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Emerging Forms of Precarity in the Arts and Aesthetics

Ontological Precarity of Body Aesthetics

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Abstract: The arts and aesthetics are subject to different forms of precarity, namely *professional* and *ontological*, the latter relating to different forms of social pressure on creative expression. Based on this framework and considering body aesthetics as a global aesthetic and creative domain, this presentation aims to pinpoint, on the ground of relevant literature, emerging forms of *ontological precarity* that affect the aesthetics of the body, namely: social expectations, criticism, gatekeeping and social instrumentalization upon body aesthetics.

The human body is an instance and a symbol of identity and interface with the social. The aesthetics of the body, biological or artistic, is an expression of personhood. Ontological precarity of body aesthetics is therefore a clear stage for the precarity of individuals.

Expectations on Body Aesthetics

As artists are exposed to social expectations on style and content of their art, people in general are subject to social expectations about the physical appearance of the body and body adornment, with possible significant psychological consequences.

A basic expression of social expectation on body aesthetics is the one that involves the widespread expectancy (eventual resulting in obligation) that individuals prevent they social nudity. As first analyzed by Warren (1933), such expectancy derives from what he labels «the body taboo», considered as socially rooted in sexuality, but of weak consistency.

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Another relevant expression of social expectation on body aesthetics relates with the fact that in many industrialized countries the social norm of the lean body can lead, in individuals with a chronic belief that they do not correspond to this norm, to the shame of the personal body, with possible negative effects on their mental health (Brewis & Bruening, 2018).

A further face of social expectation on body aesthetics occurs in the context of cultural imperialism, defined as the non-reciprocal influence of the culture of a more powerful civilization, country, or institution on a less powerful one (Boyd-Barrett, 2018). Cultural imperialism on body aesthetics can result in the erosion of local body aesthetic values, and the alienated interiorization of external ones. An example is the spread of western-style business suit, in alternative to native clothes. The equivalent is expressed in the Napolitan song *Tu Vuò Fà l'Americano (You Want to Play American)*, by Renato Carosone, 1956: "You wear trousers showing a famous brand/you wear an hat with the peak raised/you trotting along Tuleto's streets/showing off yourself, to make people look at you/You'd like to be an American,/'merican, 'merican/(…)"

Criticism on Body Aesthetics

As artists are exposed to potential destructive criticism regarding their art, people in general are also subject to eventual damaging comments on their body aesthetics.

This is where body-shaming behaviors fit, which involve critical and potentially humiliating comments about someone's body, especially about their weight or size (Kenny & Nichols, 2017), but also about other of their characteristics, such as those of shape, musculature, skin, hairiness, anatomy, and eventual modification or marking. As research has observed, suffering a ridicule of the body can lead, especially during adolescence, to shame of the personal body, with possible negative consequences in terms of mental health (e.g., Brewis & Bruening, 2018). Besides, some equivalent of body-shaming might probably generalize to cloth-shaming.

Besides being exposed to social criticism on body aesthetics, individuals can also exert self-criticism on the same body attributes, a fact that can result in psychological disturbance (e.g., Williams & Levinson, 2022).

Gatekeeping on Body Aesthetics

Criticism on art can lead, among other factors, to its social gatekeeping, which spreads from subtle to clear censorship. Equivalently, gatekeeping can extend to the aesthetic attributes of the body itself, which can be confronted with individuals' opposition, non-compliance and strategies aimed to preserve personal freedom (DaCosta, 2006).

A relevant instance of the ontological precariousness of body aesthetics is reflected in the censorship to which the artistic representation of the body, especially its nudity, is subject. For example, one of the most illustrative cases is that of the censorship exercised, throughout history, on the statue of David, by *Michelangelo Buonarroti*, 1501-4 and its representations: in 1504 the character's genitals were covered with a wreath of leaves and photographs from the mid-nineteenth century show, that by this time, the wreath had been replaced by a vine leaf (Paoletti, 2015). Although the cover was removed in the nineteenth century, in 2020 a replica of the statue, displayed in Dubai, was partially occluded, and in 2023 the principal of a school in the United States was forced to resign following a complaint about the exhibition of a reproduction of the work, in an art education class (Solomon, 2023). In this sense, as argued by Lucie-Smith (2007), some of the current *political correctness* discourse on the artistic representation of the body seems a euphemism for its censorship.

