

## **Staging fatness**

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## **Abstract**

This paper addresses the possible transformative role of staging fatness. Using our experience as audience members at a performance of *My life as a fat person*, we produce three anecdotes to discuss if and how staging the fat body can destabilize the social and cultural discourse about fatness. Elaborating on theoretical perspectives from fat studies, and using the staring encounter as our key concept, we analyze the fat performance as an emotional, intercorporeal event. It is essential for the performer to affect members of the audience, even while running the risk of reproducing stereotypes about fatness. Our analysis indicates that the actress in *My life as a fat person* creates a reflective space that allows the audience to recognize their own fear of fat, and to discover fatness as a phenomenon created between people in a social context. We conclude that the performance *My life as a fat person* challenge simplistic responses towards fat bodies, and contributes to the creation of a new story about fatness.

Key words: Fatness, fat performance, qualitative research, stereotypes, staring

## **Introduction**

This paper addresses the role that staging fatness can play in transforming attitudes towards people who are fat. For this purpose we will revisit former research material based on the young Swedish actress Lotti Törnros' (1972) theatrical performance of *My life as a fat person*. Between 2004 and 2006, she performed a play based on her life story, in which she describes growing up fatter than anyone else in her surroundings. In her story, she depicts herself as the object of other people's gaze, gossip and disdain. In their eyes, she's too fat, too hungry and too lazy. As a grown up actress, she takes the opportunity to stage her fatness and to meet the gaze of her audience and talk back to them. Jester (2009) has argued for increased research on the theatricality of fat performance. We have taken up Jester's challenge and entered the theater as members of Törnros' audience in order to analyze the potential her performance has to create new stories about fatness. We contextualize the fat performance as an emotional, inter-corporeal situation, and reflect upon its transformative potential. Before we start our examination of the performance, we will further develop the contextualizing theoretical perspectives we have chosen, to understand the emotions and dilemmas involved in staging fatness.

### **Speaking from a fat body: revolt and arrest**

It's a well-known fact that people who are fat are confronted with harmful weight-based stereotypes about being lazy, weak-willed and lacking in self-discipline (Bacon & Aphramor 2011). So when fat performers choose to perform on stage, they do so with a consciousness of systematic discrimination against fat people (Puhl & Heuer 2009, 2010). However, there is also a growing resistance to these harmful weight-based stereotypes. In particular the queer movement has long had important connections to fat activism (Wykes 2014, Cooper 2016).

*Fat activism*

Queer people and allies tend to value self-respect as more important for individual health and well-being than being thin (Farrell 2011, Cooper 2016). But it is not easy for fat people to gain self-respect. According to scholars within fat studies, being fat in modern western society can engender the feeling of being invisible and absent (LeBesco & Braziel 2001) and hypervisible at the same time (Murray 2005). Being treated like an object—especially one unworthy of attention—can produce what LeBesco (2005) calls an uninhabitable body, overwhelmed by weight-loss efforts, embarrassment, guilt, shame, self-hate and withdrawal from social contact (Farrell 2011, Meleo-Erwin 2015).

LeBesco (2004) sees fat as negotiable and “neither simply an aesthetic state nor a medical condition, but a *political* situation” (p.1). She recognizes the power interpersonal communication has to enable people who are fat to function with agency (p. 2). She answers her own question as to whether the fat body is “revolting” (p. 1), pointing to the double meaning of the label. Not only is revolting a synonym for disgusting, it also refers to “overthrowing authority, rebelling, protesting and rejecting” (p. 1). In line with this, Jester (2009) sees being revolting, or disgusting, as a revolutionary act, and Cooper (2016) writes about fat activism as profound and consistent individual work on change. The duality of the term revolting informs Farrell’s (2011) description of the fat activist as most often a woman and a feminist, with a critical view of the medical and social construction of “obesity.” Fat activism seems to be a rare opportunity for the fat individual to step forward and speak her mind, and it offers fat people an opportunity to talk their way out of oppression “because speaking builds subjects” (LeBesco 2004, p 4).

