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**Bulimic Bodies and “Bearers of Production”: Representing Bulimia in
Todd Haynes’s *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* and Mika
Rottenberg’s *NoNoseKnows***

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to Karen Carpenter and to my therapists over the years, the latter of whom always hoped my constant overanalyzing of my treatment would lead to something like this.

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Abstract

Bulimic Bodies and “Bearers of Production”: Representing Bulimia in Todd Haynes’s *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* and Mika Rottenberg’s *NoNoseKnows*

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2018

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The majority of literature on eating disorders has favored anorexia over bulimia, assuming self-starvation as the default mechanism of eating disorders, and placing bulimia in anorexia’s shadows, presuming that the the two disorders must have the same motives and reasons, despite being drastically disparate in process. This thesis asks: Must all eating disorders be placed in the realm of starvation? After Karen Carpenter’s untimely death in 1983 after an overuse of Ipecac, she has become known as the first public face of anorexia. Discussions of Carpenter are often tautological, with her diagnosis as anorexic turning the spotlight on her controlling mother and low weight, as they are two main components often found in theories of anorexia; this focus then makes anorexia seem to be the obvious—even only —diagnosis. The main process of her disorder—purging rather than fasting—is forgotten. Similarly, *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987), a film by Todd Haynes

which uses Barbie dolls to reenact Karen's life and stardom leading up to her death, describes Carpenter as anorexic, even though images of Ex-Lax, Ipecac, and toilets populate the film. This thesis uses the visuals of *Superstar* and of the video *NoNoseKnows* (2015) by artist Mika Rottenberg, in which a 6'4" fetish performer repeatedly sneezes out plates of noodles after her sneeze reflex is triggered by a pulley-powered fan that blows pollen in her face, to examine bulimia in the context of waste and production. I argue that the bulimic body is not a deprived body, but a body that is too full; it is not a body defined by a lack of intake, but by an almost impossible excess of output. I then examine Carpenter's life, her unfulfillments and alienations, to find what other aspects have fallen between the cracks of other anorexia-centered narratives, and reveal what other interpretations of her life can be made and what connections can be found using a new context for her disorder.

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Introduction: Karen

On February 4, 1983, superstar singer Karen Carpenter was found on the verge of death in her parents' house in Downey, California, at the age of only 32. She was pronounced dead later that day at the Downey Community Hospital. At the time of her death, Karen, who had publicly struggled with eating disorders, weighed 108 pounds, almost directly between her highest and lowest weights of 145 and 80 pounds, respectively.¹ In the years following her death, Karen's life, health, and death became the subject of a film by a young filmmaker named Todd Haynes. On July 28, 1987, he premiered his short film *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*, produced and written with college friend Cynthia Schneider, at a small venue in New York City. By 1990, *Superstar* had been officially pulled out of circulation and banned from being screened in any commercial space. In the past thirty years, *Superstar* has become a cult favorite, due to its outlaw status and subject matter—Karen herself has become a cult figure, as well, emblematic of a star gone too soon, a voice taken by a disorder that still puzzles many. In this thesis, I aim to investigate Karen's disorder and eating disorders in general, offering alternate explanations or theories to the mainstream theories of anorexia and bulimia currently in medical and theoretical literature (and present in cultural memory and understanding of Karen), by looking toward visual media such as *Superstar* for unspoken motives and relationships between food, waste, disorder, and patient.

¹ I will be referring to Karen—and the other members of the Carpenter family—by first name, due to the confusion that can occur when writing about multiple family members.

After her death, Karen became the first public face of anorexia, a disorder that, though it has a longer history, came to public attention in the mid- to late twentieth century. And Haynes makes this coming-to-attention clear in his film. Those around Karen have little idea of what to make of Karen's eating habits and use of laxatives and are ill-prepared to help her. Haynes's narration thus takes on a didactic quality, using the film to not only retroactively "educate" Karen's family and associates on her eating disorder, but to actively educate his audience as well. The lack of widespread knowledge about eating disorders at the time of the film's production meant that Haynes had a certain amount of agency in narrating Karen's disorder. In the film, Haynes portrays Karen's eating disorder as a function of control and self-discipline in relation to her family, her body, and her career. To explain anorexia, he uses a multitude of tools, including voiceover, superimposed text, and intertitles to directly define it, in addition to illustrating it through Karen's actions and by drawing analogies to other types of images. Haynes's focus on social causes and psychological reasoning was a radical approach to anorexia for the time, which, while having been named a disease since the late 19th century, was only beginning to receive more critical studies in the 1970s and '80s.²

Though Karen is widely remembered as anorexic, and Haynes's film refers to Karen strictly as anorexic, there is some dissonance between Karen's actions—mostly illustrated as purging—and the widely-accepted definition of anorexia—self-starvation and

² German-American psychoanalyst Hilde Bruch is in part responsible for this, as her texts documenting her work with anorexic patients were some of the first on the matter. See Bruch's *Eating Disorders: Obesity, Anorexia Nervosa, and the Person Within* (London: Routledge, 1974) and *The Golden Cage: The Enigma of Anorexia Nervosa* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).

fasting. At the time of Karen's diagnosis and Haynes's subsequent film, however, it is understandable both that Karen's doctor, Steven Levenkron, would diagnose Karen as anorexic, and that Haynes would readily accept this diagnosis. Eating disorders were severely understudied, and of the ones we now know—anorexia, bulimia, binge eating, among others—anorexia was the one most readily known in the early 1980s. The term *anorexia nervosa* was first named in 1873 by the physician Sir William Gull, from the Greek *an-orexis*, or the absence of appetite, referring to patients who appeared malnourished and emaciated due to self-starvation. It was included in the first Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), the conclusive manual of mental, emotional, and personality disorders published by the American Psychiatric Association in 1953. Bulimia, however, only entered the DSM in 1980 and even today does not receive the same critical and medical attention as anorexia. Still, it is notable that Haynes never mentions bulimia, especially as knowledge about bulimia increased during the time he was making *Superstar*. Janice M. Cauwels published *Bulimia: The Binge-Purge Compulsion* in 1983, one of the first texts focusing solely on bulimia, and in the mid-1980s, magazines like *Mademoiselle* and *Better Homes and Gardens* published articles on the disorder.³ In his book *Strange Contagion: Inside the Surprising Science of Infectious Behaviors and Viral Emotions and What They Tell Us About Ourselves*, Lee Daniel Kravetz writes that, according to Gerald Russell, the first psychologist to publish about bulimia in the 1970s,

³ Janice M. Cauwels, *Bulimia: The Binge-Purge Compulsion* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983).

bulimia was widespread by the mid-1980s, with the spread of magazine articles and information “infecting” women across America and across the world.⁴

Though it remains understandable that Haynes would adhere to Levenkron and the media’s diagnosis of anorexia, such a diagnosis and adherence to dominant narratives limited his ability to fully explore the mechanisms of Karen’s disorder, a limitation that would increase as time passed and anorexia became more solidified as a disorder with set theories and symptoms. Despite the limitations on Haynes’s spoken analysis as put forth in the film, however, the film still allows for a different approach. Images of Ex-Lax cycle through the film; in one sequence, an image of a horrified Karen Carpenter who has just heard she will be attending a buffet fades into an image of a heaping plate of food, which then fades into the familiar Ex-Lax logo on a box that slowly fills the screen. Toward the end of the film, Haynes includes a split-second image of a woman vomiting; shortly after, Karen is shown pulling out two bottles of Ipecac from a drawer filled with Ipecac bottles. Karen’s autopsy report states that it was overuse of Ipecac that killed her in the end.⁵ Thus, while the spoken narrative in Haynes’s didactic voiceovers only reference anorexia, a disorder the audience will likely associate with fasting or with the image of the emaciated anorexic, with any process obscured by her image, the images and sequences in *Superstar* primarily allude to Karen’s process of purging. By naming Karen an anorexic, Haynes participates in an already established and still enduring narrative that remembers Karen as

⁴ Lee Daniel Kravetz, *Strange Contagion: Inside the Surprising Science of Infectious Behaviors and Viral Emotions and What They Tell Us About Ourselves* (New York: Harper Wave, 2017), excerpt published on *New York Magazine*’s website The Cut, Jul. 31, 2017.

