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'*Bodies* is a timely counterblast against our harsh new visual culture, obsessed with the perfection of the physical self.' Janice Turner, *The Times*

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'*Bodies* is a terrifying, terrific read.' Chitra Ramaswamy, *Scotland on Sunday*

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BODIES

Susie Orbach

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To Lukas, Lianna, Lilli,
Judah, Lahn and Lila

INTRODUCTION

Every day my inbox, like most people's, fills with invitations to enlarge the size of my penis or my breasts, to purchase the pleasure and potency booster Viagra and to try the latest herbal or pharmaceutical preparation to lose weight. The exhortations have fooled the spam filter and the popular science pages, which too sing of implants and pills to augment body or brain and new methods of reproduction which bypass conventional biology. Meanwhile little girls can go on the Miss Bimbo website to create a virtual doll, keep it 'waif' thin with diet pills and buy it breast implants and facelifts. They are being primed to be teenagers who will dream of new thighs, noses or breasts as they peruse magazines which display page after page of a look that only ten years ago had the power to evoke horror in us as we recoiled at skeletal models reminiscent of famine victims. Simultaneously, government pronouncements grimly warn of an epidemic of obesity. Your body, all these phenomena shout, is your canvas to be fixed, remade and enhanced. Join in. Enjoy. Be part of it.

As a practising psychotherapist and psychoanalyst, I see the impact of calls for bodily transformations, enhancements and 'perfectibility' in the consulting room. People do not necessarily come in with particular body troubles, but whatever their other emotional predicaments and conflicts, concern for the body is nearly always folded into them, as though it were perfectly commonplace to be telling a story in which body dissatisfaction is central. Like many of us, the people I work with wish to and do reshape their bodies in both small and dramatic

ways. They find fault with their bodies and say it makes them feel better, more in control, to improve them. Like most of us, they do not like to believe that they are being unduly influenced by outside pressures and may disdain such an idea, with its crude sense of manipulation. Whether followers of fashion or health trends or not, we take for granted that looking good for ourselves will make us feel good. And yet there is a subtle tracery of outside urgings which works on us, creating a new and often dissatisfied relationship with our bodies.

The sense that biology need no longer be destiny is gaining ground and so it follows that where there is a (perceived) body problem, a body solution can be found. A belief in both the perfectible body and the notion that we should relish or at least accede to improving our own body has not, however, solved the problem. On the contrary, it has exaggerated the problem and contributed to what we observe today – a progressively unstable body, a body which to an alarming degree is becoming a site of serious suffering and disorder.

Our bodies are increasingly being experienced as objects to be honed and worked on. Men are targeted with steroids, sexual aids and specific masculine-oriented diet products. Children's bodies, too. Photographers now offer digitally enhanced baby and child photos – correcting smiles, putting in or removing gaps between the teeth, straightening out wobbly knees, turning little girls into facsimiles of china dolls. The web addresses of these conjurors show no sense of irony (see, for example, www.naturalbeauties.homestead.com), since they believe that enhancing photos is a version of natural beauty, the real thing. Girlie-sexy culture now entrances more rather than fewer of us. Putting the body on show and making it appear 'attractive' are presented as fun, desirable and easily accessible. Body beautiful and the goal of perfectibility have

been democratised. Invitingly set out as available to everyone in any country whatever their economic situation, the right body is trumpeted as a way of belonging in our world today. This democratic call for beauty, disconcertingly, wears an increasingly homogenised and homogenising form, with the images and names of the global style icons pressed on the lips and the eyes of the young and the not so young. While some people may be able to opt in and do so joyfully, a larger number cannot. For the democratic idea has not extended to aesthetic variation; instead the aesthetic has paradoxically become narrower over the last few decades. The slim aesthetic – with pecs for men and ample breasts for women – bedevils those who don't conform, and even those who do happen to fit can carry a sorrowful insecurity about their own bodies.

A constant fretfulness and vigilance take hold for many from the moment they wake until the time they fall asleep. Their bodies are on high alert. The norm has become to worry. In another time, we would have called such anxieties an illness and, seeing how many suffer, we would have called it an epidemic. But we don't. We have become so implicated in variants of body preoccupation ourselves, and girls and women in particular so colonised by it, that the preoccupation has become second nature – almost 'natural' and invisible.

If, however, we do look, we see that the preoccupation with the body is disturbing in its capacity to affect almost an entire life, from childhood through to old age. Young boys' yearnings to emulate a great sportsman's agility are now focused on the desire for the look of a six-pack. Girls as young as four have been made bodily self-conscious and are striking sexy poses in their mirrors which are more chilling than charming, while greater numbers of women in old age homes are showing signs of long-term eating disorders. Few would say that such

concerns come only from outside pressures. We experience the wish for more perfect bodies as our own desire, as indeed it is, yet it is hard to separate out the ways bodies are seen, talked about and written about and the effect of that on our personal perception of our own bodies and other bodies. The body has become a new focus in both women's and men's lives, no longer something secure or ordinary in itself. A new rhetoric of detox, weight training, brushing, irrigation, cleansing is proposed, inclining us to watchfulness and determination where our body is concerned. Those who had previously paid little heed to fashion or health now find themselves caught up in attempts to make the best of themselves and to take responsibility for their health and well-being. The individual is now deemed accountable for his or her body and judged by it. 'Looking after oneself' is a moral value. The body is becoming akin to a worthy personal project.

