had stayed on after child-birth (for example 7 päivää 42/1995, 16/1998, 1/1999, 43/2000, 33/2001, 42/2001). Children safely fasten these women to the heterosexual order as mothers, as excesses of maternal femininity, although mothering is portrayed as a danger to the woman’s (hetero)sexual attractiveness at the same time.

Especially in many of the “before” pictures women appear with small children or with babies in their arms. Are the babies there to make the pregnancy explanation for fatness more tangible, or have these pictures been chosen to emphasize fatness as an excessive, overwhelming, even horrifying quality? The child’s body looks tiny in the fat mother’s arms, in some pictures the baby almost seems to disappear into the mother’s flesh. Julia Kristeva’s concept of the abject becomes useful here. For her, the abject is a name for substances, which are rejected and shunned in the Western culture, but which at the same time entice people. The abject is something that exceeds the boundaries of the body and reminds of its instability. Especially the abject is linked to the maternal feminine body. (Kristeva 1982). Fat is often situated as abject in the contemporary Western culture and the media: it is associated with femininity, flesh, excess and maternity, it abhors but fascinates the viewer, and it indisputably provokes strong emotions.

In dieting stories fatness is often associated with other bodily excesses coded as shameful, such as sweating too much, or elaborated descriptions of what and how much food the woman could eat within a certain time. Susan Bordo states that the representation of unrestrained appetite as inappropriate for women is an important part in constructing self-control as a central feature of femininity. (Bordo 1993, 130). According to Bordo, the only option for fat people to receive public sympathy is to present themselves in self-humiliating ways as inadequate and willing to change (Bordo 1993, 202-204). Even though this view does seem too pessimistic, it applies quite well to the treatment of fat bodies in dieting stories.

For example, in the story of Satu Ketonen, a hairdresser who lost 60 kilograms, the “before” picture raises controversial feelings (7 päivää 33/2001). In the text she mentions photographs from a vacation “in the south” which gave her the final spark to lose weight, and the “before” picture appears to be one of those. She sits on a sun chair wearing a bikini with her legs spread wide open, and there is a small baby between her legs. Her bare skin fills most of the picture space, and the baby seems to sink into her flesh, to be just one more of her body’s bulges – the extremely bright light of the picture adds to this effect by obscuring the outlines of the baby’s body. She seems to embody the common cultural nightmare of the monstrous-feminine that has the ability to give birth to new life but also to swallow the child back into itself (see for example Rich 1976, 186-189).

My own emotional reactions while looking at Satu’s “before” picture feel difficult. Her position seems vulgar to me, the amount of flesh on display feels improper and grotesque. I also feel ashamed for her and wonder if she has authorized the use of such a picture. I despise the magazine for showing an intimate picture like that to produce a particularly sensational effect. Very soon I begin to feel guilt for my reactions – why would I consider her picture vulgar, when I barely notice the bikini pictures of slim models that I see almost every day?

Elspeth Probyn has analyzed the potential uses of shame and disgust from the point of view of fat acceptance. She suggests that pride and complete self-acceptance as goals of fat representational politics are not very fruitful, since disgust can not be simply erased from understandings of the body. Pausing to register one’s first unconscious feelings of disgust may generate shame for those feelings and recognition for injustices felt in fat bodies. These “gut feelings” may be used politically to universalize bodily hierarchies as well, but an another option is that the shame turns from the object
to the utterer. The proximity between my body and the body I look at is felt intensely. (Probyn 2000, 125-143). In this sense, the open portrayal of excessively fat bodies, even in diet stories, may be better than downplaying fatness and refusing negative emotions, since the excesses often force the viewer to pause and process her/his reactions, to think through their potential political meanings.

Also the story of Roselie, previously the fattest woman in the world (7 päivää 5/1993, 19/2001), is interesting from the point of view of disgust and shame. The same story is published with nearly the same text content and with exactly same pictures in 1993 and 2001, which emphasizes the enforced nature of the temporal situations “before” and “now”. At her fattest she weighed over 500 kilograms and was unable to move by herself – she merely stayed in bed and ate. For her, dieting was the only option for death, not an aesthetic choice. Her “now” weight is still over one hundred kilograms, which would be considered fat and excessive in most other contexts, but for her it is the result of years of strict bodily self-control. The fact that at some point one can die of fatness raises different questions than the cases of mostly aesthetic dieters. Commonly in medical speech most health problems of a fat person are diagnosed as caused at least partly by fatness, but Roselie’s fatness actually looks deadly, just as deadly as the skeleton-like body of an anorexic. My emotions move through disgust to complete amazement, pity and fear – Roselie’s body seems incomprehensible, perhaps even more than the anorexic body, which has become a more familiar figure through numerous public, medical and personalized analyses. This kind of fat bodies are nearly invisible in the media outside tabloids. The ambiguity of fatness and its different extents becomes concrete – fatness as “a common denominator” to such different bodies seems inadequate and forced.

