

# Forever Young: Consumerism and the Body of Politics from a Body Psychotherapy Perspective

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**ABSTRACT** *This paper examines the relationship between inherent oral traits (neoteny), cultural bias towards orality and consumerist culture. Through exploring the evolution of Mickey Mouse and looking at the consensual ideal body, I shall offer that consumerism and politics are shaping our body to remain needy, unsatisfied and pathologically oral. The paper suggests that psychotherapy, inasmuch as it challenges such pathological positions, is political and counter-cultural. Copyright © 2015 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

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The world of human behaviour is too complex and multifarious to be unlocked by any simple key. I say this to maintain that this richness – if anything – is both our hope and our essence. (Stephen Jay Gould, 1978, p. 533)

Psychoanalyst and body psychotherapist John Conger (1994, 2005) claimed that Western civilization turned the body into the shadow: the part of us that held whichever sides we did not find worthy of owning up to. The body held a paradox: on the one hand, it was covered and layered, painted and camouflaged; on the other, it was our body that was first seen. We modestly (or shamefully) concealed it, yet it was visible to all, publicly expressing our personal (and possibly our social) unconscious processes.

Whatever fears, cultural and social attitudes, aspirations, and values and beliefs we hold, these all find their expression in the body. Culture creates the body and, in return, the body conceptualises the culture and embodies it (Appel-Opper, 2010). Thus the body has its own politics and, faced with the speeches of our persona, the body tells the stories of our unspeakable shadow: our pains, our unrealised wishes, our jealousy, passion, and neediness which sometimes are too painful even to be spoken of.

It is no surprise that from the dawn of history many attempts were made to silence the body, and since men were in power for the majority of time, the woman's body was silenced even more extensively than man's (Butler, 1988; Cixous & Clement, 1986; Irigaray, 1993). We have

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tried to narrow down the body's dialogue, to hide its inconvenient transparency, its visible passion and fear, hate, and desire for connection which are easily seen by those willing to look. Such political attempts at silencing were expressed in gendered power struggles (chauvinism throughout the years), by religious institutions and by other societal and familial organisations.

This paper is dedicated to the exploration and demonstration of the dialectical relationship between body and politics, through body-reading of cultural icons, some clinical vignettes and cultural examples. I would claim that the politics of the body has been at the centre of the psychotherapeutic practice since the very early days of psychoanalysis and that psychotherapeutic acts represent political choices, which are publicly announced by the bodies that we are.

## **BARBIE COMES TO THERAPY**

Miri sought psychotherapy following some anxiety attacks and unexplained chest pain. She was 25, beautiful and highly groomed. She came from a small town in the south of Israel, a daughter to lower middle class parents. Miri described herself as “always knowing I was supposed to be more”, feeling trapped in her small town, feeling trapped by her parents' expectations and plans for her. Nobody envisaged Miri being anything but a wife and a mother, except for Miri herself. I later learned that I should have recognised her clothes – her Gucci, Dolce Gabbana, her Prada shoes and more. It was a few months before her wedding to Amos and Miri was a nervous wreck.

I recall, as a child and teenager, my frustration with my parents who refused to gratify my requests for brand names in clothes and shoes. Everybody who was cool had them, but my parents could not afford Nike and Adidas, and they also attempted to resist the consumerist tide. I was, however, left feeling that at least part of my social isolation and shame came from my uncool local clothing brands. While I can appreciate their decisions today, I remember being humiliated and shamed over my clothes, my shoes, my bicycle, my backpack. When Miri spoke of her love for labels, I could connect with this teenager who I used to be, and feel compassion and identification alongside an antagonistic patronising feeling towards the boy that I was, and towards Miri. Do I stand a chance of truly relating to clothing and to my body outside the sociocultural background I came from? Does Miri?

Amos and Miri sleep in separate rooms; they always have, since Amos needs his privacy. As I look at her talking, at her perfect makeup, the perfect breasts emerging (as if accidentally) from her meticulously calculated cleavage, at her doll-like presentation, I am storming inside. My ambivalence acquires strong somatic presence – I want to take her forcefully (to be her? To have her sexually? Possibly both), yet also to destroy her “sweetener-esque” shell, to distance myself from this painful reminder of my isolation and loneliness. At the same time I want to help her, to meet with her as a person. How powerful, I think, and can sense that this strong (counter)transferential tide is not merely personal; Miri is bringing an entire culture with her; and one that I know all too well. This is very confusing. Amos is 65, 40 years older than Miri. He is a wealthy businessman, an internationally known entrepreneur, who travels out of Israel at least once a month. He has been divorced three times, making this his fourth marriage. “I think it's just a little stress,” says Miri.

