Supersize Fetish

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Supersize Betsy

What is your first reaction to this picture? Is it disgust? Amazement? Fear? Maybe you wonder how anyone could get so fat. Probably you’re dismissive of the smile on her face and the see-through lingerie that barely covers her breasts. You’re also wondering, if you’re honest, about how she even has sex. But how many of you are having a hard time putting a name on exactly how this image is affecting you? Could it be that for some of you, the first reaction to Supersize Betsy is desire?

And why wouldn’t Supersize Betsy’s body produce feelings of desire? She exemplifies the round curves, soft flesh, and smooth, creamy skin of any pin-up girl, never mind that the curves are in the wrong places, there are no flat muscular planes to counterbalance that roundness, and the creamy skin covers what seem like acres of human flesh. From a purely aesthetic standpoint, I think it would be hard not to classify this image as beautiful. Other than the unfortunate cropping of the left side of the photo, which cuts off the farthest reaches of Betsy’s enormous belly, the image perfectly fills the frame. The tapering of Betsy’s body from top to bottom offers a sensual S-curve which creates a sense of flow inside the frame, and the perfect spherical belly counterbalances the epic globes of the buttocks, which merge seamlessly into the oblong sleekness of fleshy thighs that cascade languidly into the triangular fatness of
monumental calves. The reference points of obscured face and dangling arms give the viewers something “human” to anchor themselves to, lest they get lost in the oceanic enormity of Betsy’s flesh, and the flimsy negligee and the busy pattern of the blanket underneath serve as tactile contrast to emphasize the supple tenderness of plump skin. The various geometrical shapes of Betsy’s body aren’t too dissimilar from that historic trope of painting, the fruit assortment. And, in spite of the virtual nakedness of the subject, the obscuring of the breasts (as well as the undecidability of the true dimensions of that wondrous belly—wherever does it end!) leaves much to the imagination and intimates sensuous pleasures still unknown. It is an image that arrests the eye and halts the breath, interrogating what we mean when we speak about the erotic.

At this point, I wonder what you, the reader, might be thinking. If I know anything about human nature, I’m sure you’re still hung up on how much she weighs (in this photo, 470 pounds; did that come close to your guess, and could your imagination even conjure up someone that fat?). You’re also probably denying everything I’ve claimed about Betsy’s beauty, rejecting any claims to her body as art, and quite possibly the idea that Betsy might be physically attractive to anyone makes you queasy. Furthermore, the thought that I’m claiming that you find Betsy desirable in any way doubtless makes you angry, so I’ll give you a moment to relieve some tension by transference-

(I hope you used that space respectfully, but in order to dispel my tension about ceding my authorial control to you, I’m compelled to fill in those blanks with what I think is a good guesstimate of what you said—”You disgusting perv, I’ll bet you’re fatter and uglier than her and even she wouldn’t touch you.” To that I can only reply, ”Well, no, I’m not fatter than her, but, yes, she is prettier that I am, and, no, I have no idea if Betsy would have sex with me. Does that make me a disgusting pervert?”) While none of those reactions surprise me, what does surprise me is the ease with which most people would classify anyone who did find Betsy beautiful and sexually desirable as a pervert, or, more precisely, a fetishist.
And what do we mean when we say fetish? As Lorraine Gamman and Merja Makinen point out in Female Fetishism, “[t]he word ‘fetishism’ itself, in contemporary usage, has virtually become a blanket term to characterize all erotic fixations or obsessions seen as ‘perverse’” (52). My American Heritage Dictionary defines a fetish as “[a]n object of excessive attention or reverence” or “[a]n obsessive attachment; fixation” (316). As Freud defines it, “the fetish is a substitute for the woman’s (the mother’s) penis that the little boy once believed in and—for reasons familiar to us—does not want to give up” (“Fetishism” 953). For Freud, such behaviors are part of a libidinal drive which, along with the death drive, structures all instincts as trying to restore the “organism” to “an earlier state of things” (“The Libido Theory” 184) in a seemingly biological imperative. Lacan, however, talks of desire and positions it, too, as a result of longing for an earlier time. Desire is a result of the shattering of the fluid, Imaginary-stage bond of mother and child, and Lacan refers to the results of such a breach as a splitting which propels the child into the fragmented Symbolic order: “[t]hus desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction, nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second, the phenomenon of their splitting (Spaltung)” (1307). Such a splitting portends a lifelong, fruitless quest to quench the lack at the center of the individual’s craving to reassemble a disjointed self, a lack imprinted in the individual in part by their realization of their mother’s lack of a phallus; and in any intimate relationship “for both partners in the relation, both the subject and the Other, it is not enough to be subjects of need, or objects of love, but that they must stand for the cause of desire” (1307).