However, Roselie is brought closer to the “everywoman” and made less pitiful through a significant heterosexual relationship: her husband is strongly present in the stories and the pictures as her support. A heterosexual partner is often central in dieting stories, and sometimes the coming together of a heterosexual couple is portrayed as the highlight of the transformation, the reward for dieting. For example, several younger women of the stories wanted to lose weight for their weddings, to fit into a wedding dress or look beautiful as brides – all these stories have wedding pictures next to “before” pictures to ensure that a beautiful bride in white, the icon of heterosexual femininity, must indeed be slim (7 päivää 41/1994, 42/1995, 43/1999, 42/2001). Body size in these stories is strongly related to looking attractive for the heteronormative counterpart, the husband, and slimness is intertwined with fulfilling the role as a “woman” in the heterosexual order.

The writer of a dieting story often brings out her/his personality by describing the dieter’s “now” looks approvingly, sometimes quite lavishly, in a pointedly heterosexual way. For example, a male journalist writes: “It is difficult, especially for a man, not to notice Satu’s slender body, which is like the body of an athletic model” (7 päivää 33/2001, my italics). A female writer interviewing a man dieter tells that the meeting began by “a handsome and slim man opening the door” (7 päivää 28/2002). The descriptions of how fatness looked and felt like are seemingly left to the interviewee, and the writers do not make direct remarks on the “before” looks. However, in 7 päivää it is particularly difficult to differentiate between the interviewee’s “own words” and the writer’s words, since the magazine uses first person headlines and slogans, such as “I lost 113 kilos in a year!” (49/1996) or “I was a sweaty giant!” (42/1995), which are not direct quotations.

The “everywomen” and “everymen” of dieting stories are not constructed only through heteronormativity but also centrally in terms of class. As opposed to rich celebrities featured in the magazine, the dieters are middle-class, working class, retired or unemployed. Most women of the dieting stories are professional but none are highly educated – or if they are, it is not mentioned. The dieters represent mostly population of working age, from twenty-something to around sixty – youth, children and elderly people are omitted. Weight-loss is often described as a push towards a better social life, but the possible effects of body size for professional success are never articulated. Fat bodies seem to be kept “in their place” in terms of class – the common, stereotypical connection between fatness, lack of ambition and lower class is maintained.

Still the ability to buy and wear new clothes is seen as one of the most important abilities of the dieted body. Many dieters tell that it feels wonderful to buy beautiful, fashionable clothes and not
have them tailor-made. Clothes from “before” also represent the skin of the old fat body, construct it as a shell that was left behind. In almost all dieting stories the dieter wears or shows a too big old garment to highlight the difference between fatness and slimness, “before” and “now”. The improper appetite for food is directed towards a more proper and traditionally feminine direction, the appearance industry. The ability to consume is turned into a bodily capability instead of a monetary one in dieting stories.

Many of the stories clearly serve commercial ends in other ways, too. The absolute majority of the successful dieters lost weight with the aid of Weight Watchers, and Weight Watchers is always thanked in these stories. 7 päivää also makes stories of the Weight Watcher’s Dieter of the Year competition (for example 7 päivää 42/1995, 16/1996). In 1993 7 päivää organized a dieting competition sponsored by a nutrition supplement company Helle (7 päivää 37/1993). The stories never mention that Weight Watchers is a profit-making company which does not unselfishly help people but can be quite costly and often inefficient to a participant.

“Different” Beauty Contests

Miss XL contests bring the representation of fatness from the level of “everywomen” to the level of idealized femininity – still, a certain “ordinariness” is maintained in Miss XL contests side by side with the glamour of a beauty spectacle. Miss XL contests are usually perceived as counterhegemonic practices, a chance to question the thin feminine beauty norms, but this goal has never been clearly adopted by 7 päivää magazine. The ideology of the contest is left for the reader to interpret from the candidates’ pictures, weights and heights, their own descriptions of themselves and their potential fat pride declarations. Outside quotations, the magazine uses mostly euphemisms and hints in headlines such as “Let’s have a grand celebration!” (47/1999), “7 päivää magazine’s contest for real women” (42/2000), “Finland’s merriest and most massive beauty contest begins again” (22/2001). It seems like the magazine is careful not to be too straight-forwardly fat accepting in Miss XL contests but wants to make use of the increasing appeal of the XL discourse.