It was not easy to approach Miri about her choice of partner, as it seemed irrelevant at first to her presenting issue, but after a few sessions I needed to check with her. “How did you

know that you wanted to be with Amos?" I asked one day and Miri smiled. "For my 22nd birthday Amos bought me a red Volkswagen wrapped in a pink ribbon."

I am dumbstruck; Barbie is in the room with me, and alongside my contemptuous anger against what she represents for me, the unattainable perfection-via-consumerism (of which I could never partake, due to my lower socio-economic background and my parents' choices) and my judgemental position regarding her façade, I can also recognise my attraction to her. I dislike my attraction to this image, but I feel it, and it brings up a myriad of feelings in me – a desire to destroy her, and to have her. I also recognise my own part – my personal and public part – of cultivating her Barbiehood. I hate being so deeply affected by Miri's choices.

My thoughts wander to an incident. I was 30, and went with a friend who invited me to Prada, to see her buying shoes. "It'll be an experience," she said. Upon entering the shop I felt I was gazed at from toes to head with humiliating dismissal. "Would you like to see the on-sale section?" I was asked. I left the shop and waited outside, my adult and teenage selves enmeshed and fused, my heart beating and my posture tightening up. It took me a few minutes to recompose myself, to remind myself that I can be who I am.

Every time Miri speaks of her wedding, the symptoms of her anxiety increase. When she realises the connection between the two, she leaves therapy and writes me a long, surprisingly intelligent, touching and painful letter. She asks me not to judge her decision: "You can never understand; you are a man," she writes. Three years later Miri and Amos divorce and she becomes a successful businesswoman. Miri no longer lives in her small town; she has become a woman of the world.

## **THE PERFECT BODY OF MICKEY MOUSE**

Let us leave Barbie for a moment and re-engage with a less criticised cultural symbol, one of the most loved figures in Western society: Mickey Mouse. Mickey Mouse was created in 1928 by Walt Disney and Ub Iwerks, and was born out of the split between Universal Studios and Disney. Iwerks and Disney both worked as animators and, at first, Mickey resembled one of Universal's greatest symbols: Oswald the Lucky Rabbit, who was created by Disney but was the property of Universal. In fact, Mickey was created as Oswald's alter ego, and at the beginning was naughty, mischievous, and even a tad sadistic. His voice was Walt Disney's himself (Gould, 1980).

Mickey has substantially changed over the years, both in behaviour and in physical appearance. When Mickey became a cultural icon the company understood that he needed to be an ambassador of Disney – and look the part. The company responded to pressures and demands and changed Mickey's maladaptive behaviour, and alongside his demeanour his body and face changed as well. I shall now examine the somatic evolution of Mickey Mouse, inspired by the work of palaeontologist and historian of science Stephen Jay Gould (1980).

The slightly unpleasant question I wish to pose here relates to worth: what traits made Mickey Mouse into a representative, a profitable goods, a consumerist icon? This is a marketing question that Disney had to ask itself many times over, and spent time and money calibrating. The following qualities are merely the beginning:

- *Anthropomorphic* – Many people do not like things that look too different from them. Throughout history we have attended with greater kindness to all things humanlike (Gould,

1996). Animated films made sure that cats, dogs, monkeys, and other animals bear more resemblance to humans than they do in real life. Mice do not look too much like mice, (for example, their eyes are in the front of their head and not on the sides), but bear some similarity to humans. As we shall later see, this similarity will become increasingly specific.

- *Cute* – Mickey Mouse needs to be cute, appealing, and sweet. Disney worked hard to make the mouse unthreatening and meet those needs (Angier, 2006; Gould, 1980).
- *Lovable* – Similar to cute but more affective, Mickey's behaviour and appearance needed to impact upon the audience, to make us involved – and emotionally invested; for that Mickey needed to be lovable.
- *Non-aggressive and non-sexual* – Aggression and explicit sexuality are obstacles when it comes to consensual lovability and cuteness, as they lack childish naivety. Today, by the way, we can see that implicit sexuality (which speaks “beyond” the child's understanding) has become accepted and sometimes desired in animated movies.