Henry Krips expands upon Lacan’s theory of desire to “argue that the fetish is a special instance of the objet a, one for which repression is breached to the extent that the subject more or less clearly recognizes the real source of his pleasure, and thus enters an economy of disavowal” (9). Krips defines the objet a as “not only the object-cause of desire but also the object of the drive, that is, the object around which the subject turns in order to derive pleasure” (9) and it is crucial to remember that the objet a is not the conscious object of desire, despite the apparent contradiction between Krips’ and Lacan’s positioning of the cause of desire. The cause of the desire in a normative sexual relationship (as in any other) is not the other person; the other person is the entity that facilitates the desire for the Real. In addition, the objet a
is, according to Krips, only a fetish when the subject derives more pleasure from the disavowal involved in deriving a displaced pleasure from the objet a and giving up the original other as the source of pleasure (29). Gamman and Makinen observe, however, that “Lacan, following Freud, links fetishism to the protection of the signifier (the actual penis, as signifier of the phallus)” (101). In other words, the foundational conception of sexual fetishism in psychoanalysis is when the individual is unable to process the realization that the mother does not possess a phallus, and instead turns to another (non-sexual) object as the missing maternal phallus. Such a maneuver is used to assuage the individuals that they themselves will not lose their own phalluses, and releases the anxiety inherent in such a juggling act between knowing that the female does not have a phallus and still behaving as if she is supposed to.

These psychoanalytic definitions are confusing, and in no small part contribute to the vast misuse of the term fetish in various discourses, from casual talk to theoretical writings. A helpful way to look at fetishism which grounds the concept in its material reality is offered in *Female Fetishism* in the chart of Paul Gebhard:

Level 1: A slight preference exists for certain kinds of sex partners, sexual stimuli or sexual activity. The term ‘fetish’ should not be used at this level.

Level 2: A strong preference exists for certain kinds of sex partners, sexual stimuli or sexual activity. (Lowest intensity of fetishism)

Level 3: Specific stimuli are necessary for sexual arousal and sexual performance. (Moderate intensity of fetishism)

Level 4: Specific stimuli take the place of a sex partner. (High level of fetishism) (38, italics theirs)

According to Gamman and Makinen, only Level 4 corresponds to Freud’s definition of fetishism, so any use of the term fetish to describe a sexual practice which culminates in orgasm with another person (or serves in place of a preferred desire to orgasm with another person) is inaccurate. As they stress, BDSM (an acronym encompassing bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and/or sadism and masochism) is a glaring example of sexual practices that are not fetishes, just non-normative. I argue that, following both Krips and Gamman and Makinen, the significance of the term fetishism as it is used in both psychoanalytic and cultural discourse is in its constitutive
properties of disavowal and reification of ‘appropriate’ desired objects. These two components of the fetish suggest that the fetish itself is a creation and fiction of culture,\textsuperscript{7} and not a universalizing byway of human psychosexual development. It is not too hard to fit every sexual practice into Gebhard’s classification system, particularly when we keep in mind that in normative sexual behavior (heterosexual relations), Lacan proposes that the object of desire, the opposite sex, is not the object that the desiring subject truly wants to fill their own lack. If psychoanalysis is claiming that on an unconscious or semi-unconscious level all subjects’ greatest desire/drive is to return to the pre-Oedipal stage, or to inhabit the Real, which paradoxically can never be realized, then any sexual behavior short of reunion with the mother (as the site of the “Real,” unfragmented world) would be a fetish, as it is a chimera of the “true” object of desire.