The XL discourse and the idea of fat acceptance were already familiar in Finland before Miss XL contests, and the discourse has continuously concentrated on femininity and beauty. For example, in 1993 7 päivää published a story of an American woman, Jenny Freeman, under the title “I am happy as fat!” (27/1993). The story features nude (but quite proper) pictures of Jenny by herself and with her husband. Jenny tells that she is much happier without continuous, stressful dieting, that she is not desperate or stupid but a smart, sexy and erotic big woman. In 1996 7 päivää introduced Sarianne Silvennoinen, who was one of the first professional Finnish XL models, “one of the most popular models in her agency” who “draws men’s admiring looks to herself” (40/1996). She talks about XL modelling and tolerance, not only in terms of size but “for those of different color”. She also tells that she has been asked to do pornographic photos, but she draws the line in underwear pictures.

An emphasis on heterosexual attractiveness can be clearly seen in these stories. It often seems that if fat women are not portrayed as asexual, unattractive and feminine only in terms of mothering, they easily become oversexualized. However, Miss XL contests seem to be posited somewhere in between. Sexuality is not very overt in the contests, although they are advertised “more daring and easy-going” than other beauty contests. An institutionalized beauty contest brings the ideals of attractiveness so close to ideals of nationality, that a certain properness is demanded, even if the contest is supposed to be “a fun contest” (45/1999) which “should not be taken too seriously” (21/2002).

Beauty queens have traditionally brought publicity and represented all kinds of things: products, events, cities, concepts, national ideals of womanhood, ideologies. Beauty contests are inextricably linked to strategies of advertising and idealization, to racialized nationality and female bodies as spectacles. In the 1910’s and 1920’s Finnish beauty contests had a publicly articulated goal of finding the woman who would best represent the most desirable national/racial qualities associated with Finnishness. This goal is still present in today’s Finnish beauty contests, although in a bit more concealed way. (Kalha 1996, 23; Paasonen 2001, 171-172). Beauty queens embody values connected
to what they represent. They may efficiently naturalize gendered, sexual and national values, but they also put those values on public display and open them up to potential questions, discussion and judgement (Cohen, Wilk & Stoeltje 1996, 2-4). What values or norms, then, could Miss XL contests question and what do they perhaps naturalize?

There are interesting similarities and significant differences between the Finnish Miss XL contest and the Miss Finland contest. In both the meanings of Finnishness and “natural” or “genuine” Finnish femininity become central. The Miss Finland institution is well-known for its traditionality and sexual conservatism. Miss Finland is strictly located within the limits of heterosexual family values, and the continuous presence of boyfriends, potential boyfriends and later husbands is demanded without exception. Miss Finland can be sexy but in an innocent manner, which points towards future heterosexual marriage (Hänninen 1996, 128-129).

One of the obvious differences is that Miss XL contest does not demand the candidates to be childless, unmarried, or under 25 years old. In fact, many of them do have children, although none of them are much over thirty. They are not called “girls” like Miss Finland candidates often are, but “women”. While the virginal innocence desired of Miss Finland is not explicitly an issue with Miss XL, the beauty queen institution does still place her strictly within “proper”, not too explicit heteronormative sexuality, which is often naturalized through presence of husbands or boyfriends. All of the four Miss XLs have been mothers, and their children are always mentioned in their interviews, but the children are never seen in pictures like spouses, and they are not mentioned in the initial introductions of the candidates. Mothering is represented as an important part of genuine and natural Finnish womanhood, but still the combination of being a mother and competing for sexual attractiveness seems uneasy.

Idealizations of naturalness and genuineness in Miss XL contests may also be interpreted as referring nostalgically to the past as well as mothering. The body that is perceived fat (within certain limits), especially the feminine “round” or “plump” body, has been thought of as a sign of health and wealth in Finland only a few decades ago. The nostalgic image of the great and large matron, the bedrock mother of the agrarian society of the past, still lives on in the popular imagination of the nation as an undeniably rare but recognizable figure. However, even though traces of this proud and “natural” Finnish mother figure may be seen in Miss XLs, they are much more connected to popular 1990’s discourses of fat acceptance.

In the imagined past, “ordinary” Finnish women did not have time to shape and train their bodies for aesthetic reasons. Today, it is the duty of women to take care of their bodies, and the boundaries of naturalness have shifted. Miss Finland candidates readily list their body molding techniques, exercise habits and diets, but they tend to condemn plastic surgery – they also keenly declare that their bodies are all natural. The Miss XL contestants, however, claim to be even more natural. In their case, naturalness seems to mean “not trained” or “not on a diet”, an unmolded body – the possibility of plastic surgery does not even seem to exist. But of course Miss XL candidates have to fit within certain boundaries to represent ideal femininity, and those boundaries can not be considered very flexible in spite of assurances of the contrary.