⁵ Ronald, M. Kornblum. “Autopsy for Karen Carpenter.” Department of Chief Medical Examiner-Coroner, Los Angeles County, CA. Performed Feb. 4, 1983, 2:30 p.m. Retrieved from Autopsy Files.

the face of anorexia while forgetting the particularities of her disorder, but the film and specifically its visuals defy this amnesia, instead allowing the viewer to confront Karen's actions, and potentially read into them a different narrative.

My purpose in this project is to write bulimic processes back into Karen Carpenter's story, starting with their central visual presence in Haynes's *Superstar*. The limiting of Karen's narrative to an anorexic one has limited social understanding of her, which in turn has limited the ways in which works about her are read. As mentioned, there are references to bulimic processes in *Superstar* and in media coverage on Karen. Haynes does not shy away from Karen's laxative use, and it is common knowledge that Karen's death was caused by Ipecac use.⁶ I hope, by bringing back to the fore her purging activities, to liberate Karen and the media about her from being bound to only one, rather restrictive, narrative about anorexia.

In Chapter 1, I begin with background on *Superstar* and its making, and on eating disorders and their history in medical and theoretical literature, as well as public understanding, focusing on the moments in time of Haynes's making of *Superstar* circa 1987, and of my watching it in 2018. I discuss the physicality of *Superstar*, in its tape form, to begin to suggest how central physicality could be to the representation of eating

⁶ For example, *People* Magazine published an article two years after his death entitled "Karen Carpenter Was Killed by an Over-the-Counter Drug Some Doctors Say May Be Killing Many Others" (Gioia Dilberto, May 13, 1985), and more recently, *NPR* published an article entitled "Remember Karen Carpenter, 30 Years Later," for the 30th anniversary of her death, in which the author Joel Samberg writes, "She sought help for anorexia, but apparently never devoted herself fully to a cure. Her mother found her dead on the morning of Feb. 4, 1983, on the floor of a walk-in closet at home. Karen had been taking massive amounts of ipecac syrup, which induces vomiting" (Feb. 4, 2013). Samberg very clearly, in these few sentences, lays out the direction of Karen's illness—treatment for anorexia, turn to Ipecac, death.

disorders. In Chapter 2, I introduce Mika Rottenberg's 2015 video *NoNoseKnows*, in which a 6'4" fetish performer sneezes out plates of noodles in an allergic reaction to the bundle of pollinic flowers she points directly at her nose, using this video as an interlocutor to help illuminate and discuss bulimic processes in *Superstar*. I cover the topics of reproduction, autoproduction, expulsion, waste, and labor, and begin a more material/physical examination of *Superstar* by placing it in discussion with *NoNoseKnows*. In addition to the obvious interrogation of Karen's purging, I focus especially on Haynes's Barbie dolls and their physical condition as marred by Haynes, using this discussion to contrast image-based and process-based investigations, so as to illustrate the benefits of moving from considering an object traditionally thought of in static image-based visual terms, such as Barbie, in terms of process and material history. Doing so also allows for a turn in thinking about *Superstar*: The Barbie dolls cease to allude only to Karen's withering image and instead begin to refer to very physical ways in which she interacted with her body and its limits. Through the analysis in this chapter, I hope to produce a new methodology for looking at eating disorders and their interaction with the patient's life. Finally, in Chapter 3, I put this methodology to use, and put forth new readings of Karen's life in order to demonstrate how understanding can begin to vary when thinking of her in terms of process. I take the lens offered by *NoNoseKnows* and turn it toward Karen—encompassing Karen as portrayed by Haynes and as we are able to see her through other media, including biopics, biographies, magazine profiles, and fan forums. I look specifically at Karen's posthumously released solo album, placing it into the context of her relationship to Richard as a controller of her production and a rejecter of her autonomy and of her relationship to

her husband Tom Burris as a rejecter of her body, as an example of Karen's alienation from her labor and bodily production. I also look at the Carpenters' relationship to neoconservative President Richard Nixon and to America's favorite beverage, milk, as a means of deconstructing the forced dialectical relationship between the Carpenters' public-facing "good kids" image and their hidden "secret" lives, instead proffering a messier and more complicated consideration of the Carpenters as at the nexus of a matrix containing personal actions, political considerations, American material histories, media attention and legacies, and more.

This thesis offers, as much as anything, one story among many about Karen Carpenter. Karen's life is so often told through the lens of anorexia that her life has become inextricable from her disease and, thus, from her death. A visit to any Carpenters song on YouTube will include encountering countless comments about the tragedy of her disease, of a voice gone too soon, taken by the pressures of stardom and the ravages of feminine expectations. One commenter on the Carpenters' official video for "Superstar" writes, "It's so hard to comprehend that someone with such an amazing voice never felt that she was good enough. Karen, dear, you were so completely good enough. You were exquisite."⁷

Her diagnosis, both medically and culturally, as anorexia, while largely due to the medical bias toward anorexia diagnoses, especially true at the time of Karen's death, has also had a tautological effect on public understanding of her: Karen was diagnosed as anorexic because of all the telltale signs she possessed—her strained and emotionally

⁷ Lorie Worley, Re: "Carpenters – Superstar" (CarpentersVEVO, Sept. 28, 2010), 2017.

stunted relationship to her mother, her need for and lack of control, her body anxiety—but those features of her life have then since been highlighted in narratives about her life *because* she is anorexic. As a result, Karen Carpenter, as known by the public, has become increasingly “anorexic” as her symptoms have taken center stage to continue to support her diagnosis. So this thesis is an attempt to, perhaps, not disregard any of these narratives or characteristics, but to highlight the other actions and traits in *Superstar* and in Karen’s life that have fallen between the cracks as narratives about Karen have gradually left the margins and trended toward one dominant story about her life and death. These actions may include not only her purging, but also her alienation from her music because of Richard’s control over it, the obscured viscosity of a gum-chewing pop princess whose voice and life had been sanitized, her marriage, her denial of children of her own by her husband, and her repressed solo album which never quite fit the Carpenters’ image and which was released only years after her death, when a public narrative about her had already solidified. I ask this: What happens if I take bulimia out of anorexia’s theoretical shadow, and look at it in a schema of production rather than cleansing or deprivation? What if I choose to follow the visuals and actions of *Superstar* rather than its spoken explanations of Karen’s actions and of anorexia? What results is an ability to see Karen Carpenter in a new light—not one which is necessarily more true, but one which, when placed alongside anorexia-centered narratives of Karen, helps offer a fuller understanding of her life and disorder, and of bulimia in general. Bulimia deserves its own narratives, as do its sufferers.

Chapter 1: Setting the Stage

THE STORY OF *SUPERSTAR*

Haynes premiered *Superstar* at Films Charas, a small venue founded by Doris Kornish, a New York City staple film producer and co-founder of the pizza chain Two Boots. Films Charas was the only venue that would initially accept the film. Lucas Hilderbrand, in his 2004 article for *Camera Obscura*, “Grainy Days and Mondays: *Superstar* and Bootleg Aesthetics,” writes that the film “was rejected by an impressive list of venues, including the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Collective for Living Cinema, the Millennium Film Workshop, and the Film Forum” — the rejections cited concerns that the film was “too narrative” or too vulnerable to legal issues due to the film’s infringement on copyright.⁸ Haynes never actually obtained permission from the Carpenter family for the use of their songs, their story, or their image, and thus faced cease-and-desists from Richard Carpenter, as well as from Mattel for using Barbie dolls. Following its premiere and some subsequent press, *Superstar* was screened at a host of venues, including galleries, club nights, and film festivals until it was legally forced out of circulation and Haynes was denied screening rights in 1990, following more legal action from Richard.

