



Symptomatic Images/ Contagious Images: The Ambivalence of Visual Narratives of Eating Disorders

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The connection between images and anorexia, orthorexia, bulimia, binge eating, and other forms of food consumption deemed 'disordered' is controversial and often oversimplified. Frequently it is reduced to the idea that glamorous images, particularly the *heroin chic* style of the 1990s, create a dangerous imaginary that young women - statistically the main target of eating disorders - emulate. This article wants to challenge this issue by exploring three aspects of the intricate relationship between eating disorders and images: 1) the fear of contagion that haunts images exposing bodies that suffer by eating disorders; 2) As a time-based medium, film offers a privileged set of perceptive tools to account for the ways eating disorders interfere with time - as perceived, lived, shared; 3) One more aspect that is relevant to observe since it predominately occupies the current debate is the question of the *right* way to represent certain medical conditions and their experience. The reasons at the core of this debate are extremely vital and prove how photos and moving images have tragically contributed to building and constructing gender and racial bias as well as the stigmatization of certain diseases. Though when speaking of *misrepresentation* there is the risk of embracing a deceptive idea of *good mimesis* at the cost of the ambivalence that the experience of certain conditions inherently carry and which should not disappear in the fictional dimension.

Keywords
Anorexia
Bulimia
Moara Passoni
Dysmorphia
Film
DOI

<https://doi.org/10.54103/2036-461X/17898>

For others, who look from without, my ideas, my feelings have a nose. My nose. And they have a pair of eyes, my eyes, which I do not see but which they see. What relation is there between my ideas and my nose? For me, none whatever. I do not think with my nose, nor am I conscious of my nose when I think. But others? Others, who cannot see my ideas within me, but who see my nose without? For others, there is so intimate a relation between my ideas and my nose.

(Luigi Pirandello, One, None, and a Hundred Thousand)

INTRO

In this article I want to reflect on the intricate link between images and eating disorders. In recent years the question of the visual representations of medical issues - a subject that has been inaugurated by authors such as Sander Gilman and Stuart Hall - has been gaining more and more attention within cultural



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studies, gender studies, and medical humanities. If the two-way relationship between medical conditions and their visual narratives is generally crucial for all medical categories, I believe that eating disorders constitute a peculiar case study as their constellation of symptoms, their definition, and their epidemic nature appear to be strictly related to both the construction/rejection of the image of the self as well as to the circulation of *glamorous* photos and beauty ideals that are supposed to trigger the disorders. Furthermore, a careful analysis of bodily dysmorphia, which features both anorexia and bulimia, allows to expand the investigation of images from the visual aspects only to 'the embodied perceptual experience that also involves the other senses' — as Fiona Johnstone proposes in her *Manifesto for a Visual Medical Humanities*.¹ In this respect, I find compelling to engage with the filmic narratives of eating disorders at least for three reasons that I will start to unpack in this contribution: 1) Films need to confront the fear of contagion that haunts images exposing bodies that suffer by eating disorders (this hesitation is confirmed by the little filmography that exists on this subject despite the sadly increasing proliferation of these disorders); 2) Temporality is a dimension that I consider particularly significant in the analysis of cinematic narratives of eating disorders. As a time-based medium, film offers a privileged set of perceptive tools to account for the ways eating disorders interfere with time — as perceived, lived, shared. For instance, how they sabotage the conventional subdivision of the day into mealtimes and their ritualistic and social value. Moreover, time of food obsession confronts that of intersubjectivity, which often functions as a hindrance in the context of days devoted to food: avoiding it, buying it, consuming it, weighing it, thinking about it. What is sacrificed therefore is the time of shared routine, which in this case coincides with the physiological time of nutrition; 3) One more aspect, which does not only concern narratives of eating disorders, but that I believe is important to discuss since it predominately occupies the current debate (both academic and mainstream) is the question of the *right* way to represent certain medical conditions and their direct experience. The reasons at the core of this debate are extremely vital and valid, and prove how photos and moving images have tragically contributed to building and constructing gender and racial bias as well as the stigmatization of people diagnosed with diseases such as hysteria² and, more recently, HIV. Though when speaking of *misrepresentation* there is the risk of oversimplifying the discourse and embracing a deceptive idea of 'good mimesis' at the cost of the ambivalence that the experience of certain conditions inherently carry and which should not, therefore, disappear in the fictional dimension.³