All Miss XL finalists have bodies that could be described as traditionally feminine and maternal, with curves, full breasts and round stomachs. In fact, their bodies and looks do not differ from each other any more than the bodies of Miss Finland candidates. Although the size norms are not as slender as in case of “regular” beauty contests, the size of Miss XL candidates does have limitations. During the four years of Miss XL competitions, the lightest contestant has weighed 77 and the heaviest 97 kilograms. Their bodies never reach that point of fatness when gender confusion would be likely or possible. None of them can be called without doubt or excessively fat, which is a problematic issue in XL discourses more generally, like in the Me Naiset XL magazine. In reader response many criticized the magazine for using models who were too slender. In fact, XL models in women’s magazines are never bigger than size 42 (L or XL), since that is the biggest size that the fashion industry offers of next season’s sample products. (McGill 2001b, 45-48). Miss XL candidates must be clearly fatter.
than usual Misses and models, but they still can not deviate too far from size norms, and they have to be “well-proportioned”.5

Finnishness is very central in Miss XL contests, especially in connection to “genuity”. Finnish nationality is actually demanded of the candidates, although it might go unnoticed due to an emphasis on other “tolerant” qualities of the contest: “You may be married or single or a mother of five, anything goes. Miss XL contest does not set too strict limitations, instead we are looking for a genuine Finnish woman!” (21/2002). “Come along to choose Finland’s most genuine beauty queen!” (42/2000). All contestants in all four contests so far have been white and Finnish speaking, as opposed to the “ordinary” women of dieting stories, who may come from United Kingdom, the United States, or Scandinavian countries, even though the majority is Finnish and all are white.

Finnishness is usually represented in Finnish media as a self-evident, obvious and visible quality, which is linked to certain “natural” bodily features. A Finnish person is assumed white, unless otherwise mentioned, and a non-white person is assumed non-Finnish, unless otherwise mentioned. “Invisibility” of white normativity is one of the norm’s greatest strengths – whiteness does not usually become an issue unless it is set in contact with non-whiteness (Dyer 1997, 3-4). The increased visibility of non-white Finns in the media and in everyday life has made the norm of white Finnishness questionable, and brought issues of racial prejudice and tolerance to publicity. In the mid-1990’s public discussion of Finnish racism and neo-nazism was especially hectic, and in 1996 the first non-white woman, Lola Odusoga, was selected as Miss Finland. A new, racially aware and tolerant Finnishness was popularized and successfully “sold” through her persona – she became immensely popular for a while. (See Kyrölä 2003).

In a similar way as Miss Finland contest became elemental in “proving” Finns racially tolerant, Miss XL contest may be considered an event where size tolerance is applauded and connected to “natural” Finnishness through idealized femininity. Beauty contests form a central public arena in negotiating what can and can not be included in common understandings of the “natural” Finnish body, and these understandings can not be separated from gendered hierarchies.

In this sense it is particularly interesting to look into 7 päivää’s portrayal of Aria Arai, an American-born black XL model, who has appeared on Finnish television, for example in a show “Ö-studio” on channel 4 (Nelonen, 1998), and who lives in Finland. She hosted the first Miss XL contest in 1999, sung and danced in the final show and posed with the finalists in many pictures (7 päivää 45/1999, 47/1999). After that she has appeared in some interviews in 7 päivää and other media. Her presence in the Miss XL contest is on one hand logical, since she was already a relatively well-known public XL figure, who was outspoken about fat pride. On the other hand she can also be seen as a sort of a cover, so that the enthusiastic calls for genuine and natural Finnish femininity could not be interpreted calls for racial purity. The issue of race could no longer be just left aside after Lola Odusoga – Aria Arai’s presence was a handy way to combine racial and size tolerance.

Miss XL contest’s strong prioritization of fat acceptance may obscure and help naturalize other hierarchical structures: the normative whiteness of Finnishness, the strict heterosexual order and the conservative portrayal of femininity as a self-evidently quality, mainly defined in terms of looks and family. The ideology of fat acceptance is usually concerned with producing positive representations of fat people, and in the case of Miss XL contest, fat (white heterosexual) women. But what could positive representation mean? The combination of “fat and cheerful” is much applauded in Miss XL contests as something positive, and the contestants usually see themselves as potential role models for “big women” exactly because they embody this combination. The finalists of 1999 declare: “Now I have realized that big can be beautiful. We are the ambassadors of the big!”,”I have always carried my kilos with pride”, “I am more ashamed of how thin some people are!” (43/1999). The 1999 winner, Jaana Kinnari states: “I want to raise the self-esteem of genuine and big Finnish women and keep up the flag for us XL-sized people.” (47/1999). Miss XL 2001 says: “I will not go on a diet. I am happy with my curves. A woman should be voluptuous!” (46/2001).