Feature writers fill endless column inches with advice about how we should care for ourselves. Television programmes focus on the bonuses, the necessity and the moral superiority of paying attention to individual health and beauty. Politicians urge us to take personal responsibility. Meanwhile our visual world is being transformed through an intensification of images which represent the body and parts of the body in ways that artfully convey a sense that our own bodies are seriously in need of reshaping and updating. Without even noticing we may willingly accept the invitation, eager to stay up to date.

The preoccupation with thinness and beauty which has been eroding individual self-worth for years has recently been joined by another fixation: the rising rate of obesity. An ordinary reliance on one's body to signal its dietary needs appears to have evaporated, to be replaced by scrutiny and despair as

one struggles to control a body now designated as rapacious. Diet companies are growing, with a newcomer, NutriSystem, hitting the *Fortune* 500 fastest-growing companies as it moved from profits of $1 million in 2004 to $85 million in just two years. New gyms and health bars keep opening. New foods keep being invented. Magazines devoted to weight, shape and health expand their circulation. A relentless desire to reshape the body is evident everywhere. Cosmetic surgical procedures are occupying more of our television screens and our purses (with a growth rate of $1 billion a year), implying that resculpting is easy and an expression of self-worth. On top of all this, reproduction is being reconfigured: young women are freezing embryos for future use, having access to IVF at ever-younger and ever-younger ages, and a new phenomenon, the transgendered man, is reproducing.[1]

Late capitalism has catapulted us out of centuries-old bodily practices which were centred on survival, procreation, the provision of shelter and the satisfaction of hunger. Now, birthing, illness and ageing, while part of the ordinary cycle of life, are also events that can be interrupted or altered by personal endeavour in which one harnesses the medical advances and surgical restructurings on offer. Our body is judged as our individual production. We can fashion it through artifice, through the naturalistic routes of bio-organic products or through a combination of these, but whatever the means, our body is our calling card, vested with showing the results of our hard work and watchfulness or, alternatively, our failure and sloth. Where once the body of the manual worker could be easily identified through brawn and muscle, now it is the middle-class body that must show evidence of being worked on at the gym, through yoga or any number of body practices which aim to display what the individual has achieved

through diligent exercise. For young people it is very much a case of take care or beware. Users of social networking sites often post unflattering pictures of individuals which are then 'snarked' and negatively commented on.[2] The rise of public bitching about the body is accompanied by the dissemination of images throughout the World Wide Web.

Commercial pressures delivered today by celebrity culture, branding and industries which make their profits by destabilising the late-modern body have eradicated most of our prior feeling towards and understanding of the body. Our bodies no longer make things. In the West, robotics, mechanised farm equipment, pre-prepared goods from food to building packs, motorised transport, high-tech warfare and so on have replaced much ordinary physical activity and labour. We don't tend to repair things either, for mass production means it is cheaper to replace them. Our relations to the physical and physical work are shifting. Where working-class bodies were shaped by the musculature of heavy physical work; low-paid jobs in the service industry and computer-based jobs across the class spectrum leave no such physical indicators. Indeed, many of us have to make an effort to move about during the day or as we work. In an updating and democratising of the habit of the leisured classes (who didn't do physical labour) of decorating themselves as amusement and social marker, we are invited to take up this activity too. Thus we can observe something new occurring. Our bodies are and have become a form of work. The body is turning from being the means of production to the production itself.

The fallout from these changes is visible in the consulting rooms of psychotherapists, psychologists, counsellors, psychoanalysts and doctors. Here we see a rising number of cases of what I call bodily instability and body shame. It has

become ever more evident that our understanding of bodies needs new explanations and theories. Whether we're trying to fathom the willingness and desire of so many people to change the size or shape of their penises, breasts, bums and tums, or attempting to comprehend the experience of a man with a phantom limb, or decoding troubling psychosomatic symptoms, or dealing with anorexia, bulimia and any of the body dysmorphias, the Descartian or Freudian conceptions of the body now seem inadequate. The mind–body link is being transformed. Orthodox psychoanalytic theory about the mind's ability to commandeer the body has fallen short. In this time of body instability what becomes ever clearer is that the natural body is a fiction. A thorough consideration of bodies today is urgently required.