A SCENE OFF-TOPIC

A thin young woman moves nervously in a room with large horizontal windows. She stares at the landscape outside — house roofs and electricity pylons — after having checked her phone, scrolling up and down with her index finger. The

long silence of this scene is only broken by the heels of her shoes when she walks down the staircase to exit the flat and sit for a moment on a bench in the sun. The camera lingers inside, on the first floor, and zooms in from above, through the door glass, on her hesitant body. She rests only few seconds, then she goes back inside, climbing the stair towards the camera. She stops on the top step, and not even the close-up can help disclosing her thoughts. She turns her head, gives the boney back to the camera, and obsessively starts to walk up and down the stairs: first slowly, with a calm serious expression on her face, then quicker, lending rhythm to the automatic movement. A slight, enigmatic, bodily joy pushes her lips. Is she smiling?

This woman is one of the characters who participate in the choral story, *Grass* (2018), created by Korean director Hong Sangsoo. The black and white film revolves around the guests of a café and her owner, Areum, who sits all day long at her laptop observing and writing down the conversations, the actions — fights, frictions, and love encounters — of the persons eating and drinking in the room. We are not sure whether Areum is the screenwriter or a witness of this net of daily experiences that the guests bring with them at the table. An undecipherable role in line with the absence of clear temporal references that features the entire movie. The repetitive gesture of the woman walking the stairs with no purpose other than going up and down bespeaks Hong Sangsoo's attempt to move so close to actions, reactions, and words, that the temporal borders lose their framing function. The short, apparently irrelevant, sequence contains a similar kind of marginal yet symptomatic gestures that filmmaker and theorist Domietta Torlasco so accurately and poignantly describes in her film essay *Philosophy of the Kitchen* (2014).⁴ By retracing the presence of (paid and unpaid) domestic work in the history of European film, Torlasco picks up Cesare Casarino's thesis in *Images for Housework*⁵ to prove how cinema of duration—long takes, repetitive gestures, protracted silences — was born in the kitchen. The exhaustion of the (house)working women on the screen contrasts with a cinematic dead time where 'nothing happens'.⁶ In the Italian neorealist film *Umberto D.* (Vittorio De Sica, 1952) — one of the films Torlasco includes in her video essay — a young pregnant maid sits on a chair while grinding coffee: she is exhausted from cleaning, preparing food, tidying up. But suddenly, something *extraordinary* happens, she extends her leg, stretches her foot, and closes the kitchen door with the tip of her toe only because she can do it.⁷ *Philosophy of the Kitchen* reflects on female reproductive labour foregrounding its power in affecting forms and technics of time-based cinematic medium — almost a revenge against its marginalization as an activity worth neither to be paid nor to be shown [Fig. 1]. Insisting on the marginal minor gestures is here, then, not a romantic celebration of the mundane and its little details but a way to point out the significance of these interruptions, which do not immediately correspond to a signified, yet they ask to be listened to, despite the possible risks of misinterpretation. We can deem these images *symptomatic*⁸ by keeping in mind Freud's definition of symptoms as 'acts detrimental or at least useless to the subjects'.⁹ The fact that symptoms would neither speak

for themselves nor display their meaning, presented a compelling challenge where alternative forms of understanding could only be found in an in-between zone, by exposing both the patient and the therapist to the rich and impervious space of transference. As George Didi-Huberman pointed out,¹⁰ Aby Warburg's unfinished project for his Mnemosyne Atlas¹¹ is built on the idea that certain images are symptoms of the intricacy of human multi-layered temporality, made of interruptions, resumptions, inversions, regressions, stops, and accelerations. Warburg recognized in the artistic crystallization of expressive gestures and forms the physical embodiment of this ungraspable and discontinuous fluctuation of time, which he named *Dynamogram*. These were for Warburg new parameters to rethink and rewrite art history and to thus reject a conception of art history that aestheticized art works. He was rather concerned with art as trace of human gestures and expression (what he calls *Pathosformeln*): a history of moving bodies and affects. Images are not only generated by the clash between feelings and reflective thought, they also embody the symptoms of this conflict. They do not provide a solution, they interrogate time condensed in bodily gestures.



