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Susan Bordo
"HUNGER AS IDEOLOGY"
(1993)

THE WOMAN WHO DOESN'T EAT MUCH

In a television commercial, two little French girls are shown dressing up in the feathery finery of their mother's clothes. They are exquisite little girls, flawless and innocent, and the scene emphasizes both their youth and the natural sense of style often associated with French women. (The ad is done in French, with subtitles.) One of the girls, spying a picture of the other girl's mother, exclaims breathlessly, "Your mother, she is so slim, so beautiful! Does she eat?" The daughter, giggling, replies: "Silly, just not so much," and displays her mother's helper, a bottle of FibreThin. "Aren't you jealous?" the friend asks. Dimpling, shy yet self-possessed, deeply knowing, the daughter answers, "Not if I know her secrets."

Admittedly, women are continually bombarded with advertisements and commercials for weight-loss products and programs, but this commercial makes many of us particularly angry. On the most obvious level, the commercial affronts with its suggestion that young girls begin early in learning to control their weight, and with its romantic mystification of diet pills as part of the obscure, eternal arsenal of feminine arts to be passed from generation to generation. This romanticization, as often is the case in American commercials, trades on our continuing infatuation with (what we imagine to be) the civility, tradition, and savoir-faire of "Europe" (seen as the stylish antithesis to our own American clumsiness, aggressiveness, crudeness). The little girls are fresh and demure, in a way that is undefinably but absolutely recognizably "European"—as defined, that is, within the visual vocabulary of popular American culture. And FibreThin, in this commercial, is nothing so crass and "medical" and pragmatic (read: American) as a diet pill, but a mysterious, prized (and, it is implied, age-old) "secret," known only to those with both history and taste.

But we expect such hype from contemporary advertisements. Far more unnerving is the psychological acuity of the ad's focus, not on the

size and shape of bodies, but on a certain *subjectivity*, represented by the absent but central figure of the mother, the woman who eats, only “not so much.” We never see her picture; we are left to imagine her ideal beauty and slenderness. But what she looks like is not important, in any case; what is important is the fact that she has achieved what we might call a “cool” (that is, casual) relation to food. She is not starving herself (an obsession, indicating the continuing power of food), but neither is she desperately and shamefully binging in some private corner. Eating has become, for her, no big deal. In its evocation of the lovely French mother who doesn’t eat much, the commercial’s metaphor of European “difference” reveals itself as a means of representing that enviable and truly foreign “other”: the woman for whom food is merely ordinary, who can take it or leave it.

Another version, this time embodied by a sleek, fashionable African American woman, playfully promotes Virginia Slims Menthol (Figure 1). This ad, which appeared in *Essence* magazine, is one of a series specifically targeted at the African American female consumer. In contrast to the Virginia Slims series concurrently appearing in *Cosmo* and *People*, a series which continues to associate the product with historically expanded opportunities for women (“You’ve come a long way, baby” remains the motif and slogan), Virginia Slims pitches to the *Essence* reader by mocking solemnity and self-importance *after* the realization of those opportunities: “Why climb the ladder if you’re not going to enjoy the view?” “Big girls don’t cry. They go shopping.” And, in the variant depicted in Figure 1: “Decisions are easy. When I get to a fork in the road, I eat.”

Arguably, the general subtext meant to be evoked by these ads is the failure of the dominant, white culture (those who *don’t* “enjoy the view”) to relax and take pleasure in success. The upwardly mobile black consumer, it is suggested, will do it with more panache, with more cool—and of course with a cool, Virginia Slims Menthol in hand. In this particular ad, the speaker scorns obsessiveness, not only over professional or interpersonal decision-making, but over food as well. Implicitly contrasting herself to those who worry and fret, she presents herself as utterly “easy” in her relationship with food. Unlike the FibreThin mother, she eats anytime she wants. But *like* the FibreThin mother (and this is the key similarity for my purposes), she has achieved a state beyond craving. Undominated by unsatisfied, internal need, she eats not only freely but without deep desire and without apparent consequence. It’s “easy,” she says. Presumably, without those forks in the road she might forget about food entirely.