The film’s subject, visuals, and banning turned out to be the perfect recipe for the making of a cult favorite. Though Richard was effective in banning the film from being sold or screened, by the time this happened, the film had been copied onto VHS tapes

⁸ Lucas Hilderbrand, “Grainy Days and Mondays: *Superstar* and Bootleg Aesthetics,” *Camera Obscura* 57.19-3 (2004): 62.

numerous times—and those tapes begot more tapes, which begot more tapes, and so on. The multiplication of the tape and the resultant bootleg aesthetics increased the film's appeal (fig. 1a-b). As Joan Hawkins writes in *Cutting Edge: Art Horror and the Horrific Avant-Garde*, “The very rawness of the image becomes both a signifier of the tape's outlaw status and a guarantor of its authenticity. You know this is the stuff you weren't meant to see simply because the image quality is so bad...”⁹ In the introduction to his book on *Superstar*, Glyn Davis tells his story of watching *Superstar* for the first time in 2001 while teaching a class on New Queer Cinema, when his student snuck a VHS copy out of the art-house cinema at which she worked. He writes:

We met up at my office at around 9am, as planned. I immediately drew the blinds (only adding to the illicit atmosphere, the thrill of clandestine viewing) and we sat down to watch the film on a large monitor. I was struck on that first exposure by a number of things about the film that still provide pleasure for me every time I return to it: the painstakingly constructed sets, with props made to be the appropriate size for the dolls; the witty and parodic nods to a number of generic conventions (the biopic, the ‘movie of the week’, horror cinema); the meticulous montages set to tunes by the Carpenters, especially the first, which is soundtracked by “We’ve Only Just Begun”; the fractured and experimental format of the movie—the doll footage spliced together with found clips, wordy intertitles and an almost didactic presentation of information about eating disorders. Perhaps most of all, I was amazed by how swiftly the dolls ceased to be mere puppets and became characters with which it was difficult not to have some sort of emotional connection. Indeed, when the film ended, Margarita and I were both crying. This is the one and only time that I have cried in front of a student; that *Superstar* provoked such a transgression of the bounds of propriety reveals a great deal about its affective force, at least with this particular spectator. Swiftly recovering, we hooked together two VCRs and dubbed half a dozen copies so that we could disseminate the film to other people that we knew would like it.¹⁰

⁹ Joan Hawkins, *Cutting Edge: Art Horror and the Horrific Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 47.

¹⁰ Glyn Davis, *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (Cultographies, London: Wallflower Press, 2008), 2.

The story Davis tells reflects *Superstar*'s emotional impact and reveals how the emotions evoked by Karen's story can be heightened through the intimacy of watching it in an "illicit atmosphere." The viewer does, in fact, feel "close to" Karen, enveloped in the sounds of the Carpenters' music; montages placing the duo firmly in the seventies mentally transport the viewer to that decade. And perhaps most importantly, although it may seem that Barbie dolls would force the viewer to keep a sort of ironic distance from Karen's story (with the expectation that the choice of Barbie to portray an anorexic might feel too obvious to allow for any real poignancy), in actuality the dolls allow for a feeling of direct connection to Karen that a live actor might have otherwise interrupted, because the dolls allow for the projection of the viewer's feelings and historical memories of Karen onto them. They also allow for a physical mutilation to signal the withering of Karen's body and the physical and (here visualized) emotional toll of her disorder, something that would be impossible—or at least irresponsibly dangerous—with a live actor. Davis ends his illicit viewing by ensuring that he will be able to watch the film again, and that his friends will, too; he also gets to take home the film himself, have an "illicit" piece of Karen of his own. The act of copying and distributing bootlegs was a crucial part of viewing *Superstar* up until the mid 2010s when the film was uploaded to video sharing sites like YouTube, DailyMotion, and even Archive.org.¹¹

¹¹ Mac Mintaka, "Superstar The Karen Carpenter story ToddHaynes," YouTube, uploaded Nov. 6, 2014; Nicko Azzarello, "Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story," DailyMotion, uploaded 2014; and *Stay Free Magazine*, "haynes superstar," Archive.org, uploaded Oct. 3, 2005 as documentation of *Stay Free*'s "Illegal Art Exhibit" (2002).

The intimacy created by the act of sharing bootlegs, of being let into a circle of viewership, often with some relationship going back to Haynes or an early screening at which he would have been present, is matched by the intimacy created by the feeling of being let into Karen's life as a result of being let into her disorder. One's illness can often feel all-encompassing, both to the sufferer and to witnesses, and the secrecy that surrounds an illness like anorexia or bulimia can heighten that impression, as the sufferer is isolated in their disorder, and their witness, upon discovering, can feel as though the disorder holds the key to all of the sufferer's actions and identity. This holds especially true for eating disorders, which impact one of the most basic human needs: eating. In other words, Karen didn't just have anorexia, she was an anorexic, and that identity existed in every part of her life. To know intimate details of Karen's illness, then, is to feel that one knows her. This feeling of knowing is heightened by *Superstar*'s connection to the genre of pop biopics, which it emulates and from which it borrows, and which Michael Atkinson defines in the article "Long Black Limousine: Pop Biopics" as:

a self-fulfilling ritual, contrived of tropes and significations propagated in the hothouse of cinematic hyperbole and thriving jauntily at a respectable remove from the reality on which it is based. Unlike most, it traffics in a culture myth that is not only dead, a lie or buried in history, but is our most ferociously beloved bedtime story—the grandstanding, fire-breathing music genius/god courting Untimely Death by way of his or her essential extra-ordinariness...It's the American Dream distilled down to its very essence, instant splendor and celebrity twinned inexorably with disaster.¹²

¹² Michael Atkinson, "Long Black Limousine: Pop Biopics," *Celluloid Jukebox: Popular Music and the Movies since the 50s*, ed. Jonathan Romney and Adrian Wooton (London: British Film Institute, 1995), 21.

The connection to the pop biopic heightens the feeling of being let in—the pop biopic, while retaining the fact that the viewer and the pop icon are separated by stardom, is still “our most ferociously loved bedtime story,” as it reveals intimate knowledge of a cultural object of adoration—or at the very least, of intrigue.

While Richard officially took legal action against Haynes because of the unauthorized use of the Carpenters’ music, it was perhaps really for similar reasons as Mattel’s cease-and-desist: the film was too provocative in its didacticism about anorexia. While Mattel resented the implications regarding Barbies and anorexia—as Cynthia Schneider recalls, Mattel’s cease-and-desist stated, “You are associating our product with death”—Richard rejected the implications about his family—essentially, that Haynes was associating his family, and their actions and attitudes, with death.¹³ In *Superstar*, Haynes presents Karen’s eating disorder as a disease caused by family dynamics. Richard and his mother are painted as controlling and uncaring, a theme that continues in later media about Karen’s life.¹⁴ In focusing on the theme of familial relationships, Haynes prefigured elements of narratives about anorexia that have since become commonplace—those of controlling families, personal naïveté, and commerce-caused body insecurity. Haynes’s use of Barbie and Barbie-like dolls makes an obvious appeal to anxieties about Barbies and the lasting psychic effect they have on girls (fig. 2).¹⁵ Haynes also explicitly states then current theories about anorexia through the use of voiceover and intertitles, calling the disorder an

¹³ In an interview with Davis, qtd. in 33.