Fig. 1
Still from *Grass* (Hong Sang Soo, 2018)



Fig. 2
Still from *Philosophy in The Kitchen* (Domietta Torlasco, 2014)

What makes, in this sense, the sequence from *Grass* so special? The scene of the woman in the staircase exceeds the seeming banality of *empty* motion precisely because it goes off-topic- to quote Lea Melandri's provocative definition of those topics that historically were not considered theoretically relevant despite being at the core of women's life, desires, and struggles [Fig. 2].¹² If *Grass* is not at all film about eating disorders, something in this repetitive action — off-topic and out of time — offers a (moving) *Pathosformel* to elaborate on the imaginary that films (especially fiction films, tv series, and web series) on anorexia, bulimia, binge, and orthorexia create, support, or dismiss. Hong Sangsoo manages to capture a powerful moment without going after its *meaning*. The thin hectic body of the protagonist climbing the stairs alone in her flat visually resonates with the obsession for the control on the body, which is at stake in eating disorders where one's body seems to constitute the only possible battlefield to project the external world onto. Different forms of eating disorders reveal a common anxiety for the porosity of the body as if the skin could not contain the interior: if anorexia is marked by agoraphobic anxieties, bulimia is linked to claustrophobia.¹³ These two seemingly opposite reactions arise from the same difficulty to deal with the intense demands of the body and from the conviction that there are only two options to cope with it, namely to create a 'no-entry system of defenses'¹⁴ or to let everything in (and then expel it). Bodies pervaded by what Julia Kristeva describes as 'abjection',¹⁵ those 'violent, dark revolt of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside and inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable'.¹⁶

In 2016, the writer and artist Jessie Kahnweiler directed the webseries *The Skinny*¹⁷ to sensitize people to those eating disorders like bulimia that tend to be less commonly represented than anorexia, because, despite their exponential rise, they are less conspicuous, that is, they cannot be recognized as easily on the patient's body. Kahnweiler, who herself has been suffering for many years from bulimia, points out how films about eating disorders are not at all realistic since they don't reveal the disgusting and shameful aspects of bingeing, purging, and throwing up. Her attempt to move the issue out of the clinical space and into daily life by showing eating disorders in their ordinary, mundane environment, where they become invisible — yet very present in the daily schedule of the protagonist — is a remarkable alternative to plots with compulsively happy endings. An aspect that she stresses by calling *Relapse* the first episode of *The Skinny*. Nonetheless, visibility and eating disorders are much more entangled than Kahnweiler brings to light in her intentionally grotesque depiction of bulimia. If Kahnweiler's provocation draws attention to shame and secrecy by overexposing bulimia symptoms, she does so by relying on 'authenticity' as the key solution to reach her audience, and uncovers only some of the numerous elements at stake in analysing eating disorders through both an individual and socio-political lens [Fig. 3].

Fig. 3
Still from *The Skinny*
(Jessie Kahnweiler, 2016)



CONTAGIOUS IMAGES?

The connection between images and anorexia, bulimia, binge eating, and other forms of food consumption deemed *disordered* is controversial and not yet deeply explored in all its manifold levels. Mostly because it is reduced to the idea that glamorous images, particularly the *heroin chic* style of the 1990s,¹⁸ create a dangerous imaginary that young women, who statistically are the main target of eating disorders,¹⁹ admire and imitate. On its own, such a perspective fuels the risk of considering women tendentially narcissistic subjects, passive victims of the ideals of beauty promoted by the media.²⁰ Since the 1980s at least, feminist theorists and activists have been fighting against the idea of women as subjects with narcissistic tendencies and tried instead to retrace the production process behind certain beauty ideals.²¹ Their approaches often lead to a conception of eating disorders as forms of active resistance, refusing 'a culturally defined role' by attempting to regain control over the body when faced with a 'confusing social reality' of oppressive and multiple expectations.²² Other feminists have historically taken a more critical stance towards women's obsession with the body as a form of submission to patriarchy and its ideals of beauty. In recent years, academics from the social sciences,²³ cultural and gender studies,²⁴ and media studies²⁵ have significantly contributed to zooming out from the sole individual psychological components of eating disorders and have shed light upon their socio-political context. Specifically, it is crucial to look at the role aesthetics might play in the encounter between visual mass media and eating disorders, especially when that aesthetics communicates a sense of purported neutrality, both medical and political. Visual media not only, indeed, record reality but they contribute to its symbolic transformation and comprehension. Precisely because eating disorders are shaped to such an