So how did Disney achieve these goals? Gould (1980) believed that the evolution of Mickey's body was not completely clear even to his creators. The cultural, societal and financial needs conceptualised and formed Mickey's looks and, in return, his looks shaped and influenced cultural ideals, wishes and expectations. The evolution of Mickey, as I am hoping to demonstrate, tells of a dialectic relationship between politics and body, and exemplifies some political aspects of character structure (Totton, 2006b). Figure 1 portrays some of the evolutionary changes in Mickey Mouse's body.

Applying body-reading skills, we can notice many changes in his posture, proportion and shape. These are some of the changes Mickey Mouse's body has undergone over the years:

- His arms have got shorter and bulkier.
- His legs too have got shorter and thicker.
- His hands have become disproportionately large, and received white gloves. Not only were these gloves representing purity and naivety, they were also marking Mickey's whiteness, whose black body could have alienated the White middle-class audience.
- Like his hands, Mickey's feet have become non-proportionally large.
- Mickey's clothes have become more colourful and childlike – looking somewhat like a nappy.
- Mickey's gait has become clumsier and less adult-like, his movements less balanced.
- Mickey's trouser-line has got higher, thus blurring the pelvis and torso and contributing to a far less distinguishable body (there is a clear head and limbs, and one bulk of a trunk in the middle).



Figure 1. Mickey Mouse's body.

- Mickey's tail has become increasingly symbolic. Whereas in the beginning it was mouse-like (thick at the insertion), his tail has become a symbolic line which was at times completely absent.

At the same time, Mickey Mouse's face changed also over the years. (For copyright reasons I could not include the image portraying the evolution of Mickey Mouse's face, though it can be found online.)

- The eyes have changed in two stages: first the pupils have increased in size, and later the eye-to-body proportion has changed.
- Mickey's forehead and cranium have become wider and higher.
- If it was not initially clear whether Mickey Mouse was black or white, it became crystal clear with time – Mickey Mouse was white.
- Mickey's face has become rounder.
- His snout has shortened and his nose has become rounder.
- Finally, Mickey was born – and has remained –toothless.

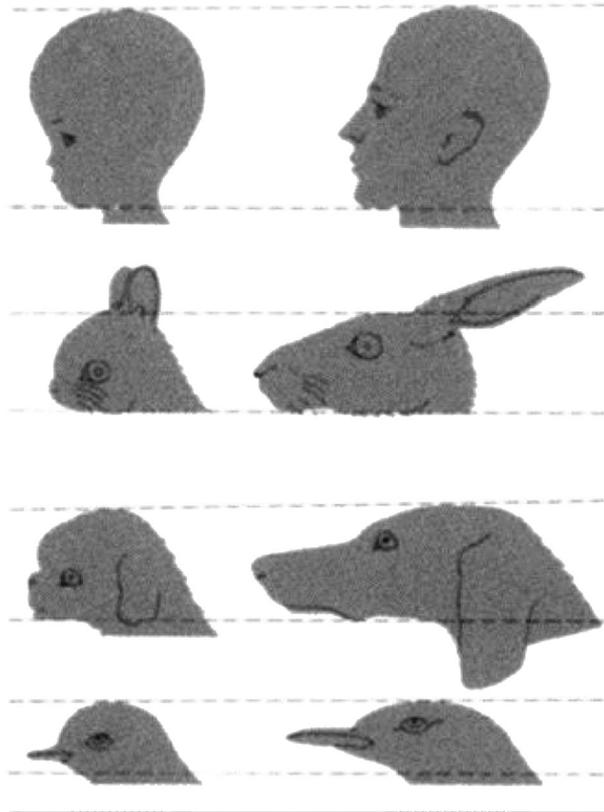
In fact, over time Mickey Mouse has looked less and less like a mouse, and increasingly resembled a human baby. To understand better why Mickey Mouse has become more baby-like, why such a look sells better, and how it is relevant to body image and psychotherapy, let us look briefly at two evolutionary processes: the first concerns the mammalian response to young individuals, the second to neoteny.

## **MIRROR, MIRROR, ON THE WALL, WHO'S THE CUTEST OF THEM ALL?**

The human organism, like most mammals, is attuned (be it biologically, socially or both) to respond favourably to young individuals (Angier, 2006; Winnicott, 1962/1990). Juvenile mammals are easily noted: our heads are larger in relation to the body, our eyes are big (since our eyeballs barely grow throughout our lives, while our heads do), our bodies are less hairy, and our arms and legs are shorter and stockier – just like Mickey Mouse. The “cuteness effect” and “cuteness sensitivity” is exhibited in marked differences in our behaviour towards younger and older individuals (Alley, 1981; Angier, 2006; Karraker & Stern, 1990; Sprengelmeyer et al., 2009).