¹⁴ Such as *Little Girl Blue: The Life of Karen Carpenter* by Randy L. Schmidt (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2010), which I will return to in later chapters.

¹⁵ Most of the dolls came from flea markets and thrift stores, and many were thus off-brand, but still bore Barbie’s typical features and measurements.

“apparatus of resistance and control,” a “fascism over the body,” “the eternal experience of contemporary femininity,” among other descriptors (fig. 3a-b). Haynes places Karen’s anorexia firmly in the 1970s, as made apparent by the bombardment of images from popular and political culture that he includes in montages with images of Richard Nixon, the Vietnam War, the Brady Bunch, and others (see fig. 4a-d and 5a-b).

SYMPTOMATOLOGY AND THE MAKING OF DIAGNOSES: THE STORY OF ANOREXIA AND BULIMIA, 1980s AND NOW

It is important now to discuss the relationship between the two moments in time with which I am working—the mid-1980s when Haynes was filming *Superstar* and when it was released, and the current moment in which I am watching the film. While these are distinct moments, there are ways that the former continues to greatly impact the latter. As the images and techniques Haynes used, such as montage and music choice, transport the viewer mentally to the 1970s and 1980s, the quality of the film’s image also keeps the viewer’s watching experience from ever being completely within the present day. One cannot watch the film without thinking of its history. Its cult status has made the story of the film—its banning, its bootlegging, its distribution through networks—inextricable from the film itself, and the poor image quality ensures that the viewer is visually reminded of this story as well. Being banned from distribution has meant that the film could never be released on DVD or Blu-Ray, could never be remastered. Instead, viewers watch *Superstar* on VHS tapes over 20 years old, often having to seek out special VCRs to do so, as VCRs are rarely still in homes. The degradation on these tapes from both age and the bootlegging process is apparent in the image quality. While the film is now online, even watching it there does not

offer a cleaner image, as the online files were ripped from these same VHS tapes. Written into the file is the film's physical history.

Present in the film, as well, is the understanding of eating disorders at the time it was produced, and present in the viewing process today is the history of that understanding and its development. The 1980s were an important time in the development of understanding about bulimia and its relationship to anorexia; to illustrate this, I will use the American Psychiatric Association's Third Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-III), released in 1980, and the revised DSM-III-R, published in 1987. Though bulimia was included for the first time in the DSM-III, it was revised somewhat significantly in the DSM-III-R. Bulimia was initially named from the Greek *boulimia*, meaning "ravenous hunger"; accordingly, the DSM-III only included bingeing as a necessary symptom, stating that purging was optional. This was updated in the DSM-III-R, which made purging a requirement for diagnosis.¹⁶ In the DSM-III, bulimic episodes were also included in anorexia nervosa's definition, and body image insecurity was limited to anorexia's diagnostics and not listed in bulimia's symptoms.¹⁷ The DSM-III further differentiated between anorexia and bulimia by weight. Anorexia nervosa's diagnostic included as a criterion a loss of at least 25% of the patient's original body weight, while bulimia had no weight-loss diagnostic criteria; the DSM-III even states, "In Bulimia, weight loss, if it does

¹⁶ Cynthia Lancelot, et. al., "Comparison of DSM-III and DSM-III-R Bulimia Nervosa Classifications for Psychopathology and Other Eating Behaviors," *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 10.1 (1991): 58.

¹⁷ The definition for anorexia nervosa reads in part that, "Some individuals with this disorder cannot exert continuous control over their intended voluntary restriction of food intake and have bulimic episodes (eating binges), often followed by vomiting." American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, 3rd edition (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 1980), 68.

occur, is never as great as 25% of original body weight.”¹⁸ In the DSM-III-R, this is partly revised: the weight criteria for anorexia changes to only 15% loss, but the differential diagnosis between anorexia and bulimia continues to be based on weight—“In Bulimia Nervosa (without associated Anorexia Nervosa), there may be a fear of fatness, and weight loss may be substantial, but the weight does not fall below a minimum normal weight.”¹⁹ There is a trope in culture to colloquially describe an extremely thin person as “looking anorexic,” but none to describe her as “looking bulimic,” and the inability to “look bulimic” is the same in medical diagnosis—anorexia gets both formally and informally diagnosed based on appearance, but bulimia only does based on process. Thus, Karen Carpenter as Todd Haynes conceptualizes her—whom he shows fully bingeing only once though alludes to her purging often—whose immense weight loss and body insecurity are crucial to her eating disorder, is understandably diagnosed as anorexic, rather than bulimic, by her doctors, by Todd Haynes, and by the media and the public.

Superstar was created within a cultural milieu that knew Karen intimately as a star shrinking before their eyes—or at least on their television screens. Long before information about Karen’s laxative and Ipecac abuse was available, Karen’s fans and the rest of the public were able to observe Karen’s weight loss themselves. Karen’s medical and cultural diagnoses as anorexic make sense, but in the years following her death and *Superstar*’s release, Karen’s diagnoses have become part of a wider metanarrative about anorexia.

¹⁸ Ibid, 69.

¹⁹ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, 3rd edition, Revised* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 1987), 66.

Thus, regardless of any changes in cultural understanding of eating disorders, Karen remains the first really public anorexic, just as she will never be able to replace Princess Diana as the first really public bulimic. As Paula Saukko notes in her article “Rereading Media and Eating Disorders: Karen Carpenter, Princess Diana, and the Healthy Female Self,” “Carpenter’s death in 1983 was the first time that anorexia entered public consciousness in a major way. Similarly, Princess Diana’s revelations about bulimia in the 1990s publicized the condition.”²⁰ Just as anorexia was not part of the public consciousness until Karen’s death, bulimia was not especially prominent in public thought until after Princess Diana’s self-confessed diagnosis in the 1990s, even despite 1980s magazine and journal articles on the disorder, as they were not given a public face to attach to the disorder. Despite the fact that today’s viewers may associate the binge-purge cycle with bulimia, it is hard to ignore this history. Public understanding of Karen is as anorexic, even if one now recognizes her bulimic tendencies.

In addition, while we do have a stronger understanding of bulimia today, its diagnostic criteria are still problematic. The DSM-III-R advanced understanding of bulimia when it introduced motivational criteria for bulimia, that the bulimic purges to “avoid weight gain” and has a “persistent overconcern with body shape and weight.”²¹ But The DSM-IV, published in 1994, complicated matters by introducing subtypes in anorexia nervosa, separating it into the restricting type and the binge-eating/purging type, creating

²⁰ Paula Saukko, “Rereading Media and Eating Disorders: Karen Carpenter, Princess Diana, and the Healthy Female Self,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 23.2 (2006): 156.

²¹ American Psychological Association, *DSM-III-R*, 69.

confusion about the difference between anorexia binge-eating/purging type and bulimia. The DSM-V, which came out in 2013, continues this. The difference between bulimia nervosa and anorexia nervosa binge-eating/purging type, according to the DSM, is only weight. If a patient binges and purges but is at more 85% of their “healthy” BMI, their official diagnosis by way of the DSM is anorexia.²² The DSM-V further states that “unlike individuals with anorexia nervosa, binge-eating/purging type, individuals with bulimia nervosa maintain body weight at or above a minimally normal level.”²³

Anorexia’s diagnostic criteria, even today, are image-based, while bulimia’s are only process-based. What is strange, then, is that this process is ignored if image criteria for anorexia are met—anorexia continues to take primacy. Some medical professionals have suggested changes for these criteria. For example, Shrigopal Goyal, Yatan Pal Singh Balhara, and S.K. Khandelwal write in their 2012 article of recommendations for the DSM-V, “Revisiting Classification of Eating Disorders-toward Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-5 and International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems-11,” that bulimia nervosa and anorexia nervosa binge-eating/purging type do “not appear to be qualitatively different,” and that even the weight criteria that separate them is flawed, as

there is no empirical validation for use of 85% of expected body weight as the cut-off. This criteria has been criticized as being arbitrary, nonpredictive of treatment outcome, and insensitive to issues of age, gender, frame size, and ethnicity... Also, 28% cases of AN [anorexia nervosa] had body weight

²² In practice, however, this is not necessarily the case. Patients can be diagnosed as bulimic based on their behaviors even if they have a low weight. Patients can also be diagnosed as anorexic if they restrict food intake even if they are not severely underweight.