extreme degree by their socio-cultural context, and due to their increasingly pervasive nature, they are an emblematic case study for the analysis of affects that are both representative of and most problematic in contemporary society. Eating disorders as a medical category were born and established roots in the industrialized West. In 1873 in Great Britain, Sir William Withney Gull defined the phenomenon of self-starvation among young women as 'anorexia nervosa'. In the same year in France, Ernest-Charles Lasègue named the same kind of food behaviour as 'anorexia hystérique'. In the nineties of the 19th Century, having established themselves as a viral phenomenon that directly correlates with wellbeing, industrial, and economic development in the West, eating disorders traverse geographical borders and expand, especially into Japan, China, South Korea, South Africa, Nigeria, Argentina, Chile and India. Coinciding with the birth of the moving image and public health in the late 19th Century, eating disorders expand symbiotically with visual media, as the latter circulate ever-more globally with the rise of the internet at the beginning of the 21st Century. Despite visual culture having been acknowledged as being partly responsible for promoting dangerous ideals of beauty that trigger eating disorders, the nature of the *contagious* nature of images in the proliferation of eating disorders is characterized by many elements. This supposed contagious power concerns not only the emulation of beauty ideals embodied by fashion images but also the symptoms themselves, as suspected by the doctor who first defined bulimia nervosa. After 1979, when psychiatrist Gerald Russel diagnosed 'Bulimia Nervosa' for the first time, he worried that his description of the symptoms had contributed to the dramatic spread of the pathology itself.²⁶ This is of course an impossible but frequent enigma regarding all new medical categories: if it is the symptoms that proliferate or the diagnosis. In his reflections on the contagious nature of desire, René Girard explains the proliferation of eating disorders and the obsession for thinness as an extreme drive to competition – mostly among women.²⁷

The idea of being exposed to the dangerous emulative power of images seems to contradict the curious experiments of Hugh Welch Diamond, one of the pioneers of psychiatric photography, who was convinced that showing his patients a picture of their own face during an acute crisis could have a beneficial influence, healing them by its shock therapy effect.²⁸ Further experiments had then called into question that it was not the subject of the photograph that generated the shock, but rather the very nature of the new technological medium: the camera, which was born at the time when Diamond was training as a psychiatrist. The portrait of a landscape was in this sense as effective and healing as that of a portrait. After all, the birth of photography is, as is well known, what made possible the controversial diagnosis of hysteria perfected by Jean-Martin Charcot at the Salpêtrière, the medical category that by definition was based on staging the symptom, on making the symptoms of the patients of the Parisian hospital – all women – a spectacle for the eyes of an audience of doctors – almost exclusively men – and for the lens of a passionate photographer like Charcot.

The current discourse about eating disorders and emulation does not, however, only find its roots in the fashion style of the early 1990s but it has been also strongly affected by the advent of the digital space. Around the beginning of the 2000s, a new eating-disorders community showed up on the internet. It was not, as one might expect, meant to support and share a healing process from these increasingly widespread issues, but rather to glorify anorexia as a lifestyle. Under the hashtag *#Thinspiration*, members of the *pro-ana* (*pro-anorexia) community posted photos that depicted skinny women and close-ups of slender bodies (such as hip bones, thigh gaps, shoulders) as well as aspects of their anorexic experience. Consistently appearing on *pro-ana* bulletin boards, websites, blogs, social network sites, email and WhatsApp groups, these images were and continue to function as a motivating tool to become a true and pure anorexic. *Pro-ana* is a community whose attempt to create a *free* space to confront raw feelings and thoughts about eating disorders is intertwined with a quasi-religious sectarian approach: Anorexia is identified with 'Ana the Goddess' and hierarchy among members is defined by degrees of 'purity' (with anorexics placed at the top, while bulimics are at the bottom). To be included in the groups one must be either an 'authentic' anorexic or an 'authentic' bulimic. Authenticity is what produces identity by excluding, for instance, *wannarexics*, the ultimate insult to describe people that fail at their weight-loss goals²⁹ or that join *pro-ana* communities merely to find dieting tips.