Furthermore, the social system can censor forms of body appearance. Sometimes this form of censorship is exerted by the state, along with the school and the family. For instance, a case that became known as *affaire du string*, involved the suspension, in some French schools, of students who dressed by exposing part of their underwear (Scott, 2007). More recently, as noted by Cooper (2021), access to certain places can be barred based on bodily appearance, emerging in the media news of individuals, perceived as "fat" or "old," who are barred from entering bars or clubs (e.g., Chiorando, 2022; Rosenblatt, 2022) or who therefore see their work admission or progression limited (Yu, 2022). Besides, in an empirical study (Oh et al., 2020) it was observed that people can categorize other people's social class based on their clothing and that people with more "rich" clothing are judged as more competent.

In other cases, the social system imposes certain body appearance, as the one resulting from the use of school and work uniforms or dress-codes, as depicted in *They are Happy*, Nikolai Belyaev, 1949, that depicts a group of Russian children in uniform. As some research demonstrates (e.g., Lim et al, 2021) such imposition can lead, in some cases, to body-shame, self-objectivation and powerlessness.

In addition, gatekeeping on body aesthetics can occur in the context of cultural absolutism - the position that holds (actively or passively) that a particular culture has a supreme value over the others (Howard, 1993). A frequent situation of cultural absolutism is the tendency to consider as abnormal or even inadequate aesthetic choices about clothing and body adornment that do not conform to those of the dominant cultural referent of the social context (Moule, 2012). In this sense, for example, as reported by Ely (2001, as cited by Moule, 2012), the use of a traditional African hairstyle by a student can be wrongly taken by a teacher as an affirmation of defiance and rebellion. A more recent example is related to the use of the veil (the *hijab*) by Muslim women, as observed by Scott (2007): if, in some cases, the *hijab* is imposed by the state or the family, against the possible desire of individuals (Syahrivar, 2021); in other cases, the hijab is forbidden by state institutions, alienating the personal expression of an aesthetic and identity choice of some of those women that insist in wearing it (Ruby, 2006).

Besides being exposed to social gatekeeping on body aesthetics, individuals can also exert self-imposed gatekeeping regarding their body. In this sense, the concept of aesthetic self-censorship may eventually be applied to (potentially harmful) behaviors of altering the normal appearance of the body, such as certain cases of: exaggerated food restriction and other ways of providing thinness, eventually derivable in *anorexia* (Treasure et al, 2015); plastic surgery, which can become addictive (Suissa, 2008); and excessive tanning, eventually derivable in *tanorexia* (i.e., additive tanning, usually by solariums) (e.g., Laporta-Herrero & Latorre-Forcén, 2020).

Instrumentalization of body aesthetics

As art and artists are instrumentalized, for religious, political or commercial reasons, body aesthetics can also be opportunistically used.

In a broad perspective, it can thus be considered the instrumentalization of which the body, especially the feminine, can be targeted, depending on its natural aesthetic attributes or that result from adornment. In this sense, a review of studies on the representation of women in the media (APA, 2007) revealed that, more often than men, women are represented as sexual and decorative objects, for example with provocative and revealing clothes of the body, Consequently, massive exposure to the media has the potential to develop in individuals a representation of women as sexual objects (APA, 2007).

Conclusion

Seen as a form of oppression, social pressures on and possible alienation of individuals' rights regarding their body aesthetics can be expected to have a negative impact in their health and well-being. Actually, studies in the psychology of oppression (e.g., David & Derthick, 2017) show that oppression in general naturally tends to act as a stressor with significant negative impact of that kind. Specifically, depending on the specific oppressive conditions, and specific psychological and group reactions to them, the experience of oppression can have a variety of effects, like low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, suicide, substance use, stress-connected heart disease, poor school/work performance, and low life satisfaction (David & Derthick, 2014, 2017).

Finally, a note is due on how to possible counter-act on the *ontological precarity* that affects the aesthetics of the body. Since it is impossible to reflect deeply on this aspect in this presentation, some exemplary ways in which art itself can function as a form of intervention in the problem at hand are offered. First, art can help to disclose and visualize the oontological precarity of body aesthetics. For instance, the movie *Piggy*, by Carlota Pereda, 2022, tells the story of an overweight teen bullied by a clique of cool girls while holidaying in her village. Furthermore, art can help deconstruct social standards that ground social pressure on body aesthetics. For example, in the *Sketch Series*, «rEvolution» Agency, 2013, it is shown how a real (raw-boned) body would look if it would imitate the fashion's standard for a (lean) body. Art can also contribute to convey messages that are the opposite of the messages conveyed by social pressures on body aesthetics. For instance, in *Mona Lisa*, Crios Serrano, 2016, a poster for an Amnesty International campaign, Gioconda appears almost totally covered near the message: "A woman's body is a work of art. Over 100 women are killed every year for refusing to cover themselves".[2]

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[2] For more examples, visit the section «Body Appearance/Adornment» of the website *Art for Human Rights* (https://sites.google.com/view/artforhumanrights)

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