The consequence of this view of human sexuality bears directly on our discussion of Supersize Betsy and fetishism. First, we need to conceptualize that the maternal is at the center of all human sexual behavior (and not the phallus); and second, human sexuality is less about the physical processes of sex (which include not only actual sexual behavior, but the classification systems that label people as “heterosexual,” “homosexual,” and so on) than it is a nostalgic longing for an integrated whole. This second point emphasizes that the object of desire all along resides within the self (or, one may argue, nowhere at all), and furthermore proposes that the sexual behavior most likely to resemble the unconscious processes at work in recreating a lost cohesive self is masturbation. Masturbation, metaphorically speaking, illustrates that the sense of wholeness that the subject is looking for in sexual behavior is always in their own hands. And, if this desire is always a self-producing, self-replicating, self-directed drive, then any sexual behavior would be psychologically appropriate. The function of disavowal, then, at the heart of fetishism is nothing more than culture imprinting its control on human pleasure. This is the “Law of the Father” that works not only to funnel sexual behavior and interpersonal relationships into culturally utilitarian pathways, but also to efface the role of the maternal in constituting human consciousness. As a consequence, the siphoning off of pleasure from the prohibited practice (part of the dyad of disavowal) prevents the individual from ever realizing that sexuality is not the seminal drive of human behavior.
How does this relate to Supersize Betsy? I would propose that you take a moment to re-read the paragraphs specifically about fetishism. On second read, you might think to yourself, “She expended a lot of words to say something that could have been said more succinctly.” I would concur. As I tried to get a hold of Freudian and Lacanian theory, I felt that I had to replicate their words to prove my authority to speak, and, in keeping with the trends in theoretical writing, I also felt that I, too, had to write in a dense manner. My inclination would have been to write something like “fetishism is a concept that has no useful reality. It is just a discourse that defines what is normal and what is abnormal, and tries to convince us that certain types of behavior are ‘correct’ and intrinsic to every individual’s psychic makeup.” Furthermore, the fact that this behavior is constructed of alternating currents of pleasure and denial keeps us from seeing that the fetishistic or perverse behavior is no different from standard sexual intercourse, the cornerstone of western sexuality. The idea of fetishism, along with the castration complex and other psychosexual theories, seems more concerned with reinforcing narrow concepts of sexual, masculine-focused behavior than in giving an objective interpretation of how sexuality, along with other human pleasures, structures human activity.” If I had written that, I would have taken all the pleasure (and pain) out of the essay. In my inept way, I’m constructing my prose to mirror the thick writing I encountered when researching this paper. If you had to stop and start when reading, or pull out after a particularly heavy sentence, then plunge back in again; or you agreed with me in one place and disagreed with me in another, or you thought I crafted a particularly messy, ungainly sentence or phrase, but one word stood out as poetic, then maybe my purpose becomes clearer. And if you couldn’t help but notice that the writing itself was padded, expanded, and, well, fat, then I hope your desire was sated through at least one of the discourses I’ve used in this paper. In short, I hope there’s a fat fetish somewhere inside this paper for you, too.

