When she included the January 2013 issue of *Self* magazine in my Christmas stocking, I’m sure my mother meant to give me a body-positive, health-oriented publication that would appeal to my interest in fitness. What she ended up giving me was an incentive to think critically about my own motivations, but I, too, could have fallen for the old ‘wolf in Kaley Cuoco’s clothing’ trick if he hadn’t given himself away in the interview. “Honestly, they’re incredible and my favorite thing in the world. I swear by them”, the slender, six-pack sporting Cuoco says of Spanx shapewear. I made a begrudging visit to Spanx’s website, and sure enough the description for their most popular style sums up a key problem that feminist theorists identify within the culture of women’s fitness: “Tame your tummy and create an hourglass silhouette with Super Higher Power, our new comfortable yet powerful high-waisted hosiery shaper from our In-Power™ Line. Now, you've got the power!” (Spanx.com). The taming of a woman’s body, sexuality, and spirit is a major preoccupation in our culture. She must tame her personality lest she risk being thought bold and outspoken. She must tame her wandering body parts so that she will be attractive. She must tame her sexuality so that she will be the right kind of attractive. Do you know who is keen on tame, demure, angelic creatures? Wolves – including the metaphorical kind I caught stalking me in the pages of *Self* magazine. The following analysis exposes the harmful stuff that lurks behind its distractingly colourful cover, and after a brief crisis I eventually affirm that I’m not a fated ewe.

It might have been awkward to receive a magazine with the word ‘sex’ on its cover from my mother, but in this case the headline was ‘Have Sex, Lose Weight – Cool, right?’, so it wasn’t about sex so much as its abomination of a third cousin: a calorie-tracking cardio performance guaranteed to tone thighs and banish orgasms to the distant realm of pizza and tight white pants. Women’s fitness magazines excel at taking the joy out of leisurely activities by superimposing a focus on weight loss upon them, as *Self* does by assuring you that snowshoeing burns 580 calories an hour (45); listening to music under soft lighting will cause you to eat less (55); women who actually enjoy cooking have a lower BMI than those who do it ‘to please others’ (55); but when it comes to something as primal and intimate as sex, this manipulation of the mindset can be detrimental.

In *Vagina: A New History*, Naomi Wolf explores the possibility that due to the neural connectedness and biochemical reactions between the vagina and the brain, a woman’s sexual awakening can be conducive to self-confidence, bursts of creativity, energy, and a sense of existential happiness. Wolf emphasizes the well-known fact that when stress (a
preoccupation with weight, for example) “takes over the (sympathetic nervous system), it focuses the woman’s attention on anxiety rather than sexual arousal” thus preventing those rewards. She posits that the concealment of this information “has to do with anxieties about the male ego, even if the censorship involved is unconscious.”¹ Self’s publisher, Condé Nast, in addition to producing Self and a number of generic fashion magazines for women, also publishes magazines aimed at the interests of white-collar men, about golf, architecture, technology, trade and business, and this gives Wolf’s suspicion some merit. Subliminally influencing women’s relationship to their sexuality is just one way to deter the kind of confidence, creativity and energy that could allow them to realize and actively resist the oppression at hand.

If female sexuality in its natural form poses a threat to the preservation of patriarchal society, reasons for depicting women’s bodies as needing taming are clear. To tame is to break in, conquer, humble; to domesticate. To tame something requires discipline, example, and control. After thousands of years of the systematic subjugation of women (not to mention colonization and slavery), white male authority has had enough success taming their way to the top to refine their technique to its most efficient potential: physical and political efforts are replaced with some sneaky wording. This method is made even more brilliant by its disguise, which makes it seem as though women are acting according to their intrinsic desires. I noticed a domination of imperative titles in Self, such as “Eat Smart”! (55), “Make your 10-minute resolution”! (14), “Power up”! (93) “Get Gorgeous”! (83) “Firm your butt”! (79) “Feel Awesome”! (Cover), and of course, “have sex, lose weight”! No matter how sure the reader is about her independent desire to get fit, these messages are a reminder that she needs to be told what to do. Even more confusing is that she is also often told that she ‘has the power!’ , but a strange, restrictive power in that it can only be used on your own physical body, and furthermore, is it really power if you’re always told what to do and how to do it?