You can note this phenomenon by looking at Figure 2 (from Lorenz, 1971). First observe the left column and notice sensations, emotions and thought patterns evoked by looking at the baby, the bunny rabbit, the puppy, and the baby bird. Then turn your attention to the right column and do the same, looking at the man, the hare, the dog, and the bird. Do you notice any differences? Our predisposition to favourably relate to our young supports attachment theory and is common sense in both evolutionary terms, and psychologically (Beebe & Lachmann, 2002; Beebe, Lachmann, & Jaffe, 1997; Lewis, Amini, & Lannon, 2000; Stern, 1985).

However, I suggest that this is only half the picture. Before commencing to look at the so-called “perfect” human body, let us turn to briefly explore the phenomenon of neoteny, which describes the preservation of infantile characteristics of the organism in the adult.



**Figure 2.** Young and mature human, hare, dog and bird.

The first person to describe neoteny was Karl von Baer (1792–1876), who, in 1828, discovered the development of mature germ cells in the larval bodies of amphibians (Brüne, 2000) and defined neoteny as the biological phenomenon that describes species in which the mature individual retains qualities belonging to the juvenile forms of the species.

Human beings are neotenous. In our adult form, we retain a lot of the infantile qualities characterising other apes (Gould, 1977, 1980). Adult humans look much more like the young chimpanzees than they resemble an adult chimp. The adult man and woman are relatively hairless and more erect, our limbs are shorter, our cranium higher, our heads larger, and so forth. But it is not only our physiology that maintains its childlike form: it is also our brain, and our behaviour.

During a trip to Rwanda, my wife and I were lucky enough to visit mountain gorillas in their natural habitat. The group we met comprised one adult male (the silverback), a few female gorillas and some young ones of various ages. The baby gorillas were the most curious and friendly. They smiled at us, mimicked our facial expressions, and reached out to touch us (we were asked to stand still and not respond). I was very surprised to witness the extent of their playfulness. The mothers simply watched over their young while the silverback sat with arms folded, looking stern, and stared at us. He made me feel apprehensive and slightly queasy. There was one juvenile gorilla whose behaviour was of particular relevance to our topic. At first contact he behaved very much like his baby sisters and brothers, exhibiting

playful behaviour, smiling, imitating us and moving a lot. However, at a certain point he looked over his shoulder at his father and immediately changed position. The juvenile gorilla started “behaving himself”, sat and folded his arms, adopting his father’s stern posture. From that moment on he no longer communicated with us, and his smile had vanished. Looking at him, I imagined that this playful behaviour would probably continue to decrease. In my fantasy, the playful and trouble-free childhood days of this young gorilla were numbered.

The human organism continues to play throughout life, more than any other animal. Our brain is flexible and adaptable. Gould (1977) considered biological neoteny as one of the reasons for keeping our brain in a labile, juvenile state, thus contributing to highly adaptable behavioural structures. I will later propose that the politics of consumerism rely heavily on both these evolutionary processes – our attraction to infantile qualities and our neotenuous characteristics – and that both these phenomena are of consumerist and political value to those who wish to control and condition our behaviours.

We now turn our scrutiny to human beings and ask a very politically incorrect question, similar to the one we asked about Mickey Mouse: what should we look like? What is deemed to be the perfect body? To be more specific, I shall focus on the female body, since body manipulation has traditionally been carried out by men and focused on the female body (Bonduelle & Gelfand, 1999; Butler, 1989; Kristeva, 2001; Orbach, 2009), although this is changing today with men paying increased attention to grooming, to their dress and physique and even to plastic surgery.

## **THE PERFECT CONSUMERIST BODY – FOREVER YOUNG**

Let us now turn our attention to the consensual female body. The following material does not represent my beliefs or taste, but rather a consensual portrayal (media-led) of the perfect body. True, body reading exercised without personal and contextual knowledge is prone to mistakes and is moreover partial and ethically dubious (Epstein, 2013; Rolef Ben-Shahar, 2013). Nonetheless, as this paper is attempting to demonstrate a trend, I ask you to bring to mind a famous actress, model or television personality considered as sexy and beautiful, so that we may look at the societal and political construction of the perfect body.

Please consider the following characteristics of the “perfect woman’s body”. The consensual perfect body has: big breasts, completely hairless body, long and thin arms (but not bony or too muscular), long and thin legs (but not bony or too muscular), very narrow hips (which separate the upper body from the lower body), flat stomach, and a soft body (toned yet not too muscular).

