



Reading



Reading is an affective and reflective relationship with a text, whether it is a new, groundbreaking monograph or one of those books that keeps getting pulled off the shelf year after year. Unlike traditional reviews, the pieces in this section may veer off in new directions as critical reading becomes an extended occurrence of thinking, being, and creation.

Heather Kettenis, “Quantifying Beauty: Chad Lavin’s Eating Anxiety.”
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THE BOOK

Eating Anxiety: The Perils of Food Politics.
by Chad Lavin.
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

Quantifying Beauty:
Chad Lavin's *Eating Anxiety*



Heather Kettenis

Chad Lavin.

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Body-environment relations are central to Chad Lavin's *Eating Anxiety: The Perils of Food Politics*. By taking an interdisciplinary look at how food functions in various human contexts, Lavin uses food as a sort of vessel in and through which he attempts to critically "navigate contemporary political crises" issuing from "globalization, neoliberalism, and democracy."¹ Drawing on philosophical perspectives from medieval philosophy to actor-network theory, he attempts to

demonstrate how trends in food politics blur the traditional boundaries of the self. Lavin's perspective is political; however, he does allude to several ways in which food politics are also aesthetic concerns. I hope to explore his perspective on aesthetics and expand his aesthetic thoughts.

Lavin focuses on aesthetics in his discussions of body image, highlighting the contemporary tendency to react to the obese body with disgust. Inflammatory documentaries such as *Super Size Me* expose the hazards of the current, average American diet to those who consume it. Images meant to incite the audience to disgust include lingering close-ups of body parts – large stomachs, obese legs. The threat of ugliness alone, the film implies, could frighten people into changing their eating habits.² Lavin notes that "obese bodies are ... often characterized in the language of filth and disgust" today, but this is a change from the views of prior centuries.³ The change began during the Middle Ages when the aesthetics of manners and social eating became regulated and bodily functions stigmatized.⁴

Eventually, the ideal standard of beauty was linked to economic status. The obese body was glamorized as long as it was associated with rich people; but when poor people started getting fat, and "surplus calories became democratically affordable," the ideal body image moved in the opposite direction.⁵ When wealthy people flaunted their monetary success by reveling in the luxury of excess, additional body weight was desirable. In contrast, the modern-day definition of wealth is the ability to buy healthy food and the luxury of time in which to work out and create a thin, toned body. The body that possesses willpower and control is considered a "fit" body, "fit" to be maintained and to inoffensively participate in public life. Thus the judgment of bodies really is determined by the association of aesthetic standards with social, economic, or political classifications. Beauty in this context is perhaps most accurately understood as an indicator of wealth.

The tendency to quantify physical human beauty results not only from the equation of beauty with financial wealth but also from the pervasive contemporary tendency to quantify all kinds of value – from friendship to aesthetic value – in social networks. In general, Lavin implies that online social networks have a great deal of influence on how we believe our bodies relate to themselves and others. In his analysis of the change in dieting trends over the decades, Lavin discusses the recent focus on low carbohydrate diets like the Atkins diet. He states that when dieters discard their diets, this is not necessarily because they don't work –

limiting one's calorie intake remains an effective way to lose weight – but because of some change in the way people understand their environment. The theory that Atkins has promoted since the 1970s was only publicly embraced in the 1990s and 2000s: the so-called "information age." The Atkins diet works on the principle that carbohydrates stimulate production of insulin, the hormone that causes cells to convert excess carbohydrates into fat. Reducing one's intake of carbohydrates decreases fat production and eventually changes fat production into fat burning. As a regulation of hormones, this type of program "promises dietary success through the successful management of information."⁶ For just as computers send messages through internal circuits and global networks with the power to alter the world around us, our bodies send and receive hormonal messages that control the contents of our bodies. The idea that the human body is governed by messages seems most credible to a public that is comfortable with the idea of the Internet. As Latour observes, the prevalence of networks encourages us to understand our entire environment according to networked structures.⁷ Hayles describes this type of process as a "coevolutionary spiral in which humans and tools are continuously modifying each other."⁸ Haraway takes this view a step further by stating that "communications technologies and biotechnologies are the crucial tools recrafting our bodies."⁹ In the Internet age, she writes:

the key operation is determining the rates, directions, and probabilities of flow of a quantity called information. The world is subdivided by boundaries differentially permeable to information. Information is just that kind of quantifiable element (unit, basis of unity) which allows universal translation, and so unhindered instrumental power (called effective communication). ... In modern biologies, the translation of the world into a problem in coding [that is, of transmitting information,] can be illustrated by molecular genetics, ecology, sociobiological evolutionary theory, and immunobiology.¹⁰

I would add weight management to Haraway's list. This brings me to the latest trend in health and fitness training: wearables. Although such devices lie outside the scope of Lavin's book, his arguments inspire critical perspectives regarding the influence of such technologies on the aesthetic notions that motivate weight management. Placed directly on the body, these devices measure someone's steps, heart rate, burning calories, and so on. In other words, wearables suggest a quantifiable self. People have embraced the practice of tracking these numbers and bringing

them within particular, predetermined ranges that correlate with the thin, strong body currently understood as aesthetically beautiful.