It would be disingenuous of me to continue without laying bare my own investment in this re-conception of fetishism. As I read the more orthodox interpretations of fetishism, which would classify the desire for fat bodies as a fetish, I can’t get past the part that proposes that my fat body is devoid of agency; in fact, it devolves into a “part” of a body and not a whole body. When I look at this image I can’t help but think of how scholars have classified these Paleolithic sculptures as nothing more than talismans against
privation (LeBesco 18), or as “obscene” fertility idols (Eisler 4). Their inability to look past the fat breasts, belly, hips, ass, and thighs presumes no other reading of these figures. If they do look past the fat, they notice the vulva or the beehive hairdo, and suggest that the absence of facial features and underdeveloped arms denies the possibility that these sculptures in some way might represent “real” women. This sculpture (and we must remember that these are the earliest known sculptures of female bodies) does imply that fat woman are “parts,” fragmented and objectified, if we hold to the prevalent academic view. (The size of the arms, the absence of feet to stand on, and the absence of facial features inform the popular view that this is a phantasmagorical fat and unreal representation of femininity.) I must be clear here—I am not making any claim on what these figures “are,” nor do I propose to make claims as to what they signify. I would, however, ask, why must they be fantastical figures? No, I don’t expect that there was some “lost race” of fat women roaming the pre-Hellenic world, nor do I want to conflate images of the Venus of Willendorf with some suppressed earth-goddess matriarchal religion. All I’d ask is that you contemplate, for a moment, why no one asks if such figures were attempts at “reality” or attempts at “idealized” forms, but mere fetish figures (possessing a magical quality denied today’s fat women). If we look ahead to the Greek period, we seem not to have difficulty identifying that many of those sculptures were representations of an idealized human form, and not bodies that actually dominated Greek society. Instead of focusing on the totality of the image, the fatness of the Venus of Willendorf prevents any viewer, steeped in this postmodern Western culture, from viewing any fat female image as an integrated entity. Could we then say that the fat woman, divorced from sexual connotations, is a fetish precisely because she’s parts and not a whole human being, and that it is primarily this recognition that propels the average person’s disavowal of fat beauty or desirability? And how does this type of fetishism differentiate itself from commodity fetishism, say? Or Gamman and Makinen’s proposal that bulimia is a fetishistic practice in its own category (7)? And if the fat female is disavowed on a cultural level, why must her sexuality be doubly disavowed? Finally, how do we make sense of fat as a fetish when fetish itself is a term with a decidedly non-Western origin, derived from the practices of a seventeenth-century African culture and its
contact with European colonialism, Africa, a continent and a culture that to this day may have dramatically different ideas of what fat is, and what fat means, in both a material and an evocative sense?

What happens, though, when the image is masculine? Do we have an easier time conceiving the humanity, the authenticity of the individual, when the fat image is male? Are we more or less likely to disavow the fat man in our culture, or deny his claims to sexual desire? Is he nothing more than body parts, or is he an active participant in his own meaning-making? How do you react to this painting? (Is it any different than your reactions to the previous images?)

This is a painting of Bacchus by Rubens. What is immediately striking to me are Bacchus’ breasts. And, like the Venus of Willendorf, the fat belly is the center of one’s gaze. What is so remarkable about this image is the multiplicity of fatness. Unlike our Venus, Bacchus has fat arms, fat fingers, a fat neck, fat lips, and even two fat protuberances above his eyebrows. He’s a marvelously fleshy and genuine bodily image of a mythologized character. Does his fat suggest to you femininity? Is he a “real man” as the cliché says? Or does it suggest the material consequences of living, of submitting to one’s desires, to satiating oneself on the glories of living in the flesh and blood of a “(R/r)eal” human body? And would this submission resemble perversion? Does the fat body avow desire, need, the erotic, in a way that negates core psychoanalytic beliefs? Is the ultimate disavowal of need that a non-fat body might represent indeed a disavowal of the body itself? Does the fat body’s extreme materiality prove that the Real is never possible; a body that, paradoxically, recalls the safety of the Imaginary stage? As Leslie Fiedler suggests,

All of us have memories of having once been cuddled against the buxom breast and folded into the ample arms of a warm, soft Giantess, whose bulk—to our 8-pound, 21-inch infant selves—must have seemed as mountainous as any 600-pound Fat Lady to our adult selves. And to rediscover in our later lives the superabundance of fat female flesh which we remember from our first is surely a satisfaction we all project in dreams, though we may be unwilling to confess it once we are awake. (qtd. in Mazer 265)
I’d add a corollary to Fiedler’s declaration—the fat body that recalls the Imaginary stage can be of any gender, for this would be expected in a stage before individualization, when all desires are polymorphously perverse, and gender is an alien concept. The fat man reminds us (in a way that fat woman can’t) that the longing for safety and comfort precedes any desires for gender or for fucking, as they must, if, as Henry Krips maintains, “desire is what happens to need when its object is traded for something more accessible but less satisfying” (22). The need for the Real (and the final comfort and safety within) can never be met, so desire for the fetish arises.