This is the body of a young girl who remains forever young – available for sex, but not maturing into a woman, a mother, a person in her own right.

Looking at the face of the “perfect woman”, we discover an interesting phenomenon. The “perfect” woman has big and full lips, a hairless face (except for eyelashes and eyebrows), relatively big eyes, completely “clean” face without wrinkles or damaged skin, small nose, high cranium, and a not-too-pronounced chin.

The face of the perfect consumerist female body is not unlike the face of an infant, radiating innocence, sweetness and fragility. The body, however, is the body of a young but

sexually available woman. While the face of the “perfect woman” elicits similar qualities to Mickey Mouse, the body is there for different purposes, leaving both the head and body as part-objects. There is an inherent gap between the body (young woman) and face (girl, baby-like). There is a similar paradox in the body itself: on the one hand it should be hairless, free of wrinkles, skinny and soft (childlike), and on the other have big breasts (which mostly require a different body-build), tiny waist and sex appeal.

Underlying these qualities are certain characteristics which we can now examine. These characteristics contribute to the making of consumerist society and, in my opinion, to perpetuating psychological dependency and distress.

### **Unattainable, but purchasable**

The perfect body is unattainable by normal means but can be purchased and maintained. To look like this, a woman needs to continuously invest in her body as a product. Even when such a look is achieved, it still requires great and ongoing investment to retain. In marketing terms, this is the perfect body since it requires continuous upgrading, investing and changing. Clothes, makeup, surgery, beauty products, accessories, hair products, and more. While the bodies of women in our society have been subjected to such scrutiny for decades, sadly men are now following them and subsequent eating disorders and body image problems amongst men are increasing, even if these are underdiagnosed (Huprich, Stepp, Graham, & Johnson, 2004; Strother, Lemberg, Standord, & Turbeville, 2012).

### **Forever young**

The perfect body keeps the woman in a juvenile and dependent state. She does not fully become a woman, a powerful and autonomous woman, a mother, an old wise woman. She remains in her neotenous position – forever young.

### **Holds contradictions**

The perfect body contains inherent contradictions – it is both a sexual object (or rather part-object), and infantile.

At the dawn of psychoanalysis, one bodily contribution to this division was the Victorian corset, which created a division between the upper body and the pelvis, as well as restricting breathing by pressing and limiting the diaphragm.

Fainting came easily when any excitement resulted in insufficient blood and oxygen supplies (both lungs and diaphragm were compromised, as you can see in the illustration). In other words, it allowed men to make sweet love to the girl while having wild sex with the woman; unite with Mother Mary on the one hand and have sex with Mary Magdalene on the other. This Kleinian split served the men who did not have to tolerate the woman’s subjectivity, although this became a slightly more difficult task once the woman gave birth. This is the environment within which Freud studied hypnosis, the cultural zeitgeist within which psychoanalysis was established. Charcot’s famous experiments and demonstrations at the Salpêtrière hospital, where psychoanalysis was conceived, were done exclusively by fully dressed men on half-naked and out-of-control women, who were expected to contort, perform and otherwise “provide the

goods” (Bonduelle & Gelfand, 1999; Enquist, 2006; Pérez-Álvarez & García-Montes, 2007; Rolef Ben-Shahar, 2010).

## **Objectification**

The perfect body is a part-object. It is completely disconnected from the woman as a subject, from the woman whose body is looked at. The body becomes an object or part-object, and moreover purchased goods. The body becomes an “it” (Balsam, 2012; Beauvoir & Parshley, 1949; Orbach, 2009; Wolf, 2002).

The objectification of the body is sadly perpetuated not only by the advertising business and politics, but also by medicine and psychotherapy. Psychoanalyst Harriet Kimble Wrye (1998, p. 114) wrote: “Freud discovered psychoanalysis, the ‘talking cure’, and freed his fledgling science from hypnotic touch. At the same time, in his effort to make his scientific project within the Victorian culture of, and with his own perchance for, Cartesian dualism, he fostered an inadvertent splitting off of the body.”