### **Staging fatness**

By staging their fatness, fat people create a situation in which they are free to speak and act

out and become visible to the world. However, the extent to which this action can be seen as radical or transformative varies and is a topic of some disagreement among fat activists. In her text “Fatties on Stage”, Petra Kuppers (2001) claims that “speaking from a large body is always already arrested” (p. 278). Performers who do not question underlying assumptions about the fat body can easily fall back into stigma and stereotype “still allowing no space for inscriptions of subjectivity” (p. 278). And Sharon Mazer (2001) writes that fat performance risks staying “locked inside the talkers’ rhetoric, defined by the dominant culture” (p. 272). On the contrary, LeBesco (2005) sees the potential for “a different way of relating to things, a different way of performing fat and understanding fat performance” (LeBesco 2005, p. 233). According to her, the performance of self can be a way of strengthening the interpersonal communication that is an essential means of enabling fat subjects to function with agency (LeBesco, 2004, p. 2). Like LeBesco, Wykes (2014) believes in the benefit of publicly problematizing the cultural and medical discourses of fatness. She suggests that making the hidden assumptions of normative categories visible can destabilise them and “denaturalise dominant ways of seeing, doing, and being” (p 4). For Kuppers (2001) as well, performance can offer a chance to broaden the image of fat women. Instead of reinforcing the image of fat as “all-embracing” (p. 282), she says that, performers are able to make their own “histories, desires and physicality visible under the mountains of proliferating discourses” (p.282).

### *The staring encounter*

Elaborating on the spectrum of visibility, Gailey (2014) writes that the way we come to know who we are occurs through examining and acknowledge how others see us. To be visible is, as Gailey sees it, intimately related to acknowledgement, but at other times it means one is different and is subject to inspection or scrutiny. She describes the situation of fat women as a state of hyper(in)visibility, experiencing, simultaneously, deprivation of recognition and

surplus attention. Fat women are reduced to their body and marked as not belonging, resulting in being treated without common courtesy or respect. They often experience an intense “onstage” feeling (Gailey 2014, p 10), as if judged and ridiculed with every move. Rosemary Garland-Thomson (2009) describes how much is actually at stake in a staring encounter. Staring too long at someone can in many circumstances be understood as rude and aggressive behavior (Garland-Thomson 2009). Nevertheless, research indicates that there seems to be an exception from this social rule when it comes to fat bodies. Some people even encourage this type of staring with the argument that it will shame fat people into changing their behavior and losing weight (Puhl & Heuer 2010). But the overwhelming results show that fat people risk feeling silenced and objectified, and their human potential goes unrecognized (Meleo-Erwin 2015). On the other hand, Garland-Thomson (2009) describes a staring encounter as an “intense visual engagement” (p. 3) and as “a dynamic struggle” (p.3) with the potential to create a circuit of communication and meaning-making. As we will show later, Törnros invited her audience into such a dynamic struggle. She invited us to stare at her, but she also stared back. She made us visible to her, and to ourselves and each other, and she placed herself on stage, but she also made us experience the intense onstage feeling.

## **Method**

Lotti Törnros is a freelance actress from Stockholm, Sweden. She’s had several roles in movies, TV-series and plays since 1999 ([www.lotti.tornros.se](http://www.lotti.tornros.se)). The research material we use in this article was collected as part of the first author’s Ph.D. project (Rugseth 2011). It was approved by the Norwegian Regional Ethics Committee (REK). From this plethora of material, including interviews and observations, we have delved more deeply into field notes taken by the first author as a spectator at Törnros’ performance. For the purpose of this article, we have isolated three anecdotes (van Manen 2014) for deeper analysis.

### *Anecdotes: creating and analyzing*

The word anecdote stems from the Greek *anekdota*; *things unpublished*.<sup>1</sup> Van Manen (2014) describes the anecdotal form as a way of grasping, recapturing and recreating experiential meaning. He even uses the term as a verb, saying that to anecdote is to reflect (6200) and that “the act of ‘anecdoting’ as a concrete reflecting prepares the space for reflection” (6200). According to Van Manen, a well-written anecdote has the power to make visible and explain things that resist straightforward explanation or conceptualization. We guided our analyses using questions such as how does Törnros manipulate our gaze and her own? How do we respond to this manipulation? How do they impact our embodied prejudices? Gradually, significant themes have emerged from the original field notes.