The cheerfulness6 of the contestants is almost obsessively repeated, in their own words as well as in the magazine’s phrases. The contestants insist on the importance of being easy-going, cheerful and
having a sense of humour; their other characteristics, skills and opinions become secondary. This seems strange and reductive, but how could it be explained? Of course, the most obvious answer is that cheerfulness is a protest against the stereotypical and oppressive images of fat people as always unhappy with themselves, traumatized by feelings of inadequacy and desires to be “normal” some day. The demands for cheerfulness seem to suggest that fat women need to be cheerful and humorous to cope with prejudice and to survive criticism, but that they lead an easier and more joyful life since they do not stress about their bodies. Still, excessive cheerfulness may also signify certain childishness and lack of sense, as if the contestants would have to be a bit dim to not worry about their bodies and so readily place themselves on display.

However, cheerfulness can be thought of as a part of the more general unruliness of Miss XL contests, at least compared to many other beauty pageants. Kathleen Rowe points out that women in popular culture have rather been seen in the role of the victim than as successful and laughing (Rowe 1995, 214). Rowe also notes that fatness and other forms of unruliness, such as loudness, looseness, laughter etc. that are especially disapproved in (but thought typical of) women, can be used to exaggerate and make visible gendered stereotypes through means of laughter (ibid., 5-6, 31-33). Miss XLs and Miss XL candidates may not be out-of-control by any measure, but they are more outspoken and pose in less controlled positions than Miss Finland candidates. For example, in 2000 the finalists describe themselves with phrases like “I curse like hell”, “I am an outrageous flirt”, “I cannot get enough chocolate” (42/2000). Especially Miss XL 2000, Satu Penttilä, appears in most of her pictures with her mouth wide open in laughter and her eyes spread in such an exaggerated manner that it looks like she is making fun of the bimbo beauty queen stereotype (7 päivää 44/2000, 22/2001). It seems like Miss XLs are even expected to exaggerate “feminine” behaviour, since their bodies have already suggested lack of control.

But when it comes to clothes, the bodies of Miss XL candidates seem to require more covering and control. All Miss XL stories usually include pictures in swimsuits or underwear and full clothing, but Miss XL candidates wear whole swimsuits instead of two-piece bikinis, or if they wear a bikini they have a scarf on their hips or a loose blouse around their shoulders. In 2001 the candidates were portrayed wearing body underwear instead of swimsuits, but the underwear was not very “daring”. The contestants always wear a shiny pantyhose with swimsuits, as if to contain their bodies as fully as possible. What is more in need of coverage in the skin of Miss XL contestants than in the skin of other beauty queens? The acceptance of fat bodies in Miss XL contests has limits: the bodies of XL candidates have to look as smooth, contained and bulge-free as possible. The potential sights of cellulite have to be eliminated, and the skin of the fat body has to be covered with extra layers to safely contain the excess of flesh.

In the Miss Plump contest of Hymylehti in 1973, the situation was completely different in many respects but also quite similar in some ways. It is often forgotten that fat pride is not only a 1990’s phenomenon. From mid 1960’s on to the 1970’s, the public discussion of and opposition to “unrealistic” body norms of the mainstream media was quite heated. The ideal feminine body was very slim at the time, with Twiggy and other thin models and actresses at the height of their fame. Although the raise and popularization of feminism was not as strong in Finland as in many other Western countries then, thin beauty norms were acknowledged and criticized here as well. Hymylehti articulated its goal to criticize beauty norms very clearly in its opening declaration of Miss Pullukka contest, in contrast with the euphemistic manner of 7 päivää. Here are some samples:

“Us here in Hymy magazine think that a girl does not have to be stick-thin, curveless model type to be beautiful, feminine and attractive.” “When we discuss women’s equal rights, we should also enforce equality between women by crushing today’s misleading ideas of beauty.” “We are organizing a very own contest for the big, plump, genuinely womanly women, where the common beauty queen measurements are unacceptable.” “The contest is open for all round Finnish women, Miss or Mrs.” “The contest costume is free, but a soft, girlish posture is an advantage.” (Hymylehti 12/1972).
The emphases on Finnishness and “genuine” femininity are already present in these statements, but the message is much more openly liberal feminist. The result of the contest shows that the fat condemnation was not yet so strongly on a crash course with fat acceptance: the excesses of the winner’s body are not smoothed. Finland’s Miss Pullukka, Rauha Sanna Koli, was not chosen by reader’s vote, although that was the original purpose, but “the jury was so won over by her voluptuousness and uninhibited behavior that the case was clear without voting” (Hymylehti 2/1973). Rauha’s age and weight were not told, but she was clearly more excessively fat than any of the Miss XLs and probably over 50 years old, a divorcée with three children.