More radically, though, does the fat body suggest the Real can be made real (and not that which resides outside all structures)? Lacan himself might scold me for my lust to link the Real to a signifier in connection of fat to the Real, since the essence of the Real is its inability to exist in language, and thus culture. If the Imaginary and the Symbolic represent nature and culture, to some degree, and the Real is a site of anxiety because of its ostensible “impossibility,” then doesn’t a fat body, in many ways, reify these discourses? The fat body escapes all the confines of the Symbolic and the Imaginary due to the inherent “impossibility” of fat itself in contemporary discourses. Thanks to the obsession with the “obesity epidemic” rhetoric in Western, capitalist culture, the fat body does not “exist” independent of the fears and anxieties of the society at large, and as a result the fat body haunts the materiality of a human body without ever inhabiting that “authentic” human body.

But I keep getting distracted, disavowing, I suppose, my own desire to re-conceptualize fat bodies as viable objects of desire. If we continue to view the sexual cravings for, and the sexual practices of, fat bodies as a fetish, and thus as perverse, then we deny that fat people are people. This denial, sutured to the very core of psychoanalytic thought, proposes that fat people can never achieve “mature” psychological development. So psychoanalysis proclaims theorems that deny any pleasure, any intent, to the materiality of fat. They tell us that fat people are stuck in the oral phase of development, or fat women become fat to deal with the trauma of sexual abuse, or that anyone who would partner with a fat person is motivated by low self-esteem.
Or, if we’re lucky, then fat desire is “deviant,” but playfully “resistant” to the homogenization of society, because fat people themselves are a deviation from the norm, an eruption of flesh against the precepts of nature and culture. In any formula, the fat person is always apart, and always a (fetishized) part, the socket upon which our deepest desires and our greatest fears pivot. And, much as I hover around the idea of fat desire as normative and yet never quite elaborate this view, this rotation proposes that the disavowal which defines the fetish is, like the Real, beyond description. The fetish, like the fat body, is a circular thing, an object with no beginning and no end, an object you can never quite get your hands around. The fat body, ironically, is over-determined with flesh, with signification, with abjection, yet indescribable, uncontainable. It must be experienced to be believed. I’ve tried to grant you a peek at the pleasures of excess in this paper, through images and words, but this is only a trace, an insignificant part of a bigger sphere.

And so we loop back to Supersize Betsy. Do you desire her now? Are you, like me, stupefied at the possibility of uncovering what the image hides? After all, we’ve all along only been speaking of an image, and not a real person. Does her 470 pounds of flesh preclude us ever knowing Betsy as an inner self, emancipated from her flesh, sitting across from us discussing current events? Would we be dismayed to find out that she isn’t so different from any other person we’d meet in the cul-de-sac? If we were to discover that Betsy is as boring as the next person, would she lose her allure? Or heighten our fear? We know that Betsy can never measure up to our desire after all, whether it is a desire borne of unity or one of division. And, ultimately, this realization makes Betsy small, and makes us even smaller. And, as I sit here dejected, contemplating the futility of my efforts, the anti-climax of my story, I wonder if trying to free Betsy from the realm of the fetish doesn’t work against my project. If supersize no longer scares you, or titillates you, then why would you ever desire any fat body? Is Supersize Betsy my own objet a as fetish, the object that distracts me from my true need, the need to be assured that my own fat desires are “normal,” un-freakish, and plain? My disavowal, my perversion, is my hope that you too look at Betsy and think, if just for a second, “Well, she’d be a hell of a ride, one I’d never forget.” In order to keep Betsy (and myself) desirable, I reluctantly must return fat desire back from
where it came, and continue to perform the role of fetish for the rest of you. I guess my longing to be a whole, real person must go unfulfilled. I’ll let you pick up your denial and disgust on the way out.