Each of the three anecdotes is meant to describe a single incident during Törnros’ performance. We have focused on what she said and did and included important, concrete details such as quotations from the performance. Our aim is to explore and understand fatness as a phenomenon in need of bracketing from the discriminating gaze. We have chosen to narrate the anecdotes in the first person from the author’s perspective, in order to more closely approximate the experience of “being there.” We have structured the analysis of the anecdotes into three different sections: first, we present our reflections after each anecdote, drawing preliminary connections to relevant theory, and then we offer a further discussion of what went on in the performance as a whole, before we summarize and conclude.

### **Anecdotes and analysis**

In *My life as a fat person*, Törnros stages herself as fat at different ages, from childhood to adult and motherhood. She gives her audience glimpses into situations that were formative for her growing self-hate and misery. Early in life, her own mother, her teacher, the school nurse,

her friends and neighbors started to tell her in various ways that she was too fat. The performance addresses her struggle to keep up her self-confidence through countless efforts—her own and those of the people around her—to make herself thinner and more physically acceptable. The play delves into the emotional impact of this endless struggle.

*Anecdote 1 - My weight for me and my weight for others*

*Arriving at the theater, I gather with the audience in the lobby. Programs are handed out and I notice that all the participants are presented in it with their name, weight and height. This information feels unexpected, a little uncomfortable, and thought-provoking. A young man who works at the theater smiles, and hands out a pen together with a brown notebook. “We kindly ask you to leave your personal signature in our guestbook,” he says. “My pleasure,” I reply and grab the pen, only to realize that, like the program, the guest-book has columns for weight and height as well. I immediately feel a bit of resistance against writing down my own weight, manifested as an ambiguity and tension in my body and an awareness of the people behind me, able to look over my shoulder. I feel intimidated, and several questions arise: Why are they asking for my weight? Who will see this information? How will it be used?*

By asking us to record our weight in an unusual setting, Törnros succeeds in making the weighing of oneself visible as an individual and emotional experience that is loaded with personal and contextual meaning. She creates a situation where we, no matter where we land on the BMI-scale, can experience the intense insecurity and discomfort that fat people often associate with such monitoring situations. Törnros takes the defining role. Her plan is not just to play *for* us, but also to play *with* us. She is not satisfied merely to present herself as fat and perform her own personal and subjective identity—she is also asking us to reconsider our own identity, and the relationship to fatness we have incorporated and habituated.



Involving the audience is a well-known technique in performance culture. Törnros is reversing the lens and turning the spotlight on us, the spectators, thereby both defining and limiting our role (Mazer 2001). The change of perspective reveals a hidden space from which buried emotions and their effects can be brought to light. Being seen by others is necessary and inevitable for the development of a person's identity. Seeing others, by definition objectifies the other as a person, but it also allows the possibility to "touch upon" the other with a warm and loving gaze (Gailey 2014). Being seen as an object can in certain circumstances suggest being cared for and comforted. However, in the context of the theater and body weight, changing status from being a seer to being seen, from subject to object, we felt deeply disturbed as well as unwilling to disclose our own weight. Writing our body weight down in the guest book created anxiety about being measured or observed against our will, an experience many fat women are all too familiar with (Kuppers 2001, Murray 2005, Meleo-Erwin 2015). According to Kupper (2001), the discomfort in this situation is directly related to the connotations of being fat in contemporary society: "[It] splits away agency and subjectivity; fat takes away the voice and acquires its own vocabulary" (p.278). Body fat's "vocabulary" expresses itself as an individual corporeal marker for inferior social status. From this perspective, asking us to write down our weight is asking us to face the risk of losing social status, our voice and hence our identity. Gailey (2014) writes that privileged bodies are invisible and that they are frequently given quite a bit of latitude regarding their behavior (p. 10). Even before the play begins, Törnros has signaled that this will not be the case during her performance.