The finalists of Miss Pullukka contest were women that could not have been finalists in a Miss XL contest. Their ages varied from thirty-something to sixty-something, and their sizes varied greatly as well. Some of them were “on the edge of being too slim” according to the magazine – Rauha, the winner, was possibly from the fattest end of the contestants. The published pictures of the finalists were the same ones they had sent for the contest, but Rauha was photographed especially by the magazine in the nude. (Hymylehti 2/1973).

The most important differences between Miss XL contests and Miss Pullukka contest are that first, in the latter bodily excesses and deviations from beauty norms were not played down but accentuated, and second, the winner was strongly sexualized in a manner that would never be acceptable in Miss XL contests (not even mentioning Miss Finland). The nude photos of Rauha were by no means pornographic, but they were meant to be shocking without doubt: “There is hardly anyone in our readers who could ignore these photos without any reaction, without any expression, without any emotion” (Hymylehti 2/1973). In the biggest of the three photos of Rauha, she is looking in a fake innocent manner over her shoulder, standing up sideways, with her whole body in the picture, hands crossed over the breasts, and her hip pushed out. In an another picture she is kneeling down, and her breasts hang over her other knee. In the third picture she faces the camera and holds her breasts up, laughing.

These photos could be read as stereotypical oversexualizations of the fat female body, connecting excess of flesh to excess of sexual desire, or as a cheap freak circus where fat women can be laughed at. However, the photos may also be read as refreshing, unique portrayals of fat female embodiment in the popular media. The pictures are fun to look at, but not because the woman in them would be ridiculous, but because the woman seems to be having so much fun herself. The pictures feel like wonderful self-parody, and parody of the slim, girlish posing conventions, which seem ridiculous when moved away from their usual bodily contexts. The subversive potential of Miss Pullukka contest is to me much greater than that of Miss XL contests. The demands of political correctness have diminished the possibilities for norm-breaking, even in the mainstream tabloid press, which is supposed to be specialized in carnivalesque practices.

Hymylehti tells that Miss Pullukka contest was a success with hundreds of participants and many thank-you-letters from readers, but for some reason the contest was not organized again. Also Miss XL contests have remained a quite isolated event in 7 päivää in spite of their publicized popularity. For example, an another beauty contest organized by the magazine called Tähtityttö (“Star girl”) contest, with more traditional, slim young Miss types, is utilized to produce new celebrities for the magazine. One or two women from every year’s Tähtityttö contest become repeated figures in the magazine, at least for a while. This is not the case with Miss XL contests. Representations of fat bodies seem in this paper quite firmly restricted in their own assigned contexts. Is isolation really today’s condition for visibility of fat bodies?

Visibility and Identity Politics

In Miss XL contests as well as dieting stories, fatness is portrayed quite one-dimensionally, as a primarily aesthetic, feminine and personal issue. Its complex intertwinings in social and cultural power relations are largely ignored, although Miss XL contests are based on the acknowledgement of too tight beauty norms of our society. Miss XL stories resemble the ideology of women’s magazines addressing “big women”, and they also share a same problem. Ellen McCracken notes that these
special-interest magazines channel fat women’s desires for acceptance and non-stereotypical treatment into intensive attachment to beauty industries. Even though the magazines’ official ideology is to criticize the overemphasis on looks and appearances in today’s world, and to shift size-related beauty ideals, their main topics are somewhat controversially fashion, beauty and looks. Making the fat identity possible and desirable only through beauty products maintains the trivializing idea of measuring a woman’s worth by her looks. (McCracken 1993, 257-259). Both Miss XL and dieting stories largely maintain this trivialization of femininity.

Minna McGill has considered the potentially negative political implications of isolating fat women to a special interest magazine such as Me Naiset XL. In her opinion, isolation is not a relevant criticism since fat women have become generally more visible in popular magazines in Finland during the last years, especially in human interest stories. The only story genre where they are not seen is fashion and beauty – unless there is a separate XL fashion theme. (McGill 2001b, 45-48). Still, I do not believe that the increase of fat bodies in “general” publicity would erase the fact that fat people are still an underrepresented group, and that there are conventions that limit the potential contexts of fat representations. Fat bodies in 7 päivää magazine are not very often seen in other contexts and story genres than those considered here, or without fatness being an issue in the story. Some visibility is still supposedly better than no visibility, but restricting the possibilities for self-representation is a strong way of using power (see Shohat and Stam 1994, 190).