Indeed, in adopting medical terminology and position, psychoanalysis treated the body, at best, as Susie Orbach (2004) noted, as the dustbin of indigestible psychic material while “the body as means of expression, the body as I–me, is easily forgotten” (Svensen & Bergland, 2007, p. 44). Although much has been written about the body and its inclusion in psychotherapy and psychoanalysis (e.g. Anzieu, 1989; Aron & Anderson, 1998; Bucci, 2011; Knoblauch, 2005; McDougall, 1989; to name but a few), the actual incorporation of somatic interventions in general, and particularly the use of touch in psychotherapy is still highly marginalised. It is my belief that including the body in the practice cannot merely remain a theoretical conceptualisation. It calls for adjustments of clinical practices and methodologies as well, including the reconsideration of touch and other unmediated somatic interventions (Asheri, 2009; Rolef Ben-Shahar, 2014; Sinason, 2006; Soth, 2002; Totton, 2006a). Otherwise, we continue to adhere to the culture of corsets, beautiful – but dissociating and limiting of life expression. British psychoanalyst Valerie Sinason (2006, p.60) illustrated: “Words can hurt, eroticize, disgust, violate, confuse. They can also heal. Bodies can eroticize, disgust, violate, confuse. They too can also offer healing. All communications are double-edged, whether physical or mental or both.”

## **Discontentment**

The perfect body is highly dependent on a deep sense of discontentedness. This is, for me, the most crucial point here – one of the most basic requirements of the perfect body is that we are never fully happy with it (i.e. with ourselves); we are never fully “there”. We are forever engaged in a hate relationship with our bodies (and if we love our body, it is not our body but rather “the attained and acquired body” that we love). Our body is continuously in a begging position (if only I had), and disconnected from a gratitude position (how good it is to be me).

## **CONSUMERISM, ADDICTION, AND ORALITY**

We saw that consumerism relies on the preservation of childlike body shape, an infantile somatic organisation. This is an oral form, and it not only serves to keep our “ideal” women young looking but also perpetuates emotional and relational oral traits.

Contentment and satisfaction are the enemies of Western consumerist culture. I see all three major psychological issues of our time – depression, addiction and eating disorders as orally fixated conditions – conditions that are culturally supported by creating and maintaining pre-oedipal developmental trauma. A future paper will expand on these issues, but we can briefly look at these three conditions from both a political and an oral perspective.

Depression involves repeated collapse of our vital and creative energy, a feeling that I am not enough or that there is not enough for me in the world. One of the major schemas in depression involves a distorted relationship with what I have and what I do not have, with positive and negative experiences. Positive experiences are frequently experienced from a dissociated place (I used to have a boyfriend, it was so good), while negative events are experienced from associated place (and now I am all alone). If oral fixation creates a never-ending search for more, depression represents the collapse of the chase – I cannot do it anymore.

Addiction (and I shall postulate that eating disorders are also an addiction) is the culmination of oral structure – of always wanting more, never having enough, and confusing our inner neediness with our inner need of something (I shall later expand on this). Addiction is an abuse of our organismic capacity to habituate and a confusion of logical orders. Instead of recognising, and working through the emptiness we all experience, we believe that something can fill the void.

I wish to ponder the possibility that these conditions largely result from cultural, political and consumerist pressures and that we cannot offer full healing to people suffering these conditions without also relating to these cultural, political, gendered, and consumerist biases. I believe such oral fixation is created by cultivating and perpetuating oral developmental stages and that this is easily done also thanks to our neotenus predisposition. But first, let us shortly examine the oral developmental stage from a body psychotherapy point of view (Rolef Ben-Shahar, 2014).

We have all been born. Our first developmental challenge is about existence (Ziehl, 2000), about establishing our existence in the world. As we arrive into this world our physiological existence is challenged and we need to know that we are here – breathing, properly regulated by our attachment figure (Trevarthen, 2004; Tronick, 2004), existing in relationships. From a somatic point of view, this challenge correlates to our respiratory system and the transition from dyadic (umbilical, placental) breathing to independent breathing through our lungs (Rolef Ben-Shahar, 2014).

Once this challenge is successfully achieved, and from moments after birth, a second body system is activated and alongside it our second developmental challenge, which continues throughout our first year: nourishment and neediness.

This is how I portrayed this developmental stage:

Hunger is one of the first experiences of lack: I want, I need, and it's not enough for me. With this lack also comes our first desire and passion, taking over our mouth and lips, our tongue, and our throat. If all is well, then shortly after this experience sweet warm milk flows in. In close proximity to the first intolerable separateness of the baby, as it manifests in the first lack and the first passion, appears the greatest satisfaction the baby has known since its conception. This is the void which was described by psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas (1978), being transformed by the mother's milk to a feeling of fullness: pleasure is now spreading all over the infant's body, the lips are keenly tightening around the nipple (or bottle), craving more, and something inside can finally expand and surrender to the pleasure.