The Virginia Slims woman is a fantasy figure, her cool attitude toward food as remote from the lives of most contemporary African American women as from any others. True, if we survey cultural attitudes toward women’s appetites and body size, we find great variety—a variety

in *subjectivity*, represented by her, the woman who eats, only here; we are left to imagine her. The look she has is not important, that she has achieved what we value (the connection to food). She is not starving (the negating power of food), but negotiating in some private corner. In its evocation of the lovely, the commercial's metaphor of means of representing that enigma for whom food is merely

by a sleek, fashionable African American woman (Virginia Slims Menthol (Figure 1) magazine, is one of a series of African female consumer. In 1980, she is prominently appearing in *Cosmo* and is associated with historical figures. ("You've come a long way, Virginia Slims pitches to the *Es*—self-importance *after* the reality of the ladder if you're not going to. They go shopping." And, in these conditions are easy. When I get to a

to be evoked by these ads is the woman (those who *don't* "enjoy the food"). The upwardly mobile black woman with more panache, with more Virginia Slims Menthol in hand. In her possessiveness, not only over smoking, but over food as well. In her worry and fret, she presents a relationship with food. Unlike the woman who wants. But *like* the FibreThin woman (my purposes), she has achieved her desire and without apparent consequence, without those forks in the road.

In this figure, her cool attitude toward contemporary African American women in survey cultural attitudes toward women find great variety—a variety



FIGURE 1

shaped by ethnic, national, historical, class, and other factors. My eighty-year-old father, the child of immigrants, asks at the end of every meal if I "got enough to eat"; he considers me skinny unless I am plump by my own standards. His attitude reflects not only memories of economic struggle and a heritage of Jewish-Russian preference for zaftig women, but the lingering, well into this century, of a once more general Anglo-Saxon cultural appreciation for the buxom woman. In the mid-nineteenth century, hotels and bars were adorned with Bouguereau-inspired paintings of voluptuous female nudes; Lillian Russell, the most

photographed woman in America in 1890, was known and admired for her hearty appetite, ample body (over two hundred pounds at the height of her popularity), and "challenging, fleshly arresting" beauty.¹ Even as such fleshly challenges became less widely appreciated in the twentieth century, men of Greek, Italian, Eastern European, and African descent, influenced by their own distinctive cultural heritages, were still likely to find female voluptuousness appealing. And even in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as Twiggy and Jean Shrimpton began to set a new norm for ultra-slenderness, lesbian cultures in the United States continued to be accepting—even celebrating—of fleshy, space-claiming female bodies.

Even more examples could be produced, of course, if we cast our glance more widely over the globe and back through history. Many cultures, clearly, have revered expansiveness in women's bodies and appetites. Some still do. But in the 1980s and 1990s an increasingly universal equation of slenderness with beauty and success has rendered the competing claims of cultural diversity ever feebler. Men who were teenagers from the mid-seventies on, whatever their ethnic roots or economic class, are likely to view long, slim legs, a flat stomach, and a firm rear end as essentials of female beauty. Unmuscled heft is no longer as acceptable as it once was in lesbian communities. Even Miss Soviet Union has become lean and tight, and the robust, earthy actresses who used to star in Russian films have been replaced by slender, Westernized types.

Arguably, a case could once be made for a contrast between (middle-class, heterosexual) white women's obsessive relations with food and a more accepting attitude toward women's appetites within African American communities. But in the nineties, features on diet, exercise, and body-image problems have grown increasingly prominent in magazines aimed at African American readers, reflecting the cultural reality that for most women today—whatever their racial or ethnic identity, and increasingly across class and sexual-orientation differences as well—free and easy relations with food are at best a relic of the past. (More frequently in *Essence* than in *Cosmo*, there may be a focus on health problems associated with overweight among African Americans, in addition to the glamorization of slenderness.) Almost all of us who can afford to be eating well are dieting—and hungry—almost all of the time.