In this context, a set of ten commandments encouraging thinness and perfection constitutes the core of a long list of strategies and advice that (mostly) young women give to each other in order to fast, to kill hunger, to purge, and to finally lose weight: one must believe in control through starvation as 'the only force mighty enough to bring order in the chaos that is my world' (*Anastart* website). The predominately female religious/sectarian self-organization, congregating around an almighty goddess interestingly resonates with the rejection of food in female mystics, which has been divergently investigated by Rudolph Bell³⁰ and by Caroline Walker Bynum.³¹ As soon as it received general public attention, the *pro-ana* phenomenon caused astonishment and fear among teenagers' parents, health professionals, teachers, and institutions; eventually, all online platforms that instigate suicide by exalting both anorexia and bulimia (*pro-mia*) were shut down. Pro-eating-disorders communities have, however, migrated from these websites, which tended to be static, strictly moderated, and password-protected to social media such as Facebook or Instagram, to platforms, in other words, which are more visual, less hierarchical, and more difficult to moderate due to the large number of posted images. On new social media like Instagram and tiktok the phenomenon has mostly lost its communitarian aspect and its recognizability and took instead the shape of an obsession for sharing one's daily meal — either to show the small intake of food or to be proud of a fast metabolism. In both cases, the aspect of exposing oneself to the images of a desirable body is here replaced by a more voyeuristic gratification as well as by a more or less subtle pleasure for generating envy. An emblematic example is tiktok's 'What I eat in a day', which is in principle only meant to document eating

habit presenting what users eat in a given day. The videos usually begin with the person showing her body, followed by clips of the snacks, drinks and meals they consume.

How can cinematic narratives respond at the same time to the proliferation of both disordered eating and images that mirror or 'reproduce' these behaviours?

DYSMORPHIC TEMPORALITIES: MOARA PASSONI'S *ECSTASY*

If every type of eating disorder appears to give life to different temporal forms and dynamics, it is nonetheless possible, despite these divergences or affective polarities, to recognise a common denominator in the effort to control and contain time. Time here is defined not only as lived time, but also the physiological time of cellular ageing, or of those activities that conventionally punctuate the everyday. Eating — or abstaining from it — is a form of time travel³² and food is the instrument with which to move as one wishes amongst the dimensions of past, present and future. It is simultaneously an emergency brake and an accelerator, allowing access to passions and desires before time crumbles them or after it has indefinitely archived them.

The privation of anorexia nervosa, the compulsive overeating of binge eating, or that of bulimia, followed by compensatory behaviour, can therefore adopt the semblance of a protective armour against collision with emotions, affects, discomforts. By building a wall, just in time, it disallows the interior world from crashing into, interacting with or simply dispersing into external reality, that 'not-I' whose most immediately recognisable limit is marked by the body. The relationship to food can constitute one of these barricades, through modalities that are heterogeneous and often invisible, either because they don't leave their marks on the body, or because they accord with societal norms — such as diets and obsessive healthy eating. The anxiety/control affective polarity in anorexia: a form of resistance to time through abstinence from nutrition in order to freeze any process of growing and transformation. The anaesthetisation of emotions during binge eating and the bulimic ritual of filling up and emptying out. Here, time is suspended in a loop that consists of the ethereal time of unexpressed desire and organic time, heavy and corporeal, articulated through chewing, rumination, compensatory vomit and purging. During this dietary ritual, one is consumed by the illusion of being able to dominate time and fantasies of unlimited coexisting possibilities that trigger a short-circuit between past, present and future, whose continuity is inevitably fragmented by sudden mood swings.

The common aspect of the perception of time which features in eating disorders seems to be the sensation of being condemned to a *not yet*, uprooted from narrative temporality and disallowed from recognising one's self as part of a story in the name of a phantasmal true self to reach.³³

Anorexia is a lived experience, a process, an episode, a way of being, not a tool. I gradually pieced together a routine. My day was divided up into the time to eat, time to exercise, time to study, time to sleep, all very precisely delineated. In between these slices of day, I couldn't relax, and if anyone tried to interrupt this routine I would bawl them right out of the room. The repetition of this regime, and the stemming of the body's vital fluxes — I didn't eat, didn't menstruate... — ended up creating a sense of eternal time, to the point that I lost all track of what happened when between the ages of 12 and 18. It was as if those six years were a static blur.³⁴

This is how Brazilian filmmaker Moara Passoni describes her personal experience of anorexia she depicted in the experimental feature film *Ecstasy*, which was premiered in the CPH:DOX main competition in 2020.³⁵ When Passoni began writing the film the main challenge for her was to unhinge visual language which that media and culture conventionally use to represent eating disorders and that often spectacularize them, oscillating between the stigmatisation and victimisation of those affected by the disorder. Passoni is not interested in restoring a more faithful, more stable, more recognisable account of anorexia, as this would be a vain challenge. It is not a question of restoring an alleged identity of the disease betrayed by filmic narratives but to rather try to recompose a story that is as fragmented as the protagonist's perception of her body [Fig. 4].