²³ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, 5th edition* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 2013), 345.

greater than 85% ideal body weight.²⁴

These sentiments have been echoed by other studies, including an article from 2017 in the *International Journal of Eating Disorders* by Deborah Lynn Reas and Øyvind Rø entitled “Investigating the DSM-5 severity specifiers based on thinness for adults with anorexia nervosa” which reportedly found little utility in BMI-based severity standards in relation to behavior-based diagnostics.²⁵ In addition, while the current main differential diagnostic criterion for anorexia and bulimia is weight, the DSM-V also states a minor, but significant, difference in the two disorders’ diagnostics. The DSM recognizes that both disorders use behaviors that “interfere with” or “prevent” weight gain, but for anorexia it lists that this is accompanied by an “intense fear of gaining weight or of becoming fat” and a “disturbance in the way in which one’s body weight or shape is experienced, undue influence of body weight or shape on self-evaluation, or persistent lack of recognition of the seriousness of the current low body weight.”²⁶ In contrast, the only motivational criterion listed for bulimia is that bulimics’ “self-evaluation is unduly influenced by body shape and weight.”²⁷ The APA thus uses the ends (body weight) to assume the motive, regardless of process; though both anorexics and bulimics are made anxious by their body and take measures to lose weight, only those that lose *enough* weight are thought to be sufficiently motivated to do so. This problematic distinction boisters an unfortunate stigma in the pro-

²⁴ Shrigopal Goyal, et. al., “Revisiting Classification of Eating Disorders-toward Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-5 and International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems-11,” *Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine* 34.3 (Jul.-Sep. 2012): 292 and 291.

²⁵ Deborah Lynn Reas and Øyvind Rø, “Investigating the DSM-5 severity specifiers based on thinness for adults with anorexia nervosa,” *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 50.8 (August 2017).

²⁶ American Psychological Association, *DSM-V*, 338-339.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 345.

ED community that considers bulimics to simply be “failed anorexics.”²⁸ In *Wasted: A*

Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia, Mary Hornbacher writes:

In treatment, as in the rest of the world, bulimia is seen as a step down from anorexia, both in terms of medical seriousness and in terms of admirability. Bulimia, of course, gives in to the temptations of the flesh, while anorexia is anointed, is a complete removal of the bearer from the material realm. Bulimia hearkens back to the hedonistic Roman days of pleasure and feast, anorexia to the medieval age of bodily mortification and voluntary famine. In truth, bulimics do not usually bear the hallowed stigmata of a skeletal body. Their self-torture is private, far more secret and guilty than is the visible statement of anorexics, whose whittled bodies are admired as the epitome of feminine beauty. There is nothing feminine, delicate, acclaimed, about sticking your fingers down your throat and spewing puke.²⁹

It is possible a similar feeling is at the heart of the history of eating disorder research, and that it is for this reason that anorexia has been studied and theorized in much greater depth than bulimia has: if bulimia is just a lesser, “failed” anorexia, then a study of the latter would more than sufficiently encompass the former.

In the essay “The Anorexic Body: Reading Disorders” from 1996, social researcher and theorist Abigail Bray lays out several of the theories that anorexia has amassed, proposed by a number of thinkers from medical professionals to poststructuralists. She writes:

²⁸ For example, a thread on a pro-anorexic online forum, *My Pro-Ana*, starts with a post that asks, “What is your opinion on the term, ‘bulimics are failed anorexics’” (anashreksic, Dec. 13, 2014, 2:38 a.m.). While many of the following posters write that they find this term “hurtful” and “offensive,” many also admit that it’s still something they think about themselves. Poster Guest_chronic_ * writes, “It may be offensive but quite often what initially starts off as anorexia turns into bulimia. This is what it was with me. Tried to starve failed, over ate and purged and once I had done that there was no going back and I was bulimic for years. I often thought of myself as a failed anorexic” (Dec. 13, 2014, 1:03 p.m.), and Relapse&Recovery writes, “this may be harsh but: i think the reason we all hate it so mch is becuse sometimes we think this about ourselves [sic]” (Dec. 13, 2014, 7:49 p.m.).

²⁹ Marya Hornbacher, *Wasted: A Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia*, (New York: HarperFlamingo, 1998), 153.

The list below exemplifies the ways in which eating disorders are constituted by an 'epidemic of signification.' Eating disorders are:

1. A slimmers' epidemic which is destroying the lives of mostly young, intelligent, white, middle-class women.
2. 'A kind of mourning for a pre-Oedipal (i.e. precastated) body and a corporeal connection to the mother that women in patriarchy are required to abandon.'
3. Evidence of the mass media's sadistic brain washing of women into complying with unrealistic beauty ideals.
4. A form of perverse feminine narcissism.
5. The shadow of the astronaut's body.
6. A non-productive, reactive body without organs.
7. A psychosomatic phenomenon which articulates the pathologies of the patriarchal capitalist nuclear family.
8. An obsessive-compulsive disorder best treated with benzodiazepines, haloperidol, thioridazine, trazodone, maprotiline, bilateral ECT or, if all else fails, a stereotactic limbic leucotomy (aka lobotomy).
9. A rejection of the role of adult femininity and a retreat into the asexual body of a child.
10. A pathology which flourishes in matriarchal households.
11. A mental illness created by gay fashion designers who want women to look like young boys.
12. A pathological fear of menarches and the implications of fertility.
13. A mass-marketed dieting disorder.
14. Phallogocentrism's brutal marginalization of the female imaginary and the materiality of the body.
15. The introjection of a bad object and the consequent internalization of a 'false body'.
16. An emblem of twentieth-century *fin-de-siecle* decadence.
17. Hunger art.
18. An experimental becoming.
19. Something women catch from television, the disease of the McLuhan age.
20. A reading disorder.³⁰

³⁰ Abigail Bray, "The Anorexic Body: Reading Disorders," *Cultural Studies* 10.3 (1996): 413-414. These theories come from a variety of sources Bray cites, including: Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2004), 40; Kim Chernin, *Womansize: The Tyranny of Slenderness* (London: The Women's Press, 1989); Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990); Louise J. Kaplan, *Female Perversions: The Temptations of Madame Bovary* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), 453-484; Robert Romanyshyn, *Technology as Symptom and Dream* (London: Routledge, 1989), 133-175; Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 151; Susie Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (London: Paddington, 1984); Matra Robertson, *Starving in the Silences: An*

On the last of these, the “reading disorder,” Bray further explains:

Rather than reproducing yet another prescriptive diagnosis of women's eating disorders, I shall investigate the formation of a dominant paradox which has been mapped on to the anorexic subject. The paradox articulates itself through a theorization of food refusal as the direct result of the consumption of media representations of idealized thin femininity. An excessive consumption of media images is perceived to activate a pathological fear of corporeal consumption: over-reading produces under-eating. This paradoxical description of consumption, I will argue, represents the imagined reading practices of female audiences within modernity as quintessentially irrational.³¹

The “reading disorder,” as Bray explains, is problematic as it posits the anorexic as a passive reader, or viewer (as Bray conflates the two positions), removing her agency in her disorder. The anorexic is assumed irrational—as “over-reading produces under-eating.” What is confusing, then, is why Bray does not reflect on bulimia—is it more rational if over-reading produces over-eating? If over-eating allows for a purge of that both eaten and read? Or if over-reading leads to over-producing, if we see the purge as a moment of production rather than cleansing? Scholarship on eating disorders has been limited by its adherence to the supremacy of anorexia.