It is thus Dexatrim, not Virginia Slims, that constructs the more realistic representation of women's subjective relations with food. In Dexatrim's commercial that shows a woman, her appetite-suppressant worn off, hurtling across the room, drawn like a living magnet to the breathing, menacing refrigerator, hunger is represented as an insistent, powerful force with a life of its own. This construction reflects the physiological reality of dieting, a state the body is unable to distinguish from starvation.² And it reflects its psychological reality as well; for dieters, who live in a state of constant denial, food is a perpetually beckoning

so, was known and admired for 100 hundred pounds at the height of "shly arresting" beauty.¹ Even as "shly appreciated in the twentieth century European, and African descent, racial heritages, were still likely to and even in the late 1960s and 1970s began to set a new norm in the United States continued to 1970s, space-claiming female bodies. 1970s, of course, if we cast our 1970s back through history. Many 1970s in women's bodies and ap- 1970s and 1990s an increasingly unity and success has rendered the 1970s er feeblers. Men who were teen- 1970s r their ethnic roots or economic 1970s a flat stomach, and a firm rear 1970s usclcd heft is no longer as ac- 1970s mities. Even Miss Soviet Union 1970s ust, earthy actresses who used 1970s laced by slender, Westernized

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presence, its power growing ever greater as the sanctions against gratification become more stringent. A slender body may be attainable through hard work, but a "cool" relation to food, the true "secret" of the beautiful "other" in the FibreThin commercial, is a tantalizing reminder of what lies beyond the reach of the inadequate and hungry self. (Of course, as the ads suggest, a psychocultural transformation remains possible, through FibreThin and Virginia Slims.)

PSYCHING OUT THE FEMALE CONSUMER

Sometimes, when I am analyzing and interpreting advertisements and commercials in class, students accuse me of a kind of paranoia about the significance of these representations as carriers and reproducers of culture. After all, they insist, these are just images, not "real life"; any fool knows that advertisers manipulate reality in the service of selling their products. I agree that on some level we "know" this. However, were it a meaningful or *usable* knowledge, it is unlikely that we would be witnessing the current spread of diet and exercise mania across racial and ethnic groups, or the explosion of technologies aimed at bodily "correction" and "enhancement."

Jean Baudrillard offers a more accurate description of our cultural estimation of the relation and relative importance of image and "reality." In *Simulations*, he recalls the Borges fable in which the cartographers of a mighty empire draw up a map so detailed that it ends up exactly covering the territory of the empire, a map which then frays and disintegrates as a symbol of the coming decline of the empire it perfectly represents. Today, Baudrillard suggests, the fable might be inverted: it is no longer the territory that provides the model for the map, but the map that defines the territory; and it is the *territory* "whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map." Thinking further, however, he declares even the inverted fable to be "useless." For what it still assumes is precisely that which is being lost today—namely, the distinction between the territory and its map, between reality and appearance. Today, all that we experience as meaningful are appearances.³

Thus, we all "know" that Cher and virtually every other female star over the age of twenty-five is the plastic product of numerous cosmetic surgeries on face and body. But, in the era of the "hyperreal" (as Baudrillard calls it), such "knowledge" is as faded and frayed as the old map in the Borges tale, unable to cast a shadow of doubt over the dazzling, compelling, authoritative images themselves. Like the knowledge of our own mortality when we are young and healthy, the knowledge that Cher's physical appearance is fabricated is an empty abstraction; it simply does not compute. It is the created image that has the hold on our most vibrant, immediate sense of what *is*, of what matters, of what we must pursue for ourselves.

In *constructing* the images, of course, continual use is made of knowledge (or at least what is imagined to be knowledge) of consumers' lives. Indeed, a careful reading of contemporary advertisements reveals continual and astute manipulation of problems that psychology and the popular media have targeted as characteristic dilemmas of the "contemporary woman," who is beset by conflicting role demands and pressures on her time. "Control"—a word that rarely used to appear in commercial contexts—has become a common trope in advertisements for products as disparate as mascara ("Perfect Pen Eyeliner. Puts *you* in control. And isn't that nice for a change?") and cat-box deodorant ("Control. I strive for it. My cat achieves it"). "*Soft felt tip gives you absolute control of your line*" (Figure 2). It is virtually impossible to glance casually at this ad without reading "line" as "life"—which is, of course, the subliminal coding such ads intend. "Mastery" also frequently figures in ads for cosmetics and hair products: "Master your curls with new Adaptable Perm." The rhetoric of these ads is interestingly contrasted to the rhetoric of mastery and control directed at male consumers. Here, the message is almost always one of mastery and control over *others* rather than the self: "Now it's easier than ever to achieve a position of power in Manhattan" (an ad for Manhattan health club), or "Don't just serve. Rule" (an ad for Speedo tennis shoes).

