

Thin is
a thing,
but we
are
fat
bodies

About bodily
aesthetic regimes

Text: Swantje Martach



Fig. 1: Laurie Toby Edison, Baker Beach. In: Women En Large: Images of Fat Nudes. Books in Focus Press, 1994.

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Being thin is often considered to be the present day's most widespread bodily ideal. However, by taking a closer look into the bodily aesthetic regime currently reigning in most parts of the world, it becomes evident that, today, the sole criterion of being thin is not sufficient anymore for being considered bodily beautiful. Rather, there are right and wrong kinds of thinness. As a consequence of several health campaigns led by major institutions, the gauntly thin aesthetic of Twiggy has become unacceptable by now; one must be athletically thin in order to be pretty by today's convention – with Instagram personages such as Pamela Reif or Hailey Bieber (with 9.3 million followers and 50.7 million followers, respectively) setting female body standards. And not every part of a human body must be thin in order for it to be appreciated as a whole. In some parts of the human body, fat is welcomed (e.g. butts and lips for females, upper arms and legs for males, chests for both genders); whereas in other body parts, fat is disdained (e.g. necks for females, shackles and wrists for both genders).

But if today's most influential bodily aesthetic regime is not essentially about being thin, then what is it really about? Aesthetic bodies need to be what shall be called ›picturable‹. In order to be considered pleasing, bodies must be pictorially accessible (compare the German adjective *bildschön*) in the sense of a) being easy to picture (the aesthetics of a body is determined by the quantity of time it takes to produce an aesthetically acceptable picture of that body), and b) looking good in pictures (and by the aesthetic quality of the actual and best-possible photographic results, which noteworthy for now remain an exclusively visual output).

The entanglement of our lives with social media shall be argued responsible for this phenomenon: First the democratization and constant accessibility of the photographic camera emerged with the ›iPhoneography‹ phenomenon (Clawson 2015), then became viral especially on Instagram, which gave a concrete purpose and social relevance to the former innovation and led to a historical change in bodily aesthetic regimes, viz. a transition from what shall be subsumed under ›thin aesthetics‹ (wherein fashion models worked as heroines) to what here is proposed as ›pictorial aesthetics‹ (headed by influencers). The present claim thus is that everyday body aesthetics has changed from being based upon a judgment of bodies according to their position in the thin-spiral (for a certain time, it was ›the further down, the better‹), to a judgment of bodies alongside the pictures they allow to produce of them. Putting this finding more drastically, maybe not yet in research, but in the ordinary realm of somaesthetics, bodies are not judged anymore as bodies, but as pictures (in a paper forthcoming in the journal *IMAGE* in 2024, I elaborate on this thesis; see Martach 2024).

This contribution is not an allegorical subsumption, but

a rhizomatic equation (for a definition of the rhizome, see Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 7–10; for an accessible explanation of the rhizome as method, see Honeychurch 2016) that compares formerly ruling thin aesthetics with the Iron Maiden torture instrument. Thin aesthetics pressed the variety of bodies existing into a singular acceptable form, the thin, which up until today many *still* die in trying to reach (Wolf 1990, 179ff.), just like the Iron Maiden was imagined to kill people by encapsulating them into itself.

At its peak, thin aesthetics had created a phraseological and pictorial instrumentarium which was as widely permeating and individually penetrating as to enable the following ›speculative narration‹ (for an introduction to this term, see Doucet, Debaise, Zitouni 2018; and Pihet et al. 2017): publicly accessible Iron Maidens, installed in the pedestrian zone of each city for the sake of granting citizens the constant possibility to attempt to insert their bodies into these, and thus immediately and directly find out which body part(s) they must still reduce fat on so as to fit better, fit more perfectly (as the struggle of pressing the own individual body to a pre-given form certainly is endless) into the (and often eventually their own) tomb. The crucial terminus here is ›in‹.

Speculating art by means of words, the present narration could lay ground for an artwork realized in public space, as a R.I.P. for thin aesthetics. It could also give rise to a fat aesthetic sci-fi piece of literature, including such secondary situations as a mother reminding her child: ›Have you been to the Iron Maiden today, sweetie?‹, a peer nagging at school: ›I saw your [body part] did not fit in. Well, mine fitted in better than yours!‹, and rebellious youth groups spraying (maybe the battle cry ›FAT!‹) on these figures.

Even those bodies that belong to the tiny elite approved by and in thin aesthetics usually painfully work to become so, but still are so only at times. Precisely these times or situations, and the bodily statuses they entail, came to be personally preferred because they are aesthetically ranked higher within thin aesthetics. For instance, matutinal bellies, that are long done with digesting last night's dinner and not busy yet with any solid breakfast, were estimated over afternoon bellies; hydrated legs, that were recently moved lightly in a mild temperature and supplied enough liquid, were rated aesthetically higher than legs swollen from a day of extended city-sightseeing in a hot climate. As an outcome of this ranking, pictures of both matutinal bellies and hydrated legs circulated numerously in social media channels during the era of thin aesthetics.