The pleasure requires the lack, and is conditioned by it; satisfaction is created by the need, and the entire world is now experienced through the lips and the digestive system, through the very same body-part that

can give so much pleasure, satisfaction, and comfort. The mother, who is the main regulating agent of this dyad, places the baby next to her skin and her heartbeat is felt by the infant. And like any first experience of need, like any primal experience of lack being fully met, the first addictive pattern in our life is established: more ... more ... more ...

An ocean of neediness opens inside us, through the lips it oozes out, through the lips it calls – in the only way a baby knows how to call – crying. And the good enough mother provides self-integration for her baby (Winnicott, 1962/1990), and helps in establishing a transitional space where there is a place for the baby's need to need (to suffer, to tolerate the lack) and at the same time to have his needs met – quickly enough, but not too quickly.

Unending horizons of needs and wants characterise the second developmental stage. The parent–baby dyad hopefully recovers, as much as it is possible, the intrauterine environment and conditions. (Rolef Ben-Shahar, 2014, p. 124)

We pay a grave price for our birth and subsequent autonomy and separateness: we experience need, void and an infinite ocean of nothingness which resides at the bottom of our empty belly, our separate existence. We have left the symbiotic field and as we learn to individuate we are by ourselves – not alone – but by ourselves. This void is the developmental structure which allows for wanting, desire and satisfaction. Erich Fromm (1957/1995, p. 14) illustrated: “The desire for interpersonal fusion is the most powerful striving in man.”

This oral void is at the heart of human neediness and dependence, and consumerist culture makes a brilliant use (abuse) of this developmental structure. Our oral void is perpetuated by medical dissociation, the breaking down of community, financial difficulties, and other socioeconomic pressures. Yet we all have a hole in our stomach; we all know this void personally (in Buddhist terminology – there is suffering), but consumerism makes a logically faulty association between our suffering and other changeable parameters. The main consumerist claim is this: it is not that you are needy, but rather you need X, and once you get this X, your neediness will cease to bother you.

That is, consumerism is a political activity which glues us to our oral developmental stage by creating an illusionary connection between our need (I am needy, I know what it is like to be needy) and our need of something. We are led to believe that if only I had this something, the hole in my stomach would be filled. Just like we hoped (as babies) that if we only fed on some milk our emptiness would no longer be felt (and it worked, but only for a short time), we follow the same addictive pattern which has an extremely simple formula: If only I do enough X (sports, buy enough stuff, get degrees, study ...), I will have enough Y (money, sex, women, men, respect, sex appeal, a perfect body ...) and then – then I would be Z enough (happy, contented, satisfied).

Pathological addiction collapses the consumerist ideal; as the consumer gets out of control, he or she can no longer pretend that they have a choice, and when the façade of consumerist choice is removed, the pathology, pain, and danger of oral fixation are demonstrated and lose their appeal.

These goalposts naturally move the closer we get to them, and since our bodies are highly familiar with oral developmental structures, and since we are hardwired towards early neotenus behaviours, the same qualities that contribute to our flexibility and adaptability also predispose our bodies to become the most accessible, meaningful target audience of consumerism and use: I need to buy stuff to have more, so that I may regulate my states of being.

In a future paper I shall deepen the examination of depression, addiction and eating disorders from this political, relational and embodied perspective.

## **PSYCHOTHERAPY AND THE BODY OF POLITICS**

Developmentally, the perfect body and our aspiration to attain such a perfect body both perpetuate the split between a tightly held and rigid body on the outside and neediness and inner collapse on the inside. It takes a lot of energy to maintain our integrity within such a split – balancing the desire to collapse on the one hand and attempting to maintain a presentable “false self” on the other (Keleman, 1987).

Mark, for example, came to see me for body psychotherapy to help him with his body image. A tall and handsome bodybuilder in his mid-twenties, Mark felt fat and inadequate, and spoke very little. I wanted to get a physical sense of him, and to meet him directly in the body, and offered to him to work with touch. To my surprise, I discovered that underneath his extraordinary muscular mass, his tissues were collapsing inwardly – it was as if this impressive man had no muscular (core muscles) infrastructure to support his huge build. The physical and emotional structures were reflective of one another – he had a very fragile ego, but a puffed-up image. Working with him therapeutically was very challenging – I was called to respect the external holding (rigid defence), otherwise he would have emotionally and physically collapsed. At the same time, such respect made our work strenuously slow, as it was difficult to touch (physically and emotionally) on any significant material without him rigidifying or collapsing. It was a perfect bind.