Advertisers are aware, too, of more specific *ways* in which women's lives are out of control, including our well-documented food disorders; they frequently incorporate the theme of food obsession into their pitch. The Sugar Free Jell-O Pudding campaign exemplifies a typical commercial strategy for exploiting women's eating problems while obscuring their dark realities. (The advertisers themselves would put this differently, of course.) In the "tip of my tongue" ad (Figure 3), the obsessive mental state of the compulsive eater is depicted fairly accurately, guaranteeing recognition from people with that problem: "If I'm not eating dessert, I'm talking about it. If I'm not talking about it, I'm eating it. And I'm always thinking about it . . . It's just always on my mind."

These thoughts, however, belong to a slender, confident, and—most important—decidedly not depressed individual, whose upbeat, open, and accepting attitude toward her constant hunger is far from that of most women who eat compulsively. "The inside of a binge," Genevieve Roth writes, "is deep and dark. At the core . . . is deprivation, scarcity, a feeling that you can never get enough."⁴ A student described her hunger as "a black hole that I had to fill up." In the Sugar Free Jell-O ad, by contrast, the mental state depicted is most like that of a growing teenage boy; to be continually hungry is represented as a normal, if somewhat humorous and occasionally annoying, state with no disastrous physical or emotional consequences.

The use of a male figure is one strategy, in contemporary ads, for representing compulsive eating as "natural" and even lovable. Men are

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FIGURE 2

supposed to have hearty, even voracious, appetites. It is a mark of the
 manly to eat spontaneously and expansively, and manliness is a frequent
 commercial code for amply portioned products: "Manwich," "Hungry
 Man Dinners," "Manhandlers." Even when men advertise diet products
 (as they more frequently do, now that physical perfection is increasingly
 being demanded of men as well as women), they brag about their ap-
 petites, as in the Tommy Lasorda commercials for Slim-Fast, which fea-
 ture three burly football players (their masculinity beyond reproach)
 declaring that if Slim-Fast can satisfy *their* appetites, it can satisfy any-
 one's. The displacement of the female by a male figure (displacement

"Dessert? It's always on the tip of my tongue."

"Really. I mean, if I'm not eating dessert, I'm talking about it. If I'm not talking about it, I'm eating it. And I'm always thinking about it. Sugar Free Jell-O® Pudding, that is. It doesn't have a lot of calories, yet it's so rich, so ... creamy, and the flavors are ... mmm, so ... it's just, well ...

It's just always on my mind."



SUGAR FREE JELL-O® PUDDING.
The dessert you don't have to desert.





FIGURE 3

when the targeted consumer is in fact a woman) thus dispels thoughts of addiction, danger, unhappiness, and replaces them with a construction of compulsive eating (or thinking about food) as benign indulgence of a "natural" inclination. Consider the ad shown in Figure 4, depicting a male figure diving with abandon into the "tempered-to-full-flavor-consistency" joys of Häagen-Dazs deep chocolate.

Emotional heights, intensity, love, and thrills: it is women who habitually seek such experiences from food and who are most likely to be

p of my tongue."

"Really, I mean, if I'm not eating dessert, I'm talking about it. If I'm not talking about it, I'm eating it. And I'm always thinking about it. Sugar-Free Jell-O® Pudding, that is. It doesn't have a lot of calories, yet it's so rich, so... creamy, and the flavors are... mmm, so... it's just, well... it's just always on my mind."



SUGAR FREE JELL-O® PUDDING.
The dessert you don't have to diet.

IF YOU'RE AFRAID OF EMOTIONAL HEIGHTS,



BEWARE OF HÄAGEN-DAZS® DEEP CHOCOLATE.

If intensity scares you, great pleasure upsets you or love makes you flee, please don't try our new Deep Chocolate Ice Creams. The shock of real Callebaut Belgian chocolate might be a tad overwhelming. And even if you can handle the thrill of Deep Chocolate alone, beware of Deep Chocolate Peanut Butter and Deep Chocolate Fudge. Or Belgian Chocolate Chocolate, found exclusively in our Shoppes. Häagen-Dazs Deep Chocolate. Surrender or stay away.



DEEP CHOCOLATE
THE FINEST ICE CREAM IN THE WORLD™

Available at participating Häagen-Dazs Ice Cream Shoppes and your favorite grocery.
© 1999 The Häagen-Dazs Company, Inc.