Accepted weight-management practice therefore relies on data collection – data about our bodies and data about food. The latter takes the form of food labels (“Nutrition Facts”) and food journals. These have been revolutionized by Internet sites and software that not only count calories but also allow dieters to track their protein, fat, and carbohydrate intakes in efficient ways. Just as in Rich Andrew’s analysis, people judge others’ personal beauty and desirability according to the number of “Likes” or “followers” they have, physical beauty can now be judged according to the number of miles, hours of workout, or calories that a body can run, endure, or burn, respectively.¹¹ Like someone’s number of “friends” may be an indicator of their popularity and superiority, food intake and body movement numbers can be publicly displayed on sites like Fitbit as indications of someone’s “fitness.” In fact, in the social media world, it is possible that users might look at the amount of weight a person has lost or the number of calories they have consumed alongside or even instead of the person’s photograph when forming a judgment on their beauty. These modifiable factors and numbers might satisfyingly overshadow opinions of traditional aesthetic beauty for people who believe they have other imperfections they are unable to change. Could a numerical judgment of beauty be considered more objective, realistic, or universal than perceptions of beauty that vary with different people’s perspectives?

These numerical standards of beauty are easily called into question as many of the wearable pedometers and calorie counters available today are often rated by features and style rather than accuracy. Numbers have the appearance and the reputation of objectivity, but they are subject to mismeasurement and misinterpretation. The designation of ideal ranges within which the measurements must fall is similarly questionable. The problem is analogous to that of medical diagnosis, which must create categories to determine the difference between illness and health or obesity and its opposite: the categories do not apply to every patient. Once the ideal ranges or diagnostic categories are agreed upon, the decision is treated as objective and fixed; but in reality it relies on subjective determinations or statistical averages that leave room for friction at the categories’ boundaries. In diagnosis for example, it is not unheard of for someone’s test results to indicate a disease that the patient does not have (a false positive) or for someone to test negatively for a condition that they actually have (a false negative). Lavin discusses another example of misleading categorization according to body mass

index (BMI) tables. A correct reading of a BMI table can lead to the mistaken classification of a fit, muscular person as obese. BMI tables were initially created using actuarial tables generated by insurance companies, linking excess body weight to shorter life spans and increased healthcare costs.¹² It is true that excess weight correlates with shorter life spans and greater costs, but this is not the whole story. The lesson to be taken here is that quantified judgments of human physical beauty or “fitness” are not at all universal – but arbitrary.

One of the goals of weight loss – to achieve an acceptable BMI and minimize health risks – is the premise behind the recent designation of obesity as an epidemic. Discussing the consequences of obesity for public health adds another dimension to the current aesthetic standard that glorifies thin bodies. Lavin points out that in the media and public lectures, news reporters and healthcare professionals often draw on maps, created by the Center of Disease Control, to demonstrate that obesity is a public health hazard. These “Obesity Prevalence Maps” show the United States in various colors that change over time. In 1990, for example, Texas is shown in blue, indicating that 10–14% of its residents were considered obese. By 2010, Texas dons an alarming red color, indicating a population in which more than 30% is obese. The typical presentation animates the maps to show the entire United States gradually changing from healthy blue to obese and diseased red. The maps are virtually identical to the “surveillance maps” used by the CDC to assess the prevalence of actual infectious diseases such as influenza.¹³ These striking visual presentations impress upon the public the dire nature of the obesity problem. They scare people into thinking that obesity is spreading just like the influenza virus during flu season. Am I more likely to catch obesity if I live in a certain area? Am I at increased risk of catching obesity within the next 10 years? I’d better make sure that I contain the spread of obesity within myself to make sure I don’t destroy the health of those around me. The aesthetic phenomenon of the “prevalence map” medicalizes obesity by translating numerical data into visual imagery that disseminates the data in a manner digestible to a public that submits to the authority of quantifiable data on a regular basis. In the same manner that the prevalence of networks, messages, and computations shaped our understanding of weight loss as a hormonal mechanism, the CDC’s maps quantify and aestheticize obesity in a format intended to make the general public understand obesity as an epidemic – in other words, to shock people into action. The idea behind the dissemination of these maps is that as much as many people focus on

our personal responsibility for what our bodies ingest and digest, we are still part of a body politic, ruled by biopolitics.