A potential problem in considering fat bodies from the point of view of genre restrictions and control is that of “overcharging” the images with negative meaning. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam point out that any representation or a subordinated group is easily seen as typical and full of allegorical meaning, whereas representations of dominant groups are seen as “naturally” diverse (Shohat and Stam 1994, 182-183). There are some isolated stories in 7 päivää, which do not directly fit the conventions I have sketched out in this paper, or which are a less typical combination of different conventions. However, restricted media representations of fatness do not “cause” narrow perceptions of fatness, even though there is an evident connection between them. An another way to look at the issue is that everyday ideas of fatness are never exclusively constructed through representations of fat embodiment – they might be formed more through the more available representations of “normal-weight” or thin bodies and fear of fatness. Or, the scarcity of media representations of fatness may set more emphasis on everyday social surroundings or other kinds of cultural imageries.

Indeed, it is very problematic and demands carefulness to even analyze certain media images as images of fatness. First, it runs the risk of reproducing the mockery included in the genealogy of “fat”. Second, it may maintain the common and discriminating view of defining a fat person primarily in terms of weight. Clearly it is important to ask what exactly are we studying when we study fatness: when does a body become fat? The popular medical terms, “obesity” and “overweight”, are nowadays usually defined in terms of Body Mass Index (BMI), weight in kilograms divided by the square of height in meters, where overweight begins at BMI 25, obesity at BMI 30. However, applying the same scale to all bodies without taking in account other factors than weight and height gives highly contestable results, which, at their best, can only be applied to evaluations of physical health, not quality of life. My starting point could only be visual perceptions. The normative fatness discourse is, however, quite impossible to dodge.

For research purposes I first decided to restrict my analysis on images of bodies that seem not only “on the heavier side” but bound to be defined excessively fat by any contemporary Western standards. I hoped to limit my material a bit this way and concentrate on actual fat bodies more than on fat speech of any body, but mostly I wanted to avoid the difficult power position of defining someone fat when s/he could be defined not fat as well. I rely here on the assumption that my own, culturally formed visual perceptions of what is “fat without doubt” are quite widely shared. Of course, this is highly problematic in many ways, but it seemed the only tangible option at this point.

The razor’s edge of the definition became especially apparent with the research material of this paper. As I have discussed, many of the Miss XL candidates were by no means “excessively fat” but obviously conformed to white Western beauty norms. Miss XL 2002, Heidi Varjoranta, emphasized
in an interview right after her selection that XL size does not mean fatness but “shapeliness”. She points out that she herself exercises regularly, eats healthy food and takes care of herself. In fact, Varjoranta was the lightest of that year’s candidates, being just barely over the “normal” weight in terms of BMI. Mira Markkanen, who was selected Model XL 2002, agreed with her in differentiating XL size from fatness. (7 päivää 48/2002).

Varjoranta still took part in the fat pride speech in same manner as earlier Miss XLs, declaring that “all XL women should carry their kilos with pride”. But the situation becomes awkward and problematic for the researcher: what does it mean to examine images of these women as representations of fatness, if they explicitly do not wish to be defined fat, and if they indeed would not and could not be my research topics without the context of Miss XL competition?

The matter is quite sensitive, and the situation leads to important questions of naming and identity politics. “Fat” is often understood as a mocking or ridiculing word, and a whole slang of political correctness has been developed around weight – “big” is often used instead of “fat”, and phrases such as woman/man of size, plus-sized or XL people, BBW (Big Beautiful Woman) and BHM (Big Handsome Man) being the most popular expressions used instead of overweight, obese or fat.

The American fat pride movement has taken the word fat and tried to turn its meaning into a category to identify with in a positive way, to make it a political term, much in the same manner as the valuations connected to the word “queer” were tried to reverse from degrading to affirmative. However, it is not possible to simply decide to separate a term from its previous uses and meanings, and “queer” just as “fat” can still be used and interpreted in insulting ways, although their potential contexts have broadened through queer and fat pride movements. But most importantly, both “fat” and “queer” derive their political force from their connections to practices of shame, degradation and insult. The meaning reversal draws on the power of the oppressive conventions in setting itself against them. (Butler 1993, 223-229). Therefore I choose to use the term “fat” than resort to weaker phrases or euphemisms.