FIGURE 4

woman) thus dispels thoughts (replaces them with a constructed food) as benign indulgence (as shown in Figure 4, depicting the "tempered-to-full-flavor" chocolate. It thrills: it is women who have and who are most likely to be

overwhelmed by their relationship to food, to find it dangerous and frightening (especially rich, fattening, soothing food like ice cream). The marketers of Häagen-Dazs know this; they are aware of the well-publicized prevalence of compulsive eating and binge behaviors among women. Indeed, this ad exploits, with artful precision, exactly the sorts of associations that are likely to resonate with a person for whom eating is invested with deep emotional meaning. Why, then, a male diver? In part, as I have been arguing, the displacement is necessary to insure that

the grim actualities of women's eating problems remain obscured; the point, after all, is to sell ice cream, not to remind people of how dangerous food actually *is* for women. Too, the advertisers may reckon that women might enjoy seeing a man depicted in swooning surrender to ice cream, as a metaphor for the emotional surrender that so many women crave from their husbands and lovers.

FOOD, SEXUALITY, AND DESIRE

I would argue, however, that more than a purely profit-maximizing, ideologically neutral, Madison Avenue mentality is at work in these ads. They must also be considered as gender ideology—that is, as specifically (consciously or unconsciously) servicing the cultural reproduction of gender difference and gender inequality, quite independent of (although at times coinciding with) marketing concerns. As gender ideology, the ads I have been discussing are not distinctively contemporary but continue a well-worn representational tradition, arguably inaugurated in the Victorian era, in which the depiction of women eating, particularly in sensuous surrender to rich, exciting food, is taboo.⁵

In exploring this dimension, we might begin by attempting to imagine an advertisement depicting a young, attractive woman indulging as freely, as salaciously as the man in the Post cereal ad shown in Figure 5. Such an image would violate deeply sedimented expectations, would be experienced by many as disgusting and transgressive. When women are positively depicted as sensuously voracious about food (almost never in commercials, and only very rarely in movies and novels), their hunger for food is employed solely as a metaphor for their sexual appetite. In the eating scenes in *Tom Jones* and *Flashdance*, for example, the heroines' unrestrained delight in eating operates as sexual foreplay, a way of prefiguring the abandon that will shortly be expressed in bed. Women are permitted to lust for food itself only when they are pregnant or when it is clear they have been near starvation—as, for example, in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, in the scene in which Mrs. Miller, played by Julie Christie,

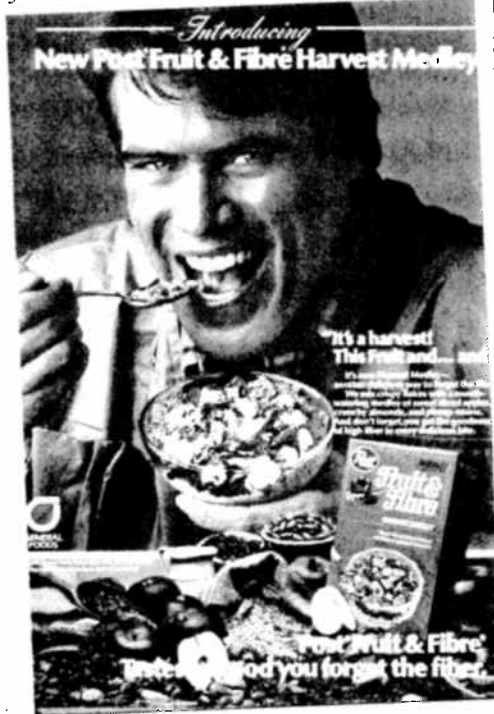


FIGURE 5

TY READER ·

problems remain obscured; the ads remind people of how dangerous advertisers may reckon that indulging in swooning surrender to ice cream and that so many women