*Anecdote 2 - Shared fear: being silent and lowering one's gaze*

*The theater is small and intimate, organized with benches on three different levels along one side, seating approximately fifty people. The audience consists mostly of women in their mid-thirties to sixties and only a handful of men. When Törnros enters the floor in front of us she*

*stands directly in front of those on the lowest level. The lighting is sharp so everybody can see each other easily. She sees us and we see her. She is barely dressed, only wearing a bra and a pair of large, light-colored, semi-transparent underpants. For several minutes, she just stands there on the edge of the stage, staring at us. She seems present and calm and at the same time scared, exposed in her fatness. It is as if she is saying to us "Go on, have a look! Take the opportunity to stare at my body, with all its folds of fat while you have the chance!" While standing still, Törnros continues to stare at us, with a direct gaze, one at a time. Everyone in the theater seems very sensitive, present and utterly silent. We hold our breath, lower our gaze. Then Törnros breaks the silence and suddenly starts to breathe heavily. Almost crying, she says: "Ooooooh you really scare me!"*

Törnros' dramatic and provocative invitation to gaze openly at her fat body makes it almost impossible for us to look at her. When Törnros stands almost naked in front of us, we want to cover her up, and ourselves as well. When she looks at us, we become self-aware and want to hide, to become invisible. When she starts to breathe heavily, showing her anxiety in the situation, she is humanized and vulnerable. Looking directly at the audience and addressing us all as "you," she holds us accountable for our gaze, for the way we stare at her fat body. Törnros take the shame and guilt she has experienced throughout her life for being fat and turns it back on us. We are silenced and lower our gaze. My heart beat faster, and it felt as if time froze.

Based on Törnros' experience of being subjected to other people's stares throughout her life, she can assume that her audience is more or less habituated by social norms to be able to stare at fat people without feeling shame. However, Törnros successfully shifts the paradigm and changes the rules of who can gaze at whom. The audience's feeling of uncertainty about whether it is acceptable to stare is nearly tangible in the room. Just as she did in the ticket area by asking us to write down our body weight, Törnros has created a situation inside the theater

where we feel forced to question what we have previously taken for granted. Allowing us to do what we normally do when faced with a fat body, and then breaking from tradition by openly meeting our gaze, contribute to an intense “onstage” feeling (Gailey 2014) and make us feel ashamed. Instead of simply telling us that it is wrong to stare, Törnros show us implicitly by letting us feel what it is like to be stared at. The staring encounter between the actor and us constitutes a dynamic struggle (Garland- Thomson 2009). Our intense visual engagement creates a circuit of communication and meaning-making. By staring back at her audience, Törnros stakes her claim to a position within this circuit and becomes an active agent, possibly gaining “the upper hand in a signification game” (LeBesco 2004, p. 5). Actions such as this are in effect a method of changing the rules of communication about fatness. She is no longer spoken about, she decides who is allowed to speak and about what. She decides that her fatness can no longer speak for itself. Her actions can no longer be defined by other people’s perceptions of her. She speaks for herself, through and about her body, with presence and clarity informed by her performative role.

### *Anecdote 3.*

#### *The unhappy, hungry child*

*The performance takes the audience through Törnros’ childhood and adolescence up until the time when she herself became a mother. As the play progresses, she plays herself as a hungry child with insatiable cravings, as an insecure and love-seeking teenager and as a frustrated and angry young adult. She breaks into a locked refrigerator, grabs burgers and stuffs them into her mouth. She clucks out loud, sighs and moans as if she’s making love to the food. Then she throws it on the floor, shouting “I’m not hungry, I’m angry! I have never been accepted for who I am.” Several times during the play, she returns to the edge of the stage, as if she*

*wants us to smell her, to take her in with all our senses. She challenges the social norms for how to behave, how to dress, what to eat and how to eat it. It's an emotional rollercoaster. We share her anger and her pain, we laugh and cry with her.*

