Fear and Sin: Images of Fat in Contemporary North America

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Awareness is growing of the tyranny of the beauty culture in North America. Scholarly work on physical attractiveness shows that ideas of beauty and ugliness have been incorporated into contemporary culture to the extent that people attribute good qualities to the beautiful, and as a society, reward the beautiful (Synnott 1989; Webster and Rissel 1983). At the same time, obsessions with the attainment of beauty can be psychologically damaging and even physically destructive (Wolf, 1990).

Wolf indicts the beauty and advertising industries for luring women in dangerous obsessions with their face and body. She further argues that the beauty myth which enslaves women grows out of a Western religious tradition which casts women as the wicked embodiment of sexual lust. In this sense, modern culture represses female oral appetite as the Victorians repressed female sexual appetite. She states that the pursuit of beauty and of thinness both have their origin in this general antiwoman bias of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

This analysis rests on the assumption that women are driven by a guilty sense of original sin while men are not. However, Delumeau argues that the development of the guilt neurosis characteristic of 20th century Western culture emerged between the 13th and 18th centuries as medieval Christianity became a secularized culture of sin and fear (1983). While some aesthetes starved themselves for God, others purged the flesh through flagellation and self-torture. These same impulses are rampant in the 20th century West, and are not restricted to women.

The above discussion suggests two major research questions. First, is there a difference between the ways fat and ugliness are construed in North American culture? Second, is there a difference between the ways fat is construed for men and for women? In this study, we attempt to answer these questions through an examination of recent images of fat in popular magazines and newspapers.

Two major conclusions emerge from our analysis. The first is that fat is associated with fault. Being fat seems to signify the horrifying results of a loss of personal control. Further, it appears that because