Miss XL Varjoranta rather used other terms, XL size or shapeliness, instead of fat. She did however promote and include herself in public identity politics based on body size and gender, and she did willingly take part in a media event especially designed around fat embodiment. That makes her media representations relevant research material for me, even though I have chosen to work with different terms, and even though I still have some reservations. Her rejection of fatness seems in one way disappointing, but on the other hand she is right in trying not to widen the gap between “fat” and “normal-sized”. The question of where to draw the line is indeed difficult and has to be constantly reconsidered.

However, one of the greatest difficulties in establishing fatness as a category of difference and a basis of identity politics is probably the strong perception of fatness as something which is “one’s own fault”, never inescapable, always changeable at least by force. The agency of fat people is at once denied and forcefully demanded. Passivity and activity appear inextricably mixed, as fat people are often simultaneously considered lazy but overconsuming. The fat acceptance movement gains socio-cultural power by suggesting that the desire and even the ability of bodily change should not be thought of as possibilities for fat people, since fatness is as unavoidable bodily feature as skin color.

Permanence and the denial of change or transformability of fat bodies seem to be conditions for fat identity politics. Why identity politics do no seem to work without claims to stable categories and without essentializing the flesh into something “unavoidable” or genetically determined? Somehow the explanation power of “nature”, biology and science is still eagerly welcomed. In biosciences, for example, there is an increasing potency attributed to the gene as the source and origin of many “unwanted” bodily and mental qualities (Franklin 1995, 64). The same way of thinking is very prominent in obesity studies: much of the work done in this field concentrates on the quest of finding the “fat gene”, a gene that predisposes some people to fatness more than others or even determines people’s body shapes and sizes. The genetical point of view may be considered from two sides: the fat-condemning point of view may promote the pathologization of fatness as something comparable
to inheritable diseases – the fat acceptance movement finds stronger justification in the idea that some people are naturally fat without their own “fault”.

From a theoretical viewpoint it is interesting to consider how fatness differs from other vectors of difference, such as gender, race, sexuality. Feminist and post-structuralist criticisms have deconstructed the biological determinism that has been long used to justify gendered, racial, national, class-related, sexual hierarchies. However, fatness does not have a similar history of essentialism, but it has systematically been seen as a potentially changeable product of the subject’s own actions. It is extremely interesting that weight or body size is almost never included in the common lists of difference (gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, age etc.) in recent feminist studies, even though body size may in many situations be experienced as the person’s strongest defining feature.

As gender is not determined by biology but may change within a person’s life and depends on institutionalized agreements and cultural situations – as “race” is often impossible to name by a person’s appearance – why should the unstableness of fatness be a hindrance in taking it seriously as a category of difference in feminist discussions and in “body studies”? But what other reason could there be? How do different histories of subordination and different potentials for agency and change construct differences and hierarchies between differences? This still remains an open question to me.

**References:**


**Author:**

FM Katariina Kyrölä
Media Studies, University of Turku
Old Mill, Ruukinkatu 2-4, 20014 Turun yliopisto
jokaky@utu.fi
The numbers depend enormously on the method of defining “overweight”. However, Body Mass Index (weight in kilograms divided by height in meters squared; overweight>25, obese>30) has become an established measurement of “normal” weight in statistical reports, which are mostly made from the medical health risk point of view.

The *Hymy* magazine’s material is based on an oral notification from the editor-in-chief of *Hymy* magazine, Esko Tulusto, in which he informed me that he remembers a Miss Pullukka (Miss Plump) contest in *Hymy* sometime in 1972 or 1973.

Respectively, *Hymylehti* dominated the Finnish tabloid or gossip press market in the 1970’s with a monthly circulation of about four hundred thousand issues.

The translations of all quotes from the magazines are mine.

Whether the size and shape of Miss XL candidates is regulated by the tastes of the readers, the magazine’s editors, or other sponsor companies, is an important question here but difficult to answer. The choosing process of Miss XL goes as follows: *7 päivää* magazine and a sponsor model agency Europe Fashion choose semifinalists from all that have signed up for the contest (i.e. sent their picture and an application), then there are some semifinals arranged in different parts of Finland with sponsor juries as well, and finally the readers of *7 päivää* vote the winner from the last seven candidates. Also a Model XL is chosen by the jury every year. There is no pattern in the reader’s vote in terms of size: women from the lighter and heavier end of the contestants have been chosen as Miss XL.

The Finnish word “iloinen”, which is almost always used here, could be translated as cheerful, glad, merry, joyous, happy, easy-going. However, I have translated it here as “cheerful”, since it seems closest to this contextual meaning of “iloinen”. 