Such pictures fortified probably the most fundamental belief underlying thin aesthetics: ›Being-thin is a permanent identity‹. It is precisely this belief that the Iron Maiden is materially capable to reveal as utopian and to stress as often mortal.



Fig. 2 Angelina Moles (@fiercefatfemme) Instagram post, 01.01.2024

It is helpful here to conceptually distinguish between ›the thin‹ and ›being-thin‹. The Iron Maiden's permanence, which was just one of its torturing capacities in medieval times, allows it to lay down the epitome of the thin, and to unfold the body shape of ›being-thin‹ as impermanent. Thus, the Maiden's thingness can make us realize that also the ideal it is made to represent, the thin, is nothing other than a thing – sometimes encountered but never entirely enlivened by such living beings that we still call *human*.

Apart from increasing anorexia and creating new psychosomatic disorders; it is also conceivable by speculation that an accelerated repetition of bodily confrontation to the Iron Maiden's torturing thingness procures an emancipating and thus healing effect. Finding that my body never (entirely) fits into these shapes *could* lead me to realize the inaptness of these shapes for my body, and hence to emancipate myself from thin aesthetics. It is here that the potential of ›fat aesthetics‹, discussed later, already looms. Yet such a conclusion affords an »adventurousness«, as the mathematician/philosopher Whitehead would call it, that often remains restricted to the artistic realm. »Perhaps countless ages ago respectful amoebae refused to migrate from ocean to dry land – refusing in defense of morals. One incidental service of art to society lies in its adventurousness.« (Whitehead 1967, 268). The decision to desist from the routine of inserting the own body into the Iron Maidens could, in a Whiteheadian sense, be called ›artistic‹.

Pictorial aesthetics, that here is argued to be the bodily aesthetic regime the world's majority is already living in but has yet to acknowledge, continues to encapsulate bodies in a singular and permanent form/frame. Yet instead of being a given kind of body (thin), today this form rather consists in a given kind of body presentation, which shall be subsumed to: the picture. Note that an excessive smile was often carved into Iron Maidens, which remains the usual mimic that pictures seem to afford.

This claim can be further dissected. On the one hand, pictorial aesthetics created an urge to picture and present the own body (substantial kind of presentation, the what). Who has no account does not exist, has never been. Who does not feed their own account with pictures sinks into oblivion. What is more, pictorial aesthetics also set a standard of ways in which bodies are to be presented (adverbial manners of presenting, the how of a doing).

Whilst thin aesthetics tortured bodies most directly into a given bodily form; pictorial aesthetics tortures bodies more cunningly by means of and within pictorial practices: How to pose, how to picture (from what angles and distances; aesthetics here becomes photographics), how to hashtag, when and where to publish and promote, what to text in reference to the body. Only during the first two steps of such processes does the body

still hold an active role. All further steps are rather instrumentalizing the body for their own sakes. The final end is not the body anymore (its shapes, as in thin aesthetics), but it rather is the social media post, or, putting it more generally, the publication, viz. the making-accessible of the body to and in the virtual sphere. Put shortly, the affirmed shift here is one from bodily to behavioural framing.

This speculated artistic instrumentalization of Iron Maidens could thus be stretched towards pictorial aesthetics: torture instruments posing in mannequin fashions in the streets, standing open and inviting public immersion (immersions by the public, and publicly happening immersions), which could be interpreted as oscillating between a how-to of supposedly correct body poses, a possibility to learn the own bodily and/or emotional limits of poses, a parody of conventional poses as found online, and a hint towards the underlying power schemata of somaesthetics in the present pictorial age. As a direct consequence of engaging in such artworks, a feeling of exposure can be supposed, arising even when no picture has been taken yet. Already in the fueling of this fragility, evoked by opening the body to restrictive pictorial judgements in the action of stepping into the open Maidens, lies a torture. And such fragility is the pathway to further regulative torture, even if just pending, of which the most preeminent form is the shitstorm.

Thin aesthetics was often defined as isolating (see e. g. Wolf 1990, 179ff.), leading one's own focus towards a work on the individual body inhabited. Pictorial aesthetics certainly cannot be said to have reworked this effect entirely. Yet what pictorial aesthetics effectuated, so it shall be claimed, is an inversion of the sociality at base.