Törnros does not allow her audience any escape. She holds on to us, demands our attention and drags us through her life story. She acts out the fat, revolting body with all its ambiguity and contradictions (LeBesco 2004). Törnros uses her presence and her silence as affective forces. Where LeBesco (2004) sees language as necessary for constituting a subject, Törnros' performance underlines the affective capacity of the body. At one moment, she becomes a provocative and rebellious teenager, vulgar and “out of control,” in another she plays herself as an extremely lonely and insecure child, let down by the adults who were supposed to take care of her. Our judging gaze is destabilized and ambivalent. Her performance disturbs and confuses us, refusing to settle into a single, easily classifiable category. One unspoken but ever-present question is: “Am I loveable?” Although she depicts a lonely childhood and difficult relationships, Törnros never suggests that being fat was a survival mechanism for her (Kuppers 2001). We never get the feeling that her story is told to justify her fatness. She never tries to escape her physicality, which, according to Kuppers (2001) is impossible anyway. Törnros challenges social rules about how women, and especially fat women, should dress, eat and behave. Stereotypes are stretched and bent. She plays with the perception of the fat female body as out of control by implicitly asking whose control is at stake. The answer to the question becomes obvious when she puts herself in charge of the situation in the theater, shamelessly presenting her body without any attempt to hide, and then meeting our gaze and directing it back at us. She acts as if she has nothing to lose. She has already lost too many years fighting against the fat in her own body and defending herself against the humiliating attacks of others. In her version of the story, she never lacked the will power to become thinner, but experienced exhausting hunger and malnutrition through several and various

diets. Her doctor assures her that she is healthy and fit, but psychologically she suffers from low self-esteem, and feels disconnected from her own body, which she has learned to hate.

### **Further discussion**

On stage, the expression of thought-provoking ideas and communication between performers and society is part of a long and rich tradition. Theater is a means of expression and an art form with a strong visual component; as such, it is subject to norms of appearance just like the rest of society (Jester 2009). Traditionally, theater was designed for and by the male gaze.

There is a longstanding tradition that says that fat women have no place in the theater as performing subjects. According to Jester (2009), when fat women are allowed a place in the theater at all, they have typically been relegated to the roles of the old, the ugly, or the comical. Törnros' play, in its typically revolting fashion, is an explicit rebuke to this sort of typecasting—she is the star of the show, but she is not a comedian or an old woman, and she is constantly playing with and problematizing the norms of female beauty behavior.

#### *A relational, affective and reflective space.*

We analyze Törnros' performance as an invitation to enter the world of a fat person, to perceive the world through and with her staged body. Based on a socially charged story, the play allows the audience to receive her bodily appearance as an intense and powerful happening. Her performance affects us as an open, unpredictable and essentially active process. Upon entering the stage, Törnros makes her fat body relational, affective and reflective. Her performance allows the audience to share in her experience of cultural ideas about (female) fatness and subjective embodiment. By staging herself explicitly as a fat person, Törnros situates her play squarely in the contested ground that the social culture has placed her in. She seizes the chance to tell a familiar story from a new perspective, that of lived fat subjectivity (LeBesco 2004).

Furthermore, she uses dramaturgical techniques that allow the audience to share in the genesis of an experience. In Törnros' performance, the subject is self-contained and individualized, but she is also operating together with others in a shared affective space. In this space, the audience cannot remain solely in the role of spectator. Instead, Törnros forces and invites us to feel her gaze, which makes us more aware of our own seeing and habitual judgment of the fat body.

In both direct and more subtle ways, she communicates about being fat in a way that reflects the latin root word, *communicare*<sup>2</sup>, meaning “doing together.” Through our affective connection to Törnros' performance, we communicate back to her. During her period of stillness, when Törnros exposes herself almost naked on stage, we are exposed as well, we share the moment with her. In such a position, the judgmental gaze on her fat body loses its legitimacy and its power. It is no longer possible for us in the audience to feel we are better, safer, stronger, more right than Törnros. The feeling of being exposed circulates from Törnros' staged fatness over to us in the audience and back again, the boundary that separates audience from performer is broken down.

Törnros is enacting the universality in the human condition, even though our body sizes may differ. Life is constituted by being in the world with others. To make her situation intelligible she presents her fatness and her misery as a result of difficult and demanding relationships that continue to produce negative feelings as long as they exist. Törnros did not become fat in a vacuum—everyone around her played a part and contributed to maintaining her misery and self-loathing. Her performance shows how this collective field shapes her identity and makes her body uninhabitable (LeBesco 2004). However, by staging the story, she is able to reframe those negative experiences and reinterpret what it means to live a life under constant scrutiny and objectification.