To Bray's list I'll also add: the progeny of the holy disease anorexia mirabilis,

Exploration of Anorexia Nervosa (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1992); M. Boskind-White, “Cinderella's stepsisters: a feminist perspective on anorexia nervosa and bulimia,” *Signs* 2 (1979): 342-356; L. Brown, “Women, weight and power: feminist theoretical and therapeutic issues,” *Women and Therapy* 1 (1985): 61-71; Bryan S. Turner, *The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), 196; Wayne O. Wooley and Susan Wooley, “The Beverly Hills eating disorder: the mass marketing of anorexia nervosa,” *The International Journal of Eating Disorders* 1.3 (1982): 57-69; Philippa Rothfield, “A conversation between bodies,” *Melbourne Journal of Politics* 22 (1994): 30-44; Susie Orbach, *Hunger Strike: The Anorectic's Struggle as a Metaphor for our Age* (London: Faber & Faber, 1986), 90; Maud Ellmann, *The Hunger Artists: Eating Writing and Imprisonment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 24; and Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

³¹ Ibid, 414.

which afflicted Catholic fasting girls of the Medieval ages and women saints whose fasting was meant to bring them closer to God, as they sustained themselves spiritually on his Word and love, rather than physically on food; and anorexia as a means of subjectivation, a term by Michel Foucault that Patrick Anderson succinctly defines as “the simultaneous production of subjectivity and subordination to State power” in his text, *So Much Wasted: Hunger, Performance, and the Morbidity of Resistance*, akin to hunger strikes and art performances of an endurance category.³² Anderson sets as the scenes for self-starvation “a hospital ward, a gallery space, a prison cell,” likening the anorexic in the hospital bed to endurance artists like Chris Burden who push their bodies to the limit in the name of art and to hunger strikers like those of the Turkish prison strikes that took place from 2000-2003, the “longest and deadliest hunger strike in modern history.”³³ Anderson takes an important step in his approach to anorexia, linking three very different practices of self-starvation simply because they are all self-starvation—the three are connected by their same choice of process to respond to different state apparatuses. A “reading disorder” style approach thus doesn’t work here—one would hardly claim Turkish prisoners starved as a result of inundation of images. However, despite his ability to begin his investigation of anorexia with its processes and mechanisms, he does not extend this methodology to bulimia. In the article “On Feeding Tubes,” published in 2005, Anderson discusses famous

³² Patrick Anderson, *So Much Wasted: Hunger, Performance, and the Morbidity of Resistance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 145. For anorexia mirabilis, see Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *Fasting Girls: The History of Anorexia Nervosa* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000) and Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

³³ Ibid, 1 and 110.

bulimic Terri Schiavo (who was left comatose after suffering a cardiac arrest caused by bulimia, and whose family and husband battled for fifteen years over whether to respect her wishes to be taken off of life support or turn her into the face of the national right-to-life cause) as he would an anorexic; he writes:

The Schiavo case epitomizes the complicated nature of hunger as it functions at the very heart of mortality—or, in Freud's words, of the drive to die in one's own way (1961). The intensity of the question of hunger is especially strong at the site of the alternately lionized and demonized medical apparatus at the center of the controversy: the feeding tube. In standard medical practice, the feeding tube is used both as a short-term prosthetic esophagus for those who have temporarily lost the ability to swallow and as a long-term form of life-support for those who require permanent assistance with eating. But the broader history of the feeding tube includes other applications—most notably, the practice of force-feeding hunger strikers and anorectics who, despite their gastronomic competencies, refuse to eat...In the case of Terri Schiavo—and anorectics and hunger strikers—the feeding tube aims to mediate between the demands and the denials of hunger, a material symbol of the discomfort that surrounds the morbidity of hunger, its potential to cast the question of care in the language of life and death.³⁴

Anderson considers only Schiavo's vegetative state, equating her with anorectics and hunger strikers who should have the right to starve even within the context of state control, forgetting how Schiavo ended up in such a state. Hunger as an overarching paradigm is complicated when remembering Schiavo's tendency to binge and purge, a process that began long before her unwitting involvement in the conversation on the right to life.

³⁴ Patrick Anderson, "On Feeding Tubes," *The Drama Review* 49.3 (Fall 2005): 5-7.

IMAGE VS. PROCESS: A NEW CONCEPTION OF BULIMIA

Most of the literature addressing eating disorders speaks specifically about anorexia, and if bulimia is included, the two are equated—or at least deemed similar enough in nature for writing on anorexia to apply to bulimia. Though Bray and Anderson do both stress the *process* of anorexia and the agency of the anorexic in engaging in it, they still lump bulimia with anorexia, even in the same breath that they demonstrate the need for specific study of the processes and mechanisms of eating disorders. Whereas anorexia has enough theories to merit an entire list, bulimia mainly just has one: other anorexia—or even *failed* anorexia. While there are many similarities between the anorexic theories and Haynes's portrayal of Karen's disorder—the purity and cleanliness fasting girls hoped to achieve seem akin to the purity of Karen, the smooth-voiced covergirl of young conservative America, and Haynes's montage sequences containing a barrage of images from popular media of the 1970s seem to particularly anticipate Bray's excess of media images—considering Karen as bulimic, because it's been severely understudied, frees us from the weight of association and metanarrative and allows for a freer way of imagining her. There is little benefit to continuing to think of Karen as anorexic only, despite her low body weight, as it would continue to inspire a still-image-based, rather than process-based, method of interrogation.

The realm of anorexia is image, both in practice and in the history of its medical and theoretical discussion. In practice, the anorexic tends toward image, flattening the body quite literally through starvation and metaphorically through the eschewal of bodily process. The anorexic denies the body's basic needs, such as the need to eat, the need for

regular digestion, instead prioritizing a different need—the need to image. In the article “The Haunted Flesh: Corporeal Feminism and the Politics of (Dis)Embodiment,” Abigail Bray and Claire Colebrook point out the dangers of eating disorder discourse that assumes the feminine body as a passive site responding to a homogeneous and hegemonic “body image” from which it is separate.³⁵ I want to clarify that in my assertion that anorexia’s realm is that of image rather than of process, I am not condemning the anorexic body to static passivity, but rather considering it as responding to the context in which it operates. Becoming-image is still a form of becoming, and the discourse between body and image still a discourse. Instead, the denial I see in anorexia is not a denial of the body altogether, but the denial of the body as a processing body, an active assertion of the body-as-image. The body’s needs are replaced with other needs, not completely or only disavowed. Anorexia is form of subjectivation, of imagining the body and forming the self “*in the context of subordination to larger institutional and ideological domains.*”³⁶

Bulimia, on the other hand, is an activation and overdrive of the body’s needed processes. Through bingeing and purging, the bulimic body is the processing body on steroids; it must be understood in time and through time. The bulimic amplifies and speeds up her bodily processes. She eats more in one sitting than a 2000-calorie diet could intake in days, and she vomits or defecates almost immediately, accelerating the digestive process. The bulimic is ultradimensional, almost too physical, with its bodily needs overestimated,

³⁵ Abigail Bray and Claire Colebrook, “The Haunted Flesh: Corporeal Feminism and the Politics of (Dis)Embodiment,” *Signs* 24.1 (Autumn 1998).

