BODY AND IDENTITY

It has become a widely shared theoretical point of departure in modern and postmodern discourses on the body that the human body is not merely an external, innate - biological, physical - reality, but a social object, a 'surface,' on which present and past events, institutional and non-institutional power leave their marks. Human body is the bearer of the continuity of individual life, and at the same time, it is also the signifier of similarities and differences. Hence, it is a surface that is able to represent the self, and also to take part - through the play of similarity and difference - in the processes of identity formation.

Recent years have witnessed a veritable explosion of interest in the body in social theory - an explosion that cannot be explained by the changes of intellectual fashions alone. The body has always been an important element of self-expression and the construction of social relationships, but in the past, one's social belonging and the related self-image was influenced also by a number of external collective factors. However, at a time when traditional components of identity - nationality, social class, gender, etc. - have lost much of their former meaning, in other words: in late modernity, it has become almost exclusively the task of the individual to build his or her identity. In our so-called 'visual age,' the construction of bodily appearance plays a key role in the process of identity formation. As Zygmunt Bauman puts it, a globalized society is an individualized society as well.\(^1\) In this sense, concentrating on one's own body and its transformability means the search for individual, 'biographical' solutions. In late modernity, the body becomes a constitutive part, a 'last shelter' of the self,\(^2\) where individuals can withdraw from the participation in the social system, to an apparently firm ground, on which solid identity narratives can be built. At

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the same time, an unlimited range of techniques for the construction and the transformation of the body has become within reach to meet this purpose.

In contemporary consumer societies, the youthful, sexually attractive body represents the norm, and anorexic, megarexic body the extreme. Thus symptomatic expressions of our anxieties prevail, together with the stigma and the shame that aging, sick, disabled, and poor bodies provoke in the social surrounding. These phenomena can be put into the more general contexts of globalization and contested identities (gender, ethnicity, etc.). Responses to the pressure of present-day globalization processes may vary, but the most important among them is the creation of new artificial borders, such as the border around the cultural Other.3

As a result of social and economic transformation after the political transition, the spreading of phenomena characteristic for the 'consumer society' and the 'imperialism of appearance' have accelerated in Hungary as well. Especially among the middle class youth, the popularity of appearance - manipulating tools and practices, as well as the demand for products of the 'beauty industry' - has increased enormously.

Not only have the commercial industry and the media created a demand for such tools, but, by setting up new norms and ideals and by producing 'fantasy characters' that serve as anchoring points in the representation of beauty and good appearance, they have given the bodily appearance also a l'art pour l'art value. The desire to meet the norms and ideals and the simultaneous constant threat of deviation have evoked new fears, anxieties, and uncertainties, and have created new risks as well. Beside the recent changes in East-Central Europe, it is also the above-indicated effects of 'globalization' that invigorate the new kinds of fears, anxieties, and risks. At the same time, it is increasingly true also for people of the region that, amid the blurring traditional, national, ethnic, macro-social, and group boundaries regulating the frameworks of identity, it is left almost exclusively to the individual to create his/her self-boundaries.

In interpreting this process, Nelson's approach proves to be fruitful.4 She argues that identity is formed in a narrative framework: when considered as a story, the structure and credibility of it is largely dependent on social group-relations. If a story about a person is more credibly told by someone else than the person him/herself, then the person's agency, and the role in defining his/her own identity will be damaged. If the first person's narratives are adapted to stories told from 'outside,' then the identity of the group will be damaged, too. Stories imposed on oppressed groups often include ideas about the body, the biological characteristics, and contain also certain pronatalist arguments. Dominant (Western-European) stories about Gypsies, for example, represent romantic and free people on the one hand, and savages endangering the social