So, what reasons do women have for deciding to get fit? And more importantly, who else benefits? The first question has plenty of possible answers. A person faced with a health issue may find motivation to exercise in the will to live; another may train for an event or profession that requires a specific physical aptitude. But for millions of North American women who read Self and the like, the desire to attain the coveted thin-but-toned body is prominent. “Gym-culture” is now a thing. Celebrities and music-video girls are the epitomic fusion of fit and sexy. For many women, the idea of being muscular (but not too muscular – men don’t like it) is more empowering than being just thin, and even seems like

a way of subverting ‘skinny’ ideals without becoming... what, exactly? Fat, lazy, ugly, an obstinate feminist? The binaries are baffling.

*Self’s* articles themselves are not rife with – but not devoid of either – a pressure to lose weight: that role is filled by dozens of beauty product and diet book ads in between articles on how, where, and *why* to get fit – and this last has a lot to do with jobs and work. For example: “Taking a snack break will make you more effective all afternoon” (14). The article “Why A.M. Exercise Rules” claims you can “nab a promo... after a sweatfest, people are better at managing their time at work” (46). And most astonishingly, in “Your Magic Sex Number”, it is claimed that having sex one day a week will help you lose weight, while having sex five days a week will give you the focus and motivation that “could help you perform better at work” (74). There’s a lot of equating the fit woman with the productive woman in this magazine, perhaps because the two share common criteria: discipline, energy, focus, and drive.

In their work exploring the differences between ‘body as agent’ and ‘body as symbol’, Erica Reischer and Kathryn S. Koo suggest that “by attaining a difficult body ideal, a woman proves herself able to control the dangers of her own desiring and thus proves willing to forego her own interests in favor of the interests of society.”

This not only explains the manipulation of sex into a tool for weight loss and efficiency at work, but also the benefits that ‘society’ reaps from the fit woman, who is seen as a better employee than the skinny woman (not to mention the overweight woman). And, thanks to the advice *Self* gives, the woman herself realizes that her professional status is valued more highly if she is in good physical shape – but what does this really tell her? Isn’t it just a clever reworking of the importance of being attractive (not so much disciplined, energized and focused) even in the professional world? Attractive, that is, to the men who run that professional world.

Susan Bartky identifies two negative effects this preoccupation with appearance can have on a woman’s self. First, she relates Marx’s theory of body/labour alienation (which we have just discussed) to the separation a woman experiences between her personality and her body. This leaves the self fragmented, and thus objectified when the body becomes the only thing of value. Second, she points out narcissism as an inevitable side effect of self-objectification, because the woman learns to “take erotic satisfaction in her physical self, reveling in her body as a beautiful object to be gazed at and decorated.” And sure enough, *Self* has entire sections devoted to beauty and fashion to distract one’s attention from life’s more important things, like... anything.

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Here is where it all comes full circle and *Self* magazine, its clones, and its message are revealed to be just another manifestation of the male gaze; a phenomenon so influential that women have learned to internalize it, so that their seemingly autonomous desire to work out is really a compulsion to be attractive. The resulting self-objectification suddenly reveals itself to be a common theme in *Self* – one most salient example is the picture accompanying “Your Magic Sex Number”: a woman straddles a man, but is looking away from him, while he gazes directly at her. His facial expression is one of arousal and intense sensuality, but she has a toothy, girlish smile. His body is largely concealed, but her perfect figure is inescapable. He’s thinking carnal thoughts of pleasure; she’s thinking about losing weight and nabbing a promo. She’s a sexual object and a productive member of society, and he loves it.

Analyzing *Self* originally left me with more questions than answers. It forced me to question my own gym-going habits, and, to my dismay, compelled me to suspect the motives of my fellow gym-mates. I always felt good about not counting weight-loss as a goal – I just wanted to make muscles. I rolled my eyes when that one class instructor would say things like ‘let’s get rid of that butt jello’! I learned to tune out the ridiculous, sexist tunes they play. But how could I be absolutely sure that I haven’t been brainwashed by this patriarchy? Was I just internalizing the things I thought I was tuning out? I couldn’t deny that it felt good to be fit – did this make me a narcissist? Wouldn’t a narcissist diet? But I abhor dieting. Should I have been dieting? Do I lack discipline and focus? As a feminist, I make a conscious effort to spurn the concept of an objective aesthetic ideal, but my feminist self also loves having strong arms and mean legs – and not for the purpose of a promotion or being pleasant to look at for all the men. I feel I have circumvented the dangers that can accompany gym-going and the desire to be fit, but I can’t help but think of how different my life might be if I hadn’t. What can we do to counteract harmful messages? One thing I know for sure is that I was completely at peace with myself before this *Self* magazine came along.

So I burned it and went out for a lemon danish.
Bibliography