In thin aesthetics, bodily work was undertaken in order to connect to an elite; an aspiration which more often than not remained in despair. In pictorial aesthetics, first is the elaboration of a connection, and therein, pictorial work on the body is exercised. This reversion, enabled by the technological advances mentioned above, led to the breaking up of the unifying, limiting aesthetic mainstream, and created the chance for the formation of multiple ›aesthetic bubbles‹ existing next to and overlapping with each other.

By implication, more aesthetic (bodily) expressions became possible, and more bodies became aesthetically accepted, crucially only in some bubbles. Each bubble developed its own aesthetic standard, in which other bodies are considered pleasing. To say that pictorial aesthetics includes those bodies that thin aesthetic excluded would be a simplification of the factual matters. Rather, pictorial aesthetics allows bodies to become included in their own, single-handedly created bubbles, which remain governed by themselves – a free market aesthetics, with all its pros and cons. Singular actors individually decide wit-

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thin which bubbles they wish to partake, eventually might even switch from bubble to bubble when they scroll from post to post in their feed, and in scrolling, they influence the bubbles they are influenced by.

The aesthetic bubble that is considered of immense worth for the present undertaking because ordinarily occupying the opposite of and thus unthinkable in thin aesthetics, but that indeed developed within the frame of pictorial aesthetics, is termed ›fat aesthetics‹.

Being thin indeed can be one manifestation of being picturable, and there are still pictures circulating, which are undertaken in the aspiration to make the body appear as thin as possible, so it must be relented. Yet not in modern contrast, but in alter-modern addition to this once-mainstream phenomenon, it is finally asserted that there are thin people who are not photogenic. There are thinnesses that do not look good on pictures (their inaccessibility by words might be equiprimordial to their pictorial elusiveness; two facets of a phenomenon that remains to be researched elsewhere). There are bodies that are fat and (not still but crucially *therefore*) ›picturesque‹, such as the ones of singer Lizzo or fatfluencers like Angelina Moles, Instagram @fiercefatfemme (see Fig. 2); Nyome Nicholas-Williams, Instagram @curvynyome; or Charlotte Kuhrt, Instagram @charlottekuhrt. And there are practices of picturing that do not aim at depicting thinnesses, but rather fatnesses, that is, juicy flesh and swelling curves (see, e.g., the series *Women En Large* by photographer Laurie Toby Edison, Fig. 1).

Such celebrations of corpulence receive their vehemence from having already re-thought the thin-identity-belief explai-

ned above. By developing and exercising respective pictorial practices, *fat* aesthetics found a way to detach itself from that belief. And in making fat aesthetic pictures circulate, it promotes such detachment. The posted picture here serves as medium and message, and must be taken seriously as an ›apparatus‹ (a Foucauldian term Barad revives, see Barad 2007, 63).

Fat aesthetics works against the body's aesthetic restriction, and in so doing has the potential to pave the way for an embracement of the living body as living. In this vein, fat aesthetics becomes all the more interesting for conceptual thought. If even the utmost opposite of the thin can serve as source for aesthetic experiences, then, as philosophers such as Dewey (2008, 19) or Lind (1980, 131) have already remarked, everything and every body can be experienced aesthetically. By implication, all divergences can be beautiful, and what kinds of beauties and sources for the beautiful still lie slumbering in the divergent is enough material for much research to come. In such research, several decolonizing bubbles could get fruitfully entangled, e.g. also black aesthetics, feminist aesthetics, queer aesthetics, and disabled aesthetics.

›Fat‹ can thus be understood as a politically provocative umbrella term for all that is diverging from still afterglowing thin aesthetics. Precisely such an understanding of the term ›fat‹ is put forward in this contribution (see also Martach and Cardoso 2021; *ibid.* 2022), reworking the again discriminatory fat-identity-belief on which many scholarly fat studies approaches (see e.g. Wann 2009, xv; or Pausé and Renee Taylor 2021, 11–12) as well as medially happening fat aesthetics are based.

Another limitation inherent to fat aesthetics, as it is medially practiced, results from its materialization within the

realm of pictorial aesthetics, in combination with its historicity that so far remains entangled with/in thin aesthetics. Those fat aesthetic pictures that receive the most appreciation in the respective medial bubble continue replicating the body postures introduced by thin aesthetics. Their intended message certainly is: Fat can be sexy, too! Yet by taking up respective poses, and picturing their bodies in conventional ways (the feminisms of which I consider worthy to discuss), these protagonists allow the Iron Maiden (the posing one) to sneak back into fat aesthetics. This dynamic begs an art/research project on a fat reworking of pictorial body poses and bodily picture contents, allowing fat to become not only the matter but also the project's technique.

»Thus, the Maiden's thingness can make us realize that also the ideal it is made to represent, the thin, is nothing other than a thing – sometimes encountered but never entirely enlivened by such living beings that we still call *human*.«

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