Fig. 4
Still from *Ecstasy*
(Moara Passoni, 2020)

By following the story of the development of Clara's anorexia, from her childhood to her late teens, *Ecstasy* shows the political changes in Brazil during the 1990s, a time when the country had its first democratically elected president since 1964 [Fig. 5]. Clara's character is partly autobiographical, partly the result

of interviews Passoni conducted with women affected by eating disorders, a way to step out from the solitary obsession with self-observation and find relief in the communality of the symptoms. *Ecstasy* is a biography inscribed on a body that refuses and questions its shape and its identity. Biology and history meet from the very beginning of the film where Passoni uses archival photos of the protests that took place in Brazil in 1970s and in the 1980s. We see a portrait of Passoni's mother, the leader of one of the movements participating in these protests. She is pregnant and the voice over speaks about the foetus absorbing the adrenaline released by the mother. The story of Clara's relationship with food is depicted as immersed in and indistinguishable from her own environment. In exploring anorexia, Passoni considers not only the individual psychological components of her main character, but also the socio-political context as well as the religious one the girl grew up with in Brazil. None of these elements alone constitutes an explanation for Clara's food behaviour, but they rather provide a complex net through which to look at eating disorders. An approach that mirrors the difficulty of understanding the nature of these issues: as Susan Bordo has pointed out, the medical attempt to find subcategories to define new forms of eating disorders and to try to capture their features satisfies fantasies of precision and unification of phenomena that in fact have become less and less amenable to scientific clarity and distinctness.³⁶

When she started writing *Ecstasy*, Passoni's main concern was to find a language that didn't fulfill the expectations of the audience according to the conventional visual stereotypes about eating disorders. How to use images to account for issues that are thought to be affected by the circulation of *contagious* images that generate emulation? To what extent would it be possible to follow Clara in her ecstatic process, so strongly marked by the death drive?

Fig. 5
Still from *Ecstasy*
(Moara Passoni, 2020)



Passoni was firstly tempted by an iconoclastic solution: to leave bodies out of the frame, to avoid the spectacularization of anorexia (often criticized in films about eating disorders — I am thinking for example of *To the Bone* (2017) by Marti Noxon).³⁷ In doing so, Passoni tried to make an 'anorectic' film by re-ducing the presence of visual (living) elements and delegating the story of a bodily struggle mainly to the voice over. But something was missing from this first cut and in the final version the risk of overexposing the frailty of Clara's body is avoided by a careful account of Clara's dysmorphic perception of herself and the external world. Instead of omitting her body, Moara paradoxically presents Clara's subjective experience, her (self)objectification, by making visible her phantasies and desires, her idiosyncrasies and her fears. Clara's alienation from her body and its fragmentation, her struggle against a living body affected by time and space, is rendered through the use of close up and extreme close up, which convey the obsessive love for detail that is defined as 'the geometry of hunger'. Eating disorders are linked to the obsession with control and often this control is linked to perfectionism, and automatically to beauty, good behavior, and ambition. In *Ecstasy* the need for control carries different nuances, revealing a complex relationship with pleasure: there is, for instance, an immense pleasure for details and for images, as Passoni poignantly shows, by presenting ecstasy as a contemplation of organs, flesh, bones, their beauty and their repulsiveness. Film editing mirrors Clara's morbid need to re-edit reality by cutting it in little pieces — as she does with the food. Clara seems to be either too close or too far from *the other*. In the struggle to find an *in between* space, the camera reminds us that the body is the primary seat for the development of the sense of self as well as the primary site for meeting the other.

The overused and often obscure word 'dysmorphia' in relation to eating disorders takes in *Ecstasy* multiple forms and speaks for both the concern to see oneself and being seen at the same time. In Passoni's film, dysmorphia affects Clara's body as well as the world around her: it also takes the shape of two imaginary friends/enemies of Clara: Mr. Egg, whom Clara meets for the first time when they move to Brasilia where her mother got a job as a representative of the Federal District. The second friend (a sort of alter ego of the Egg) is a Blue dot, which appears on Clara's plate to hide the forbidden object of desire: food. Mr Egg teaches Clara the 'magical game' of self-control or rather, self tyranny. This character together with the Blue Dot introduce another important aspect of eating disorders: magical thinking as a tool to transform the world into a safe, predictable space.