³⁶ Anderson, *So Much Wasted*, 3. Italics added for emphasis.

rather than downplayed. If the anorexic should be understood through image, then, the bulimic should be understood through process; or, in other words, anorexia can be seen through still image, while bulimia is seen through moving image. Thus while image may be the domain of anorexia, we are still able to see bulimia in *Superstar*—not through any still image or single shot, but through the sequences of images and the processes they illustrate, as well as the processes contained and implied within each shot. For example, while Barbie may seem like the perfect image, the process implied in seeing a whittled doll acknowledges and exaggerates the doll's physicality and its physical history. It is a time-sensitive ultradimensional body, rather than a flattened body. Its physicality is amplified rather than denied. There is a common joke that if a thin person turns to the side, they will disappear completely from view, quite literally flattened out of the third dimension into a two-dimensional image. In the plane of image, the anorexic has been much more easily turned into discourse. Perhaps this is another reason why the anorexic has been theorized so much more than the bulimic.

If anorexia is about reception—the anorexic turns inward, closes herself off at her edges, as she is bombarded with expectations, with images, with phallogocentrism, with the shrewish demands of an overbearing mother—bulimia may be about production, turning outward, making the internal quite literally external. Haynes provides a barrage of images from the 1970s that plagued Karen in *Superstar*, but Karen also produced her own barrage of content, which Haynes also acknowledges in the film: every song in *Superstar* is in her voice; she uses laxatives to almost surreal ends, using more than her meager diet could ever actually handle. In a montage sequence late in the film, appearing shortly before

Karen's death, Karen is pictured in a late-night binge, flipping through channels before ultimately landing on *The Brady Bunch*, another squeaky-clean "family."³⁷ Karen sits passively receiving the media she consumes, which is echoed in her almost mindless eating of a variety of (mostly junk) foods that sit in front her—a classic image of a binge. Karen's bombardment by media and images seem at first like they may be illustrative of the "reading disorder" theory—especially as Karen watches *The Brady Bunch* and a beauty pageant, media that famously portray ideal American womanhood (fig. 5a-b). But unlike the prediction of the "reading disorder" narrative, Karen does not respond to this bombardment with abstinence; instead her overconsumption of images is mimicked by her overconsumption of food. As the montage progresses, the images that Haynes uses take a darker turn: he shows a young child (also a doll) being spanked repeatedly, and the body of a female Holocaust victim being dragged by two officers before she is thrown into a mass grave (fig. 5g-h). Haynes mirrors the repeated spanking with a chorus of repeated "Karen!"s from the voices of her family and managers, and mirrors the Holocaust victim with a plate being dropped on the floor and shattering; the sequence switches from the mass grave to the plate just as the body is about to hit the ground. Immediately before this sequence, Karen says, "Do the Carpenters have something to hide?"

³⁷ The Brady Bunch also became plagued by rumors and revelations of the impact the show had on their lives. Robert Reed, who played the father Mike Brady, hid his homosexuality until his death, after which it was also revealed he was HIV-positive (Associated Press, "H.I.V. Contributed to Death of Robert Reed, Doctor Says," *New York Times*, May 20, 1992). Maureen McCormick, who played the beautiful and popular Marcia Brady, battled an addiction to cocaine and Quaaludes, as well as bulimia, following the ending of the show (see Maureen McCormick, *Here's the Story: Surviving Marcia Brady and Finding My True Voice* [New York: HarperCollins, 2008]). Rumors also spread that Barry Williams, who played 16-year-old Greg Brady, was having an affair with his TV mother Florence Henderson, who was twenty years his senior (Brian Cronin, "Did TV's Greg Brady Seriously Date His TV Mom in Real Life?," *Huffington Post Blog*, Jul. 7, 2015).

This montage culminates in images of a toilet bowl and a hand reaching for an Ex-Lax box, which are followed by a quick succession of television images, including those already played in this montage (fig. 5i-j). This culmination is matched by an aural crescendo, as the soundtrack to Karen's montage—which began with television sounds overlapping with Carpenters songs, such as “We’ve Only Just Begun” and “Close to You,” and ghostly echoing lines from without the film (Agnes: “You’ve just been so fanatical about your weight!”; Richard: “What are you trying to do, ruin both of our careers?”)—becomes even more hectic. A frantic tune with a repetitive drum beat joins the chorus, the layered Carpenters songs become indistinguishable from each other, and the different lines from the film collapse into a simple repeated echo of “Karen!” from a variety of the film's other characters as Karen makes her way to the bathroom to be greeted by the Ex-Lax and the toilet. What the cycle of images, the speed in which they repeat, and the crescendo of sound in this sequence lead to is the toilet. The climax of Karen's binge-purge experience is not the binge, which takes place alongside a media binge in front of her television, but instead the purge. The frenzy that Haynes portrays is a moving-toward the purge, rather than a frenzied tearing through food, as one might expect from a disorder named for “ravenous hunger”—the climax has more to do with production than with consumption. Though Haynes may focus on anorexia throughout *Superstar*, this sequence does offer a compelling way to consider Karen's bulimia, as a disorder that focuses on production more than it does consumption, deprivation, or punishment as a form of control.

However, the climax is still barely a climax. We see a toilet and an Ex-Lax box, nothing more—the actual climax is denied to the viewer. Even in this sequence, in which

we see a hand reach for the box—the human interaction with laxatives had been missing until now—there is no actual scene of physical production, no loud, final chord signaling an end to the disharmony. Instead, a voice is introduced—Karen’s mother’s—whose “Karen!” becomes a new, rather than echoed, line. Agnes’s voice comes to Karen—and the viewer—from an answering machine, alerting Karen to an upcoming dinner with some “very special people.” The film returns to business as usual; there is no big triumph for Karen, no moment of unfettered production, no conclusion taking place at the toilet, just as there will be no conclusion or big enough triumph or fully unfettered production at this dinner, or in her parents’ home, or in the studio with Richard. Though this is a film about a woman’s “eating” disorder, this is one of the only sequences in which we see Karen unabashedly eat, yet we are inundated with Ex-Lax boxes and Ipecac bottles—images of her purging. For this, *Superstar* gives us the opportunity to see Karen’s eating disorder as a wasting disorder—not a wasting-away disorder, as might usually be associated with anorexia and bulimia, but a disorder of wasting as creating waste, producing waste—a wasting-toward, or waste approach. The production is not triumphant, it is not useful—it is grotesque and it is wasteful.

Chapter 2: Methodologies of Purging and Production

BULIMIA AND PRODUCTION: IMAGING THE PURGE IN MIKA ROTTENBERG'S *NONOSEKNOWS*

In an interview from 2010 with Judith Hudson for *BOMB*, New York-based artist Mika Rottenberg tells the story of a woman with a unique blood type who quit her job and sold her blood as her main source of income. Rottenberg states that this story and its implications about the body's ability to auto-produce inspire her work and the way she imagines bodies as "bearers of production."³⁸ In her videos, the body is a producing agent of seemingly infinite potential—even as it produces, it is never depleted—self-sustaining without any special external materials, or any special external direction. It is the impossible perpetual motion machine; such a machine, of course, eschews traditional understandings of production, and must reconfigure standard systems of labor. In an interview with *Border Crossings* from 2011, Rottenberg evokes the familiar categories of production in a commerce-centered context, stating of her characters, "I guess you're not exactly sure who's the boss and who's the employee. [They] own the means of production;" in addition, her interviewer, Meeka Walsh, writes in the interview's forward that Rottenberg's "players—who are all women—are industrious and that work itself is the outcome of their efforts."³⁹

But it is not simply "work itself" that is present in Rottenberg's videos—it is specifically work as it is present in and natural to the body—the artist even refers to herself

³⁸ Mika Rottenberg, interview with Judith Hudson, *BOMB* 113 (Oct. 1, 2010).