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<sup>2</sup> English Oxford Living Dictionaries. [www.oxforddictionaries.com](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com)

### *Shared meaning of body weight*

Törnros makes her body, specifically her *fat body*, highly visible. Although fat can be said to be “written on the body for all to see” (LeBesco 2004, p. 6), Törnros takes this one step further and exposes herself in public, almost naked. Her performance is her ultimate “unmasking” (LeBesco & Braziel 2001, p. 1), of the fat body, which renders it hypervisible and present, impossible to overlook. Given how the fat body is often seen as repulsive, funny, ugly and unclean (LeBesco & Braziel 2001, p. 2), she creates and embodies a deeply vulnerable situation on stage. Yet again, her vulnerability is not only her own. Her communication through nakedness, sustained eye contact, heavy breathing and tears reaches out to us. We are dragged into her drama, and potentially become as vulnerable as her. Garland-Thomson describes staring as “an interrogative gesture that asks what’s going on and demands the story” (p.3). She argues that eye contact is a primary way of being together and indicates that everybody in each precious moment belongs to the same world and shares the same human conditions.

### *Twisting discourses*

As mentioned earlier, Kuppers (2001) has shown that the link between body and meaning is deeply embedded in our cultural vocabulary. She describes the fat actor’s size as a performance in itself, “prior to any staging of it” (p. 278), and that “to twist discourse away from their size is nearly impossible” (p. 278). In many ways, this blurring of lines between performance and lived life is precisely the point of Törnros’ performance. She illuminates this ambiguity by staging it. The twisting of discourses is her main tool on stage and she uses this technique to tie the bonds of affection and keep up the shared emotional intensity between her and her audience. The performance is Törnros’ way of talking herself into being a subject instead of an object (LeBesco 2004). Our analysis indicates that creating the time and space to

construct a story balanced between well-known discourses containing discrimination and objectification and their unknown individual repercussions can offer valuable insights into the way Törnros and other fat people live.

### *Conclusion*

Törnros' decision to enter the stage can be regarded as a revolting act in the tradition of fat activism. She takes on the challenge of making her experience visible—publicizing the hidden story of her life as a fat person to the world. Rather than being satisfied to be merely an object for the gaze of others, by staging her fatness Törnros creates space to deconstruct and engage in conversation with culturally shaped ideas about fatness. In our analysis, we have shown how staging the fat body can destabilize the social and cultural discourse about fatness. Of course, how her story affects others will remain open and unpredictable, and as Garland-Thomson (2009) points out, what happens during the transaction of looking and looking away is unpredictable. And as Mazer (2001) points out, there is a chance the audience will not be affected, that they will continue to hold on to cultural stereotypes and that even Törnros runs the risk of reproducing stereotypes about fatness. But, in line with Gailey (2014), we experienced that to make the phenomenon of hyper(in)visibility transparent as Törnros did, there was at least a potential for renewed curiosity about fatness, for reflection and the possibility of a change of attitude. In our opinion, *My life as a fat person* challenges simplistic responses towards fat bodies, and contributes to the creation of a new story. By forcing us to lower our gaze and look away, Törnros' performance made us (hyper)visible to ourselves and able to look at her in a new and unfamiliar way.

A good performer must affect the audience, and in our experience, Törnros was very successful in this regard. She carried us through feelings of repulsion, resistance, shame, guilt, sadness and discomfort. Where Mazer (2001) is skeptical that a fat performance can be more



about the audience than about the actress, we feel that this switch of focus to the audience was essential to Törnros performance and that she cannily used it as a transformative dramaturgical technique. Törnros' mastery of the form revealed to us that everybody is complicit in and shares in a fear of fat. Instead of allowing fatness to remain specific to Törnros' own body, she creates a reflective room for the audience to discover fatness as a phenomenon created between people in a social context. Staging fatness in the way Törnros did allowed both audience and performer to recognize their intercorporeality and interconnectedness, complicit in their creation of a world both within and without the theater.

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