

In the air

How thin is too thin?

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In a recent satirical novel set in England in a dystopic near future, the „morbidly obese“ are confined, along with „the criminal, the antisocial, the inadequate, the feckless, the agitators, the disgraced professionals, the stupid, and the drug-addicted“, to Exclusion Zones surrounded by high fences topped with razor wire. ⁽¹⁾

While not - yet - a criminal offence, the problem of obesity certainly exercises minds (if not bodies) in Europe and the US.

Just as the so-called festive season got underway, with its traditional bout of over-indulgence, the press published the results of a *Eurobarometer* poll, showing that EU citizens have got bigger over the last few years. Our average height has increased, but so, in 11 out of the 15 countries surveyed, has our weight.

The average Luxemburger leads the field, weighing in at 2.7 kg heavier than in 2002.

55% of those consulted thought they did not have a weight problem, whereas 38% (more women than men, naturally) thought they were too fat.

But how fat is too fat?

There do exist objective measures, like the body mass index (though this is now criticised for not distinguishing between muscle and fat): roughly speaking, as an adult, a BMI of less than 18.5 means you're underweight, 18.6 to 24.9 is normal, 25 to 29.9, you're overweight and above that, you're considered obese.

But we don't perceive ourselves, or others, objectively.

Recently, two stories hit the headlines. The first concerns an overweight opera singer, who in 2004 revealed she'd been sacked from a Royal Opera House production of *Ariadne auf Naxos* the previous year for being too fat.

The story created media frenzy in Europe and the US. Aside from concern that her voice might have suffered (she underwent gastric bypass surgery and whittled herself down to 64 kg), other issues were at stake, such as the sexism implicit in the diva's story: one reviewer had apparently pointed out how overweight she was, while failing to mention that the tenor „had a stomach like a nine-months-pregnant woman.“

The second story concerns underweight models.

The regional government of Madrid banned models with a BMI of less than 18 (56 kg for 1.75 m) from the city's main fashion show: they were deemed to set a bad example to young Spanish women.

In the wake of this, pressure was put on London's Fashion Week to apply a similar ban. The British culture secretary criticised „stick-thin“ supermodels for encouraging young girls to starve themselves to be fashionable. She was backed up by the culture spokeswoman on the London Assembly, who declared that „with eating disorders on the increase, it is irresponsible to be glorifying an unnatural image that puts impressionable girls' and women's health at risk.“ The editor of *Glamour* magazine just shrugged and remarked that „one person's skinny is another's slender“.

One top British model, who has taken a lot of stick for being, well, stick-like, condemned the media's obsession with women's bodies. „No one's a winner,“ she complained, „thin women are disgusting and so are fat women.“

These stories raise serious questions of public health but also reveal a murky cultural obsession with body image.

It is obviously right to take action against obesity, especially in young people: there's no need to rehearse the health risks involved. And our Health Minister could usefully start by ordering Coca Cola to remove their omnipresent pairs of shiny machines, full of tooth-rotting, diabetes and hyper-activity inducing drinks and snacks from state-funded schools and hospitals: their presence makes nonsense of a government war on weight!

Similarly, anorexia is a serious medical problem that concerns more young women than is admitted and needs to be tackled. But this is where things get more complex.

Obesity can be opposed by concrete measures, promoting exercise, education in healthy living, diet, etc. Anorexia is a more insidious enemy.

Women's desire to be thin is driven by powerful cultural forces. To fight them, you have to counteract the huge pressures brought to bear on young female psyches, encased in naturally-shaped female bodies, by being constantly confronted with skeletal celebrities hailed as ideals of female beauty and success.

Stories like that of our diva tap into a deep cultural anxiety people in the western world feel about obesity.

The obese have long been victims of negative stereotyping - at best comic, at worst guilty of the deadly sins of Gluttony and/or Sloth. Today they are portrayed as „couch potatoes“, scoffing convenience food while watching junk TV or playing violent video-games: the moral undercurrent is always present while the highly complex socio-economic realities are largely ignored.

Obesity concerns both sexes while thinness concerns women alone: thin-



Photo: www.theage.com

„An unnatural image that puts women's health at risk?“

ness has become a cultural signifier - for women - of beauty, wealth and success.

Women in the public eye are forced to be thin in order to conform to the prevailing aesthetic norm - although today's obsessive portrayal of women as physically underdeveloped, starved and implicitly powerless says less about female desiderata than about masculine fantasies and fears in an age when women are struggling for equality ...

Today's icons - i.e. super-rich, super-thin stars - seem locked in a deadly media-driven contest to be the thinnest of the pack. One commentator recently quipped that not only do you have to be thin to be a celebrity, but that in some cases it is the only apparent reason. And should one of them gain or lose a kilo, it makes the headlines; sadly, not just of the gutter press.

The situation is even worse in the US, where stars are expected to be even thinner than in Europe. Revealingly perhaps, obesity is also more widespread in the States than in Europe ...

Many women whose BMI is perfectly normal consider themselves too fat - and even more absurdly, so do many whose BMI is too low.

So while we should certainly tackle the question: „how fat is too fat?“ we should also, urgently, ask another: „how thin is too thin?“

-> (1) *Queen Camilla* by Sue Townsend (Michael Joseph, 2006)