

Book Reviews

***The Media and Body Image* by Maggie Wykes and Barrie Gunter, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, Sage Publications, 2005 (Reprinted 2006), pp. 252, ISBN - 1076194248 3.**

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The media is undoubtedly the major formative source of contemporary life. Historically, the justification for the need and necessity of the media was centred on the possibility of radical realization of democracy. But the postmodern scenario adds more to the ontology of the media, which makes some thinkers to diagnose it as merely simulating, simulating to the extent of limiting 'reality' to 'media made reality'. Such a metamorphosis of the media cautions Jean Baudrillard to observe that a major share of the formative force that determines the postmodern condition is the model of the media made reality, 'which becomes determinant of the real' and erases the boundary between hyper/constructed/media-made reality and every-day life. In effect, the media not only turn away from their critical function but also act as a system of playful self-reference, which create reality as the supportive system of their extension or marketing strategy.

A good number of studies have come out problematizing the role and function of the media. The book under review, Maggie Wykes and Barrie Gunter's, 'The Media and Body Image', is a notable contribution to critical media studies, which in a hitherto unexplored fashion lays before us how the media produce the image of 'body-self' in a constructive engagement of the feminine body through a slim aesthetics that reduces the female bodies into something perpetually under-expressed and wanting. The book goes deep into the manipulative role that the media play in making it/them the sole source of contemporary creation/interpretation of the image of the body by imploding the other sources of meaning of life into itself in an authoritarian, hegemonic manner. The set of critical queries the authors unleash in the work begins by pointing out 'the lack of research on the media and eating disorders' and the resultant theoretical vacuum. Justifying the authors' claim, the book approaches the problematique by striking a critical convergence of theoretical perspectives and studies on the media, body image and the socio-cultural discourses on subjective identity, history of representation and the related empirical assessments, mainly of audience response, which they generate out of mapping the deeply fragmented media-made contemporary living. Such an endeavour opens a text within the text which invites us to read the book also as the inevitable gender political consequences of media representations. As a divergent

textual engagement, the book maps out the discourses that mark a peculiar combination of the constantly dissipated cultural and communication networks created by the media to project an image larger than itself.

Divided into two parts, the book discusses both historical and contemporary sources of generating interconnectedness between the slim aesthetics and eating disorders and the dynamics of the media's influence on the body to construct an acceptable feminine body concept, how it is culturally constructed and finally how such discourses are gathered in the combining exercise of constructing the aesthetics of the acceptable femininity from a variety of glossy-cheesy identities which include celebrity-models, stardom-screen image etc, in the first part. It also makes a praiseworthy close look into a diversified range of empirical studies about body shape ideals, gender and body image, diet and discourse, sex and slenderness and the thin technology which measure the length and breadth of the media's representational power. The second part concentrates more on both the theoretical and empirical aspects that deal with the audience impact of the supra-culture of the media. The problematique of the book touches its expected upper range as it discusses the clinical problems created by the media with its representation of the body image to strike the concluding hints at body messages and body meanings.

It was Erich Fromm who had equated the consumerist culture and its philosophy of life with commodification of all aspects of life, which slips into a culture of the machine. He observed, 'the cybernetic man is so alienated that he experiences his/her body only as an instrument for success. His/her body must look youthful and healthy; it is experienced narcissistically as a most precious asset on the personality market'¹. Sexuality becomes technical skill to perform like a love machine, emotions and love becomes 'just having fun', the world becomes a sum of lifeless artifacts: from synthetic food to synthetic organs, and thus for the shattered and dissipated human being. Perhaps the media as the virtual extension of the sum total of consumerist culture completes the circle by affirming the macho image of man and market with its other, the more inclusive slim aesthetics of the female body, to legitimize 'the unbearable lightness of being' it produces with its larger than life image to go beyond the uniqueness of different cultures. As the authors rightly point out, '...the thin is a feminist issue because it is symptomatic of a context within which power works to construct very particular models of acceptable femininity in a range of discourses such as a family, the law, religion and most systematically, covertly and invasively, the media'².

The book, as it takes us along with its very intricate and critically interrogating style of penetrating into the innumerable layers of meaning and modes of respectable existence as women that the media representation of the body image dictates to

1 Erich Fromm, (1984), *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, Penguin, pp. 464-65.

2 Maggie Wykes and Barrie Gunter, (2006), *The Media and Body Image*, London, Sage Publications.

women, opens another window to the reader, that is, the supra-cultural framework of the media that arrests from within the multicultural and cross cultural dialogical engagements. In other words, the study highlights that the media made fantasies of the slender-female body and its invariable relation with reputation, success and acceptability becomes in reality an acceptable norm for the women across many non-western cultures as well. Therefore, the story of the global culture industry, to use a relatively old terminology, and its alignment with the slim aesthetics and a supra-culture of the media with the ideals of 'cosmeticized' females bodies, ready to be sold, which ultimately denies cultural identity to the female bodies, becomes very much part of the field of interrogation that is projected by the book. However, the significant hints to such possible readings do not thicken in the study as the area of contention addressed by the book is mainly the western societies.

As the noteworthy list of references and bibliography given at the end indicates, the vast corpus of the theoretical and empirical resources the book made use of invites the attention of any serious reader. It indeed is the novelty of the work which provides a very contemporary reading experience of the book even after five years of its publication.