As a medical category, dysmorphia defines an excessive preoccupation with the body, the entire body or one single part; the struggle to accept one's body, the need to modify it, the feeling that it doesn't (yet) coincide with one's identity.³⁸ 'Subjects with dysmorphic disorders often show problematic narratives about their life and display a general deprecation not only towards their body but also with respect to themselves as individuals'.³⁹ It is proved that the experience of one's own body affects the representation of the body and shapes a different narrative about the self. Bodily experiences and body image are reciprocally

linked to the narratives employed by an individual in depicting herself.⁴⁰ In *Ecstasy* anorexia is a way of moving in and looking at the world, not only at oneself, and it is only when the camera turns towards the fear for a reality, which is transformed by time and motion, that dysmorphia ceases to be just an image reflected in the mirror, it not only affects Clara's body but also everything she touches, (not) tastes, observes and listens to.

Films do not heal like medicaments, they disclose unforeseen scenarios, they move us, push us forward or backward where we had not been before. The case of eating disorders is particularly ambivalent and challenging to confront, because images are at the core of these issues, which are structured by imitation and concealment. The possibility to make something visible (or invisible), which inherently constitutes the cinematic medium, is challenged by the ambiguous relationship with (self)visibility that eating disorders manifest through dysmorphia: every form is not yet the good one, every shot has not yet the right distance. Oftentimes, people who are affected by eating disorders are in search of an imaginary that can help understanding their obscure and exhausting constellation of symptoms and that can bring to light what they most of the time live hide and live in secret. In this respect, one asks images to show, to exhibit what one does not have the courage to say and what one is not yet able to see. Images are therefore not asked to be faithful, but rather to both exhibit and escape the repetition, the *reproduction* of certain gestures and behaviors one is trapped in.

Notes

*This article is part of the research *Contagious Images? Visual Representations of Eating Disorders*, which I am currently carrying out at ICI Berlin Institute for Cultural Inquiry thanks to the VolkswagenStiftung grant 'Original isn't it? Special thanks to Dr Claudia Peppel. The outcome of this project will be published in a forthcoming monograph by the same title.

¹ Fiona Johnstone, 'Manifesto for a Visual Medical Humanities' in The *Medical Humanities* blog, July 2018, <https://blogs.bmj.com/medical-humanities/2018/07/31/manifesto-for-a-visual-medical-humanities/> [accessed 25 August 2022]

² See George Didi-Huberman and Alisa Trans Hartz, *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004); Sander Gilman and others, *Hysteria Beyond Freud* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Elaine Showalter, *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Media* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

³ In the recent conference 'Violence, Care, Cure: (Self)perceptions within the Medical Encounter' I co-organized at ICI Berlin together with Marta-Laura Cenedese, we explored visual and literary narratives that deal with the ambiguities of the concepts 'care', 'cure', and 'violence' within medical settings.

⁴ Domietta Torlasco, 'Philosophy in the Kitchen', *World Picture*, 11 (Summer 2016), http://worldpicturejournal.com/WP_11/Torlasco_11.html [Accessed 25 August 2022]

⁵ Cesare Casarino, 'Images for Housework: On the Time of Domestic Labor in Gilles Deleuze's Philosophy of the Cinema', *differences*, 28.3 (2017), 67-92.

⁶ I here borrow the title of Ivone Margulies's seminal book on Chantal Akerman's *Hyperrealist Everyday* (Durham, NC ; London: Duke University Press , 1996).

⁷ Cf. voice over commenting this scene in Domietta Torlasco, 'Philosophy in the Kitchen'.

⁸ In his book *The Surviving Image. Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms: Aby Warburg's History of Time* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), George Didi-Huberman dedicates a session to the image as symptom.

⁹ Sigmund Freud, *The Paths to the Formations of Symptoms. Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works* (SE), 16 vols (London: Vintage Press, 2017), 358.

¹⁰ George Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image*.

¹¹ Aby M. Warburg and Martin Warnke, *Der bilderatlas mnemosyne* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2000).

¹² Cf. Lea Melandri, *Alfabeto d'origine* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza Editore, 2017).