NOTES

1. Supersize Betsy is one of the best-known former participants in the “Fat Porn” industry. Along with Kelligrl, she is most known for her enthusiasm for a subset of fat sexuality known as “feederism” and/or “weight gain fantasies.” She provided online content in the form of websites, she posed for fat pornography, and she starred in weight-gain/eating videos, among other endeavors. This picture (http://web.archive.org/web/20010303033724/deviantdesires.com/profiles/profmain.html) is a typical “boudoir style” shot of Supersize Betsy, who reveled in her fatness through web sites, visual materials, and fantasy fiction. She provides a detailed interview on these topics in Deviant Desires by Katharine Gates. She also shows up in a chapter on “Porn” in the anthology Fat: The Anthropology of an Obsession, edited by Don Kulick and Anne Meneley. This photograph comes from the no longer active website http://deviantdesires.com. [back]

2. As of early 2009, I weigh 162 pounds less than Supersize Betsy, but I must admit I’m somewhat dismayed to realize, looking at Betsy’s picture, that while I’m much closer in size to her than to the standard American centerfold, my own body in no way embodies the aesthetic beauty that Betsy’s does. If fat and beauty are two terms that our society claims can never be linked, then the fact that I can discern a difference in bodily attractiveness between two very fat bodies implies that some very fat bodies must be beautiful, both in the abstract world of images and signs, and in the very real materiality of the body. My hope is that such a comparison is not read as an instance of “low self-esteem” on my part, but rather a support for the claim that this image is beautiful no matter what body one inhabits or what opinions one has about fat people. [back]

3. An honest answer to this question would have to be yes, regardless of whether or not I find Betsy desirable, since as a fat person, any sexual behavior I exhibit is typically construed as perverse in our culture. This paper is a critique of such constructs. [back]

4. Ironic that such a definition, to Freud, seems “familiar to us,” but decidedly unheimlich to me as a woman in the sense of being “unhomelike.” Re-workings of the masculine bias in Freud and Lacan by feminist theorists do little to convince me of the accuracy of their phallic-centered conceptions of infant psychological development, but as the phallus is central to any argument about fetishism, I’m stuck with it. [back]
5. I wanted to take a moment to point out the significance, for this paper, of Lacan’s use of the word “appetite.” [back]

6. I can’t be certain that I’ve accurately described the Lacanian position, particularly as it has been expanded by so many other scholars. I’ve included my interpretation of it to show the resonance the concept of fetishism has for many theoreticians. [back]

7. Krips says that “the fetish, as a special sort of objet a, takes on the role of substitute for maternal lack. This role for the fetish is not one of its essential characteristics, however; it depends instead upon a culturally and historically contingent fact, namely, the role of the mother as caregiver in the early life of the child” (31). I agree that the fetish is constituted through culture, but have trouble with his implication that the maternal is an “accident” of culture, not because of any “difference” feminist leanings, but because this statement does not include an acknowledgement that the phallus as a concept is culturally and historically tainted with the paternal. [back]

8. And, no, I am not claiming that all forms of sexual behavior are permissible. I am claiming that theories of sexual dysfunction are relevant only when the sexual practice(s) do(es) real violence to the practitioner or others. [back]

9. According to Lacanian theory, all our bodies aren’t whole, but some bodies must then be more (w)hole than others. Could we re-signify the fat body, then, and propose that if culture recognizes these types of bodies as fragmented (instead of thin, able-bodied ones), then the fat body is closer to the “truth” of the body’s fundamental lack, and therefore wholly aware of this “truth” (thus existing outside the normal dynamics of psychosexual development)? Could we even say that the fat body is a signifier of the Imaginary-stage exodus into the Symbolic? [back]

10. The Venus of Willendorf (http://www.edu.pe.ca/rural/class_webs/art/images/venus%20of%20willendorf.jpg) is one of the earliest, and best-known, human statues in Western culture, dating back to 24,000-22,000 B.C. Her rounded hips and behind, large breasts, fatness, and lack of facial definition have led many scholars to classify her as a “fertility fetish.” The statue was discovered in 1908 in Austria. There is no consensus among scholars as to their purpose, or their meaning, to the culture that produced them. [back]

11. This painting of Bacchus by Peter Paul Rubens (http://www.arthermitage.org/Pieter-Paul-Rubens/Bacchus.jpg) presents the Roman god of wine and ecstasy as a fat man. ”Rubenesque” has become a euphemistic term for fat in Western culture, typically applied to women, though. [back]
WORKS CITED