Mickey Mouse, the perfect woman’s body, Mark, and all of us with our culturally conditioned bodies are defined and shaped by the abusive tools of orally confusing promises. The consumerist politics of the body keep us forever young, needing our leaders to define our goodness, to tell us what to look like, to shape – literally carve us. Our bodies provide the governing agencies with the utmost political leverage. Even when we do not want to have these perfect bodies, we all dialogue with this perfection since we – and our bodies – are conditioned by our culture (Appel-Opper, 2008, 2010; Orbach, 2002, 2009).

While marketing supposedly elicits choice and wanting, these in fact correspond to the hole in our stomach, the neoteny-biased, orally predominant societal wound. This would make you feel better; you have to have this. Contemporary consumerism speaks with adult words but directly addresses the younger, oral self-states in us. And, upon hearing promises for the holy grail of satisfaction, we mostly elect to remain forever young. Sentences like the ones below create preoccupied attachment between us and marketing providers. We always want more:

- You have to marry and have children in order to be happy.
- You have to have an iPhone 5 to be happy.
- You need to shave your bodily hair to be beautiful, and you have to be beautiful to find a man or woman (and you have to be in a relationship to be happy).
- You need to make a lot of money to find someone (and you need to find someone to be happy).
- Today, everybody knows that you have to have a university degree.

These sentences, however distorted, are not merely clichés – they carry a genuine cultural, embodied form; they go hand in hand with our culturally conditioned bodies and, correspondingly, these bodies fund the culture which feeds off those poor and discontented bodies of ours.

And here we come, as psychotherapists. We offer secure attachment and a loving platform to explore connection without having to lose individuality. When psychotherapy works well, it challenges the consumerist bind; it helps us reclaim the hole in our stomachs, within a secure-enough attachment system, helping us to own our neediness and grow up. Erich Fromm (1942, p. 225) phrased it well: “The dynamic quality of love lies in this very polarity: that it springs from the need of overcoming separateness, that it leads to oneness—and yet that individuality is not eliminated.”. Fromm (1957/1995, p. 16) further elaborated: “*Love is an active power in man; a power which breaks through the walls which separates man from his fellow men ... love makes him overcome isolation and separateness, yet it permits him to be himself, to retain his integrity. In love the paradox occurs that two beings become one and yet remain two.*”

At its best, psychotherapy helps both client and therapist to engage in a genuine dialogue with oral injury:

- Psychotherapy encourages self-acceptance.
- Psychotherapy fosters acceptance of limitations and recognition of our abilities, attaining a realistic sense of agency and working through our narcissistic injuries.
- Psychotherapy encourages humanity and imperfection.
- Psychotherapy supports congruity between inside and outside (and different self-states).
- Psychotherapy fosters contentment and satisfaction.
- In addition, body psychotherapy directly addresses the body, and hence encourages a closer and more benevolent relationship with our bodymind – it helps change our form, and allows us, alongside our neotenous characteristic, also to adopt a mature somatic organisation.

In so doing, culturally minded psychotherapy, and in particular attachment-based and body-centred psychotherapy, is a countercultural and anti-consumerist movement, which threatens the pillars of political finance and the contemporary regressive and abusive marketing and political trends. Peter Schmid (2012, p. 106) went even further, claiming that “A psychotherapist or counselor who does not care about politics in fact does harm to their clients. To be apolitical means to stabilize, to fortify the status quo. If psychotherapists do not raise their voices in society, they do not take themselves or their clients seriously.”

Mark, for example, has become a failing consumerist. He no longer watches television, nor does he read newspapers. He does not attend the gym anymore and instead takes long walks. Mark does not invest as many hours in self-grooming and he has a little belly now. But more than all that – Mark decided that he does not want children. Can you imagine how much money he actively withholds from the education system, the health system, home security, and the taxperson because of his “culturally irresponsible” choice? Mark does not have a perfect body anymore. He is slightly more contented; it is difficult when he had been conditioned for so many years, but he is light-years away from satisfying the financial, national, consumerist needs which were cultivated in his biography all his life.

The culturally and politically minded psychotherapist engages with countercultural political activity, and I hope that many of us will continue this movement. Perhaps we stand very little chance of liking ourselves and our bodies – we are possibly too deeply conditioned – but I believe that part of our role as psychotherapists is to do as much as we can so that our children (real or in legacy) and their children may hate their bodies less than we do, and that someday they might even like themselves, just as they are.

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