¹³ Cf. Marilyn Charles, 'Meaning, metaphor, and metabolization: the case of eating disorders', *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 81.4 (2021), 448..

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of horror* (Columbia, Princeton: University Press of California, 1982).

¹⁶ Ibidem, 1.

¹⁷ <https://jessiekahnweiler.com/category/the-skinny/>

¹⁸ 'Heroin chic' defines the style of 1990s top model such as Gia Garangi and Kate Moss (especially from the famous Calvin Klein underwear campaign in 1991) and which features extremely thin physique, pale skin, dark undereye circles, and disheveled hair and clothing.

¹⁹ Heike Bartel has conducted precious research on eating disorders in men, the outcome of which has recently been published in her monograph *Men Writing Eating Disorders Autobiographical Writing and Illness Experience in English and German Narratives* (Bingley: Emerald, 2020).

²⁰ Cf. Abigail Bray, 'The Anorexic Body: Reading Disorders', *Cultural Studies*, 10.3 (1996), 413-429.

²¹ See Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993); Susie Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (New York: Arrow, 1978).

²² See Ibidem; Chris Kraus, *Aliens & Anorexia* (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz Verlag, 2021).

²³ See *Eating Disorders and Cultures in Transition*, ed. by Mervat Nasser and others (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2001).

²⁴ See Gitte Marianne, *Femininity, Self-harm and Eating Disorders in Japan. Navigating contradiction in narrative and visual culture* (London, New York: Routledge, 2016); Helen Malson, Maree Burns, *Critical Femist Approaches to Eating Dis/Orders* (London, New York: Routledge, 2009).

²⁵ See Karin Eli, Stanley Uljaszek, *Obesity, Eating Disorders and the Media* (Farnham: Asghate, 2014).

²⁶ See the interview to Gerald Russel conducted by Lee Daniel Kravetz in his book *Strange contagion: Inside the surprising science of infectious behaviors and viral emotions and what they tell us about ourselves* (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 2017).

²⁷ Cf. Girard, René, *Anorexia and Mimetic Desire* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013).

²⁸ Sander L. Gilman, *The face of madness: Hugh W. Diamond and the origin of psychiatric photography* (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1976).

²⁹ Boero Natalie and Cheri Jo Pascoe, 'Pro-anorexia communities and online interaction: Bringing the pro-ana body online', *Body & Society*, 18.2 (2012), 27-57.

³⁰ Rudolph M. Bell, *Holy anorexia* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

³¹ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy feast and holy fast: The religious significance of food to medieval women*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

³² Marco Casonato, *Immaginazione e metafora. Psicodinamica, psicopatologia, psicoterapia* (Bari: Laterza, 2003).

³³ On the question of authenticity in anorexia see Tony Hope and others, 'Anorexia nervosa and the language of authenticity', *Hastings Center Report*, 41.6 (2011), 19-29; In their research on proana online communities Boero and Pascoe also provide a compelling analysis of the role of authenticity for the pro-ana communities, see Boero Natalie, and Cheri Jo Pascoe, 'Pro-anorexia communities and online interaction', cit.

³⁴ P. Gomes, 'Êxtase The Film. "She didn't feel time nor people, what she felt was ecstasy' in *Wall Street International*, 2020, <https://wsimag.com/entertainment/61892-extase-the-film>.

³⁵ On *Ecstasy* I wrote the article 'Biografia di un sintomo: Ecstasy di Moara Passoni', *Fata Morgana. Quadrimestrale di Cinema e Visioni*, 46 (2022).

³⁶ Susan Bordo, 'Eating disorders: The feminist challenge to the concept of pathology', in *The Body in Medical Thought and Practice*, ed. by Drew Leder (Dordrecht: Springer, 1992), 197-213.

³⁷ See Clio Nicastro, 'Recovery', in *Re-: An Errant Glossary*, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzey, Arnd Wedemeyer (Berlin: Ici Berlin, 2019), 49-56.

³⁸ See Alessandra Lemma, *Under the skin: A psychoanalytic study of body modification* (London, New York: Routledge, 2010).

³⁹ Antonella Tramacere, Angelica Kaufmann, 'Bodily self-narratives and the experience of disliking ourselves', submitted to *Journal of Consciousness Studies*. I want to thank Antonella Tramacere for having shared her research with me.

⁴⁰ Ibidem.