AND DESIRE

On a purely profit-maximizing, economic rationality is at work in these ads. The ideology—that is, as specifically gender ideology; the cultural reproduction of a quite independent of (although related to) concerns. As gender ideology, the ideology is actively contemporary but conventional, arguably inaugurated in the 1950s with women eating, particularly in the 1950s, is taboo.⁵ The ideology begins by attempting to imagine an attractive woman indulging as a Post cereal ad shown in Figure 6. The sedimented expectations, would be experienced by many as distasteful and transgressive. When women are positively depicted as voraciously voracious about food almost never in commercials, and only very rarely in movies and novels), their hunger for food is employed solely as a metaphor for their sexual appetite. In the eating scenes in *Tom Jones* and *lashdance*, for example, the heroines' unrestrained delight in eating operates as sexual foreplay, a way of prefiguring the abandonment that will shortly be expressed in sex. Women are permitted to lust for food itself only when they are pregnant or when it is clear they have been near starvation—as, for example, in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, in the scene in which Mrs. Miller, played by Julie Christie,

wolfs down half a dozen eggs and a bowl of beef stew before the amazed eyes of McCabe. Significantly, the scene serves to establish Mrs. Miller's "manliness"; a woman who eats like this is to be taken seriously, is not to be trifled with, the movie suggests.

The metaphorical situation is virtually inverted in the representation of male eaters. Although voracious eating may occasionally code male sexual appetite (as in *Tom Jones*), we frequently also find *sexual* appetite operating as a metaphor for eating pleasure. In commercials that feature male eaters, the men are shown in a state of wild, sensual transport over heavily frosted, rich, gooey desserts. Their total lack of control is portrayed as appropriate, even adorable; the language of the background jingle is unashamedly aroused, sexual and desiring:

I'm thinking about you the whole day through [crooned to a Pillsbury cake]. I've got a passion for you.

You're my one and only, my creamy deluxe [Betty Crocker frosting].

You butter me up, I can't resist, you leave me breathless [Betty Crocker frosting].

Your brownies give me fever. Your cake gives me chills [assorted Betty Crocker mixes].

I'm a fool for your chocolate. I'm wild, crazy, out of control [assorted Betty Crocker mixes].

I've got it bad, and I should know, 'cause I crave it from my head right down to my potato [for Pillsbury Potatoes Au Gratin].

Can't help myself. It's Duncan Hines [assorted cake mixes] and nobody else.

In these commercials food is constructed as a sexual object of desire, and eating is legitimated as much more than a purely nutritive activity. Rather, food is *supposed* to supply sensual delight and succor—not as metaphorically standing for something else, but as an erotic experience in itself. Women are permitted such gratification from food only in measured doses. In another ad from the Diet Jell-O series, eating is metaphorically sexualized: "I'm a girl who just can't say no. I insist on dessert," admits the innocently dressed but flirtatiously posed model (Figure 6). But at the same time that eating is mildly sexualized in this ad, it is also contained. She is permitted to "feel good about saying 'Yes'"—but ever so demurely, and to a harmless low-calorie product. Transgression beyond such limits is floridly sexualized, as an act of "cheating" (Figure 7). Women may be encouraged (like the man on the Häagen-Dazs high board) to "dive in"—not, however, into a dangerous pool of Häagen-Dazs Deep Chocolate, but for a "refreshing dip" into Weight Watchers linguini (Figure 8). Targeted at the working woman ("just what you need to revive yourself from the workday routine"),

"I'm a girl who just can't say no. I insist on dessert."

The way I see it, every woman is entitled to her just desserts. Just as long as dessert is Sugar Free Jell-O® Gelatin. It's light and fruity and fun. And it's only 8 calories, 'cause it's made with all NutraSweet.™ Kind of makes you feel good about saying "Yes."



Sugar Free JELLO

The dessert you don't have to desert.

© 1997 Kellogg Company

FIGURE 6

this ad also exploits the aquatic metaphor to conjure up images of female independence and liberation ("Isn't it just like us to make waves?").

All of this may seem peculiarly contemporary, revolving as it does around the mass marketing of diet products. But in fact the same metaphorical universe, as well as the same practical prohibitions against female indulgence (for, of course, these ads are not only selling products but teaching appropriate behavior) were characteristic of Victorian gender ideology. Victorians did not have *Cosmo* and television, of course.