Many people cite their health as their reason for losing weight. They want better endurance, lower risk of heart disease, diabetes, stroke, sleep apnea, arthritis, and other associated medical conditions; they want to improve their fertility and live longer.¹⁴ Physicians do recommend weight loss as a treatment for such conditions. In that sense, obesity is indeed a medical condition. However, it is misleading to consider obesity as a condition on par with influenza and Ebola because obesity is not technically infectious.

Furthermore, many people want to lose weight not because of medical reasons but aesthetic ones. In order to achieve a total metamorphosis into a thin, ideal, and “fit-for-a-bikini” body, these people chain themselves somewhat paradoxically to the quantified body described above. To achieve a reality that is particular, concrete, visible and tangible, fleshy and desirable, the dieters envision themselves as abstract transmissions of messages that imply no flesh at all, and are only representable by numbers. Moreover, the ideal numbers and the desired sensible reality do not necessarily go hand in hand. The loss of a significant amount of weight produces irreversible changes to the body, not all of which are aesthetically desirable. For example, someone who loses over 100 pounds may possess excessive folds of stretched and empty skin that will not fit the thinner body without surgical intervention. This failure to achieve physical perfection in front of the mirror may encourage a focus on numbers as opposed to sensible qualities as bearers, markers, and standards of beauty that may prove to be more satisfying to those who achieve dramatic weight loss.

Could this emphasis on quantifying the body, treating it like a machine, be a step towards the creation of a cybernetic chimeric human? And are we ready for this step? How to make the body more beautiful, to create something new and machinic when the flesh body in and of itself is not enough? Haraway discusses how cyborg politics rejoice in the “illegitimate fusions of animal and machine ... conceived as coded devices.”¹⁵ In contrast, the struggle with food that Lavin describes is very much a struggle against the fusion that is the process of eating, during which the environment literally becomes ourselves and vice versa.¹⁶ Consciousness of this self-diffusing fusion produces the anxiety that human bodies are animal bodies, and this anxiety may encourage us to withdraw our fleshy bodies behind the abstract veils of quantification and

information. In a contradictory identity crisis, we resist interspecies fusion by embracing cybernetic fusion. Either way, we experience the loss of our singularity.

Analyzing the political implications of eating, Lavin observes that we strive for control of our bodies and the numbers implied thereby when everything else in our lives is beyond our control. “Beneath the veneer of the debates about obesity we can find widespread anxieties about the status of the narrative of individual responsibility that anchors liberal politics,” he writes.¹⁷ “The saturation of food discourse with fear and anxiety is symptomatic of the broader concerns about economic power, self-determination, and the reliability of government institutions and the scientific establishment.”¹⁸ The contradictory idea that a supposedly public-health problem, an epidemic, boils down to a matter of private, individual, personal responsibility for one’s own quantified body exemplifies a general, pervasive attempt to take control of our relations to the world by shifting the location of politics from the public to the private realm.¹⁹ I would add that we try to quantify beauty when control of our own aesthetic presentation – how our bodies appear and feel to others – seems to elude us both in the mirror and the abstract realm of the online network.

• Notes •

- 1 Chad Lavin, *Eating Anxiety: The Perils of Food Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), ix.
- 2 Ibid., 81.
- 3 Ibid., 80.
- 4 Ibid., 32.
- 5 Ibid., 73.
- 6 Ibid., 15.
- 7 Ibid., 18.
- 8 N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 30-31.
- 9 Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge), 164.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Rich Andrew, "Fakebook," *Evental Aesthetics* 1, no. 2, (2012):53.
- 12 Lavin, *Eating Anxiety*, 74-75.
- 13 Ibid., 84. Some examples of the maps Lavin and I discuss are available at: <http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/prevalence-maps.html> or http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/downloads/obesity_trends_2010.ppt.
- 14 <http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/adult/causes/index.html>
- 15 Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, 150.
- 16 Lavin, *Eating Anxiety*, 137.
- 17 Ibid., xii-xiii.
- 18 Ibid., xiii.
- 19 Ibid., xiv.

• References •

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Haraway, Donna. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1991.

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