Of course, looking around the world at the many varieties of bodily gesture and decoration,[3] it is easy to see the ways in which bodies have always been an expression of a specific period, geography, sexual, religious and cultural place. Lengthening necks, decorating faces, veiling heads, revealing ankles, wearing business suits, colouring hair, tattooing arms, binding girl's feet, inserting gold teeth, covering heads, practising circumcision on males and females, or painting fingernails in particular ways are all immediate signs of being marked or marking oneself as belonging to a specific group. Bodies are recognised by the costumes and the gaits that befit the groups we come from and wish to belong to or identify with. Our bodily codes and behaviours constitute who we are. And while we might not regard them as purposeful practices, they nevertheless show us that our taken-for-granted body is neither natural nor pure but a body that is inscribed and formed by the accretion of myriad small specific cultural practices. It is now possible to see that, in certain respects, there has never

been an altogether simple, 'natural' body. There has only been a body that is shaped by its social and cultural designation. What I shall argue in this book, however, is that current cultural discourse on the body means that we have entered a new epoch of body destabilisation, and that there is a new franticness surrounding the body induced by social forces which are absorbed and transmitted in the family, where we first acquire our bodily sense.

This does not mean that we experience our bodily practices as alien. As we perform our exercises, do our hair, put on our clothes, we are underpinning how we wish to be seen and how we see ourselves. We prepare with pleasure. Our bodily practices don't come to us from on high as a prescription to follow like some catechism. Cultural identities are transmitted in the most ordinary and primary of interactions between babies and parents. They are the very stuff of the relationship. The way babies are carried, nurtured, spoken to, fondled, fed and engaged with represents not only a set of cultural practices that mothers, fathers, nannies, grandparents have absorbed and are passing on; they also become the essence of the child's experience of his or her own body.

It was ever thus and was not something we needed to pay much heed to. Boy children raised to be warriors developed the necessary physical and emotional attributes that entailed, while girls were raised to be demure and sit quietly and sweetly with their legs crossed. Their bodies were appropriately expressive without being questioned. An English schoolboy of the 1960s would be instantly recognisable and distinguishable from his German or Chinese counterpart, by his posture, his clothing and the physical field his body occupied. Each boy's embodiment was constitutive of his sense of self. Bodies are first formed in infancy and shaped according to the social and

individual customs of the families they are born into, so that they reflect the kinds of bodies that are suited for the lives they will need to live.

Of course, sometimes bodies went wrong. Not medically or organically, but they somehow refused to behave as they were meant to. They stopped working quite right. A limb became paralysed, or a woman appeared with a swollen pregnant-looking stomach when neither intercourse nor impregnation had taken place. A man might become sexually obsessed with a high heel and be unable to ejaculate without fondling or seeing one. Such phenomena captivated Sigmund Freud in the late nineteenth century and he became fascinated by the relationship between mind and body: more specifically, the routes of the troubled body in the workings on the mind. Talking to his patients, he set about tracing the origins of bodily symptoms for which there was no medical basis in the individual's physical make-up or heredity. From there he drew links between what individuals had experienced, their construction and memory of what had happened and how they made sense of that experience in the light of their unconscious longings and conflicts. Freud convincingly demonstrated that the mind could exert a powerful influence on the body. His work, although slow to be taken up initially, has revolutionised how we see the relationship and the interaction between the mind and the body.

Freud's insights have deservedly compelled us for over a hundred years. They are not only the basis of a psychoanalyst's stance and toolkit but have penetrated the medical field so that it is now commonplace to try to evaluate the impact of stress on the immune, endocrine and digestive systems or on the largest of our organs, the skin. Today we don't think twice about linking eczema with psychological distress. We don't

dismiss the chemical irritants that provoke itching and redness but we rarely stop there; we pursue the relationship between emotions, personal story and the various body systems.

What Freud showed us, first of all, was that a 'natural' human sexuality was a misperception. Sexual desire is replete with conflict, longing and fantasy. In our epoch, I contend, the body itself has grown as complicated a place as sexuality was for Freud's. It too is shaped and misshaped by our earliest encounters with parents and carers, who also contain in themselves the forces and imperatives of our culture, with its panoply of injunctions about how the body should appear and be attended to. Their sense of their own bodily lacks and strengths, their hopes and fears about physicality, will play themselves out on the child. In my consulting room, their impact on the child's bodily sense and his or her adult wearer's bodily instability becomes clear. What I am finding new and troubling is the prevalence of distressed parental bodies inside the body experience of the adults I see. What is emerging now is a transgenerational transmission of anxious embodiment.

Early on in my working life as a psychotherapist, I picked up the rumblings of body distress through the eating and body-image difficulties I encountered with people in the consulting room. I wrote about the ways in which, tucked into notions of thinness and fatness, were complex social and psychological ideas and feelings that were having difficulty being expressed directly. Since I wrote *Fat is a Feminist Issue* and *Hunger Strike* (1978 and 1986), the problems I sought to describe have mushroomed: eating problems and body distress now constitute an ordinary part of everyday life for many people and many families. With more and more countries entering global culture, the symbolic meanings attached to fat and thin have come to assume a shared significance for many whose recent historic