³⁹ Mika Rottenberg, "Fetishizing the Visual: An Interview with Mika Rottenberg," interview with Meeka Walsh and Robert Enright, *Border Crossings* 117 (March 2011).

as her “own factory.”⁴⁰ The body that contains its own means of production, that auto-produces, is a common character in Rottenberg’s work. In the video *Mary’s Cherries* (2004), women ride stationary bicycles to power a light system that aids in the quick growth of another woman, Mary’s, red fingernails (Fig. 6a-b). These fingernails are clipped and then dropped down a series of holes, a woman working on them at each successive stop, until they are finally ready, and packaged to be sold as maraschino cherries—“Mary’s cherries.” In *Tropical Breeze* (2004), Rottenberg again uses the stationary bicycle as a means of harnessing bodily labor. Bodybuilder Heather Foster plays a truck driver who uses tissues to wipe her sweat as she sits in the hot cab of her semi (fig. 7a). After she uses a tissue, she passes it to the back of the truck, where the audience sees that it isn’t just cargo she’s carrying, but also Felicia Ballos, a dancer on a make-shift stationary bike whose pedals power a pulley system that connects Foster and Ballos, cab and bed. Ballos collects tissues off the floor with her feet, and sends them via pulley to Foster up front, who then wipes her sweaty brow, and sends them back to Ballos to be packaged in the numerous boxes of wet wipes that her truck carries, boxes labeled “Tropical Breeze” (fig. 7b). The name evokes both naturalness and artificiality: a tropical breeze is made by nature, but who pictures its scent as anything other than manufactured in a lab and marketed by laundry detergent companies and Calgon?⁴¹ The irony is, of course, that the wet wipes contain no additives, just pure, unfettered bodybuilder sweat; if there is anything unnatural in them,

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Calgon never had a “Tropical Breeze” scent, but they did have a “Tropical Dream” scent—Calgon, take me away!

perhaps it comes by way of the unnaturally green soda and “STAY AWAKE: ENERGY BOOST” powder that Foster keeps with her in the front seat (fig. 7a). But how would these transform into a “tropical breeze”?—the body responds naturally to even the smallest provocations, in unexpected ways, no longer in the producer’s active control. In *Cheese*, (2008) a farm of sisters, all with stunningly long hair, make cheese by milking their hair, and one, coincidentally, sets off chaos across the farm after sneezing out a rabbit (fig. 8a-b). In each of these videos, the body is the site and source of labor and its product, it is a self-reflexive cycle, even when outside forces contribute or multiple women’s bodies work together to form a greater cycle. But it is perhaps *NoNoseKnows* (2015) that best encompasses why Rottenberg’s work can offer insight into Karen Carpenter’s behaviors and their portrayal in *Superstar* when viewed alongside the film.

At the 2015 Venice Biennale, Rottenberg premiered *NoNoseKnows*, a video featuring a cast of true characters, including the 6’4” fetish performer Bunny Glamazon, with whom Rottenberg had previously worked, and a group of female Chinese pearl factory workers and the oysters on which they toil (fig. 9a-b). When the video begins, Glamazon appears riding a motorized scooter, which is almost too small for her, through a city of apartment blocks and trash bags to an office building (fig. 9d). There, she passes through rooms in the building populated not by office workers but by floating smoke-filled bubbles before reaching her own peculiarly decorated workspace (fig. 9e). At her desk, she is surrounded on one side by small bouquets of flowers covered in plastic and on the other by plates of noodles of all kinds: Chinese lo mein, spaghetti with red sauce, various udon and pastas (fig. 9f). Glamazon uncovers one bundle of flowers and places it in a small vase

held up in a wooden contraption featuring a fan and pulley in front of her. When she rings a bell, a Chinese woman in a pearl harvesting factory, which appears to be located right underneath Bunny Glamazon's office, begins rotating a crank that activates the pulley-fan system in front of Glamazon. The fan blows pollen from the flowers into her nose, which then grows, red and throbbing, until she finally sneezes out a plate of noodles, appearing to produce them out of nothing but pollinic irritation (fig. 9a and 9g-h). In intercut shots, the Chinese factory workers work to harvest pearls from oysters, also created out of almost nothing a tiny source of irritation; some remove the pearls from their shells, and then pass these shells onto workers who remove a small strip of flesh from inside the oyster. This strip is cut up into smaller pieces, then inserted into new oysters. For the oysters, production is a self-contained cycle (though it is sped up by the workers.) The irritation comes from the foreign yet familiar flesh, and this irritation is what grows pearls.

The situation is similar for the work that Glamazon does—everything she needs is contained within her body and her office. She waters the plants that cause her to sneeze, and the noodles appear from source unknown, perhaps from the pollen, perhaps from somewhere deep in her body, perhaps from both. Production is, except for the moving fan, self-contained. In the Venice Biennale installation, the video was accompanied by an installation featuring slightly misshapen cultured pearls—the rejects from the factory—in baskets and bags (fig. 9c). The supposedly “imperfect” pearls, displayed in excess—physical, not monetary excess, as the pearls are understood to be kept out of the market due to both their imperfection and Rottenberg's intervention, collecting them here for setting rather than for capital—serve as a constant reminder to the viewer of the oysters'

production and the workers' labor, both of which, in a capitalistic sense, have gone to "waste" as the pearls remain displayed almost like raw material.⁴²

NoNoseKnows largely centers around an action, a sneeze, which in its imaging and relationship to food also seems to be a *more complete* form of vomiting—the sudden expulsion of *intact* food—and a *more complex* breastfeeding—containing everything the food is within it, but with more ingredients and cooking time than breast milk. Glamazon embodies a position of labor somewhere overlapping and in between the work of the factory workers and the oysters—like the workers, she sets up the "factory" system and introduces the irritant, and like the oysters, her body is the site where the action takes place. There are two forms of work here: labor, like that of the Chinese workers, and automatic bodily reaction and production, like that of the oysters. In Glamazon, the two forms become the same, bodily production made equal to labor.

In this video, Mika Rottenberg uses food to evoke questions about the body and what comes out of it, about what we society counts as valuable and what it does not, and about what it means to be auto-productive, to have what it takes to make, in her words, one's "own stuff."⁴³ Thus, *NoNoseKnows* offers a useful lens through which to examine bulimia; though it does not depict bulimia per se, it does depict a sort of productive purge. The little literature that exists on bulimia concentrates on the act of bingeing, with purging as an act of contrition; such actions, however, could also be considered to be productive, a

⁴² Of course, due to being involved in Rottenberg's installation, the pearls again have a monetary worth, though are now valued not for their individual quality and beauty but for their inclusion in a larger work. This is part of a much larger conversation about the relationship between art and capital and the difficulty artists have in critiquing the latter when the former always necessarily participates within the latter's realm.

⁴³ Rottenberg, *BOMB*.

form of addition or creation, rather than only a form of subtraction. The bulimic body then could be viewed as not only a perishing or deprived body, or whittled down Barbie doll, but also as a body of fullness and production. *NoNoseKnows* confronts the viewer with the question that Mika Rottenberg herself seems to be interested in: What happens when we recognize a creative potential already present within the body—to create out of seeming thin air? Or at most, with a little assistance from some pollen configured as pixie dust, sparkling as sniffed in, or through the actions of a worker in a cramped factory?

***NONOSEKNOWS* AND *SUPERSTAR*: PARALLELS OF WASTE**

In an early shot in *Superstar*, Karen laments her weight as her mother fits her for new stage clothes, her feelings spurred by a recent columnist calling her “chubby.” The mother-daughter exchange is interrupted by Richard, fresh off a business phone call, exclaiming, “Karen! You’ll never guess! Jack’s taking us out for a huge celebration dinner in your honor—some smorgasbord at Scandia!...What do you say to that?” Haynes then fills the screen with a close-up of a heaping