FIGURE 7

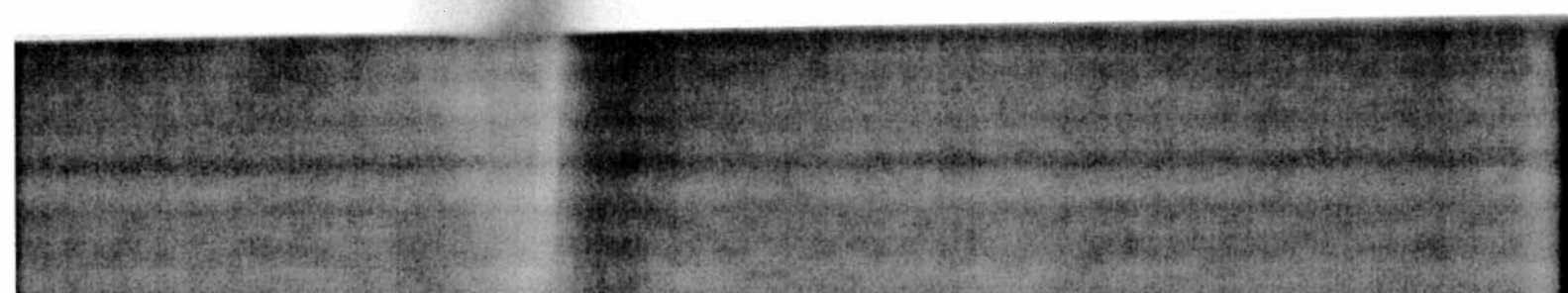
But they did have conduct manuals, which warned elite women of the dangers of indulgent and overstimulating eating and advised how to consume in a feminine way (as little as possible and with the utmost precaution against unseemly show of desire). *Godey's Lady's Book* warned that it was vulgar for women to load their plates; young girls were admonished to “be frugal and plain in your tastes.”⁶ Detailed lexicons offered comparisons of the erotic and cooling effects of various foods, often with specific prescriptions for each sex.⁷ Sexual metaphors permeate descriptions of potential transgression:

Every luxurious table is a scene of temptation, which it requires fixed principles and an enlightened mind to withstand. . . . Nothing can be more seducing to the appetite than this arrangement of the viands which compose a feast; as the stomach is filled, and the natural desire for food subsides, the palate is tickled by more delicate and relishing dishes until it is betrayed into excess.⁸

Today, the same metaphors of temptation and fall appear frequently in advertisements for diet products (see Figure 9). And in the Victorian era, as today, the forbiddenness of rich food often resulted in private binge behavior, described in *The Bazaar Book of Decorum* (1870) as the “secret luncheon,” at which “many of the most abstemious at the open dinner are the most voracious . . . swallowing cream tarts by the dozen, and caramels and chocolate drops by the pound’s weight.”⁹

The emergence of such rigid and highly moralized restrictions on female appetite and eating are, arguably, part of what Bram Dijkstra has interpreted as a nineteenth-century “cultural ideological counter-offensive” against the “new woman” and her challenge to prevailing

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Dive in.

Just what you need to revive yourself from the workday routine. A refreshing dip into our new Seafood Linguini. Generous chunks of seafood with whole shrimp, together with tender cuts of broccolini, carrots and zucchini. All in a light garlic sauce, and served amid a sea of linguini. Weight Watchers Seafood Linguini. Something deliciously different to add to your schedule. Isn't it just like us to make waves?

Weight Watchers
This is living!

FIGURE 8

rather, the sexual act, when initiated and desired by a woman, is imagined as itself an act of eating, of incorporation and destruction of the object of desire. Thus, women's sexual appetites must be curtailed and controlled, because they threaten to deplete and consume the body and soul of the male. Such imagery, as Dijkstra has demonstrated, flourishes

gender arrangements and their constraints on women.¹⁰ Mythological, artistic, polemical, and scientific discourses from many cultures and eras certainly suggest the symbolic potency of female hunger as a cultural metaphor for unleashed female power and desire, from the blood-craving Kali (who in one representation is shown eating her own entrails) to the *Malleus Malficarum* ("For the sake of fulfilling the mouth of the womb, [witches] consort even with the devil") to Hall and Oates's contemporary rock lyrics: "Oh, oh, here she comes, watch out boys, she'll chew you up."¹¹

In *Tom Jones* and *Flashdance*, the trope of female hunger as female sexuality is embodied in attractive female characters; more frequently, however, female hunger as sexuality is represented by Western culture in misogynist images permeated with terror and loathing rather than affection or admiration. In the figure of the man-eater the metaphor of the devouring woman reveals its deep psychological underpinnings. Eating is not really a metaphor for the sexual act;

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in the West in the art of the late nineteenth century. Arguably, the same cultural backlash (if not in the same form) operates today—for example, in the ascendancy of popular films that punish female sexuality and independence by rape and dismemberment (as in numerous slasher films), loss of family and children (*The Good Mother*), madness and death (*Fatal Attraction*, *Presumed Innocent*), and public humiliation and disgrace (*Dangerous Liaisons*).

Of course, Victorian prohibitions against women eating were not *only* about the ideology of gender. Or, perhaps better put, the ideology of gender contained other dimensions as well.

The construction of "femininity" had not only a significant moral and sexual aspect (femininity as sexual passivity, timidity, purity, innocence) but a class dimension. In the reigning body symbolism of the day, a frail frame and lack of appetite signified not only spiritual transcendence of the desires of the flesh but *social* transcendence of the laboring, striving "economic" body. Then, as today, to be aristocratically cool and unconcerned with the mere facts of material survival was highly fashionable. The hungry bourgeois wished to appear, like the aristocrat, above the material desires that in fact ruled his life. The closest he could come was to possess a wife whose ethereal body became a sort of fashion statement of *his* aristocratic tastes. If he could not be or marry an aristocrat, he could have a wife who looked like one, a wife whose non-robust beauty and delicate appetite signified her lack of participation in the taxing "public sphere."¹²



FIGURE 9

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This essay grew out of a shorter piece, "How Television Teaches Women to Hate Their Hungers," in *Mirror Images* (Newsletter of An-

orexia Bulimia Support, Syracuse, N.Y.) 4, no. 1(1986): 8-9. An earlier version was delivered at the 1990 meetings of the New York State Sociological Association, and some of the analysis has been presented in various talks at Le Moyne and other colleges and community organizations. I owe thanks to all my students who supplied examples.

ENDNOTES

1. Journalist Beatrice Fairfax, quoted in Lois Banner, *American Beauty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 136.
2. "Starvation Stages in Weight-loss Patients Similar to Famine Victims," *International Obesity Newsletter* 3 (April 1989).
3. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), pp. 1-3; quotation is on p. 2.
4. Geneen Roth, *Feeding the Hungry Heart* (New York: New American Library, 1982), p. 15.
5. See Helena Mitchie, *The Flesh Made Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), for an extremely interesting discussion of this taboo in Victorian literature.
6. Quoted from Godey's by Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *Fasting Girls* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 179.
7. Mitchie, *The Flesh Made Word*, p. 15. Not surprisingly, red meat came under especial suspicion as a source of erotic inflammation. As was typical for the era, such anxieties were rigorously scientized: for example, in terms of the heat-producing capacities of red meat and its effects on the development of the sexual organs and menstrual flow. But, clearly, an irresistible associational overdetermination—meat as the beast, the raw, the primitive, the masculine—was the true inflammatory agent here. These associations survive today, put to commercial use by the American Beef Association, whose television ads feature James Garner and Cybill Shepard promoting "Beef: Real Food for Real People." Here the nineteenth-century link between meat aversion, delicacy, and refinement is exploited, this time in favor of the meat-eater, whose down-to-earth gutsiness is implicitly contrasted to the prissiness of the weak-blooded vegetarian.
8. Mrs. H. O. Ward, *The Young Lady's Friend* (Philadelphia: Porter and Coates, 1880), p. 162, quoted in Mitchie, *The Flesh Made Word*, pp. 16-17.
9. Quoted in Mitchie, *The Flesh Made Word*, p. 193.
10. Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 30-31.
11. *Malleus Malificarum* quoted in Brian Easlea, *Witch-Hunting, Magic, and the New Philosophy* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1980), p. 8; Hall and Oates, "Man-Eater."
12. Women were thus warned that "gluttonous habits of life" would degrade their physical appearance and ruin their marriageability. "Gross eaters" could develop thick skin, broken blood vessels on the nose, cracked lips, and an unattractively "superanimal" facial expression (Brumberg, *Fasting Girls*, p. 179). Of course, the degree to which actual women were able to enact any part of these idealized and idolized constructions was highly variable (as it always is); but all women, of all classes and races, felt their effects as the normalizing measuring rods against which their own adequacy was judged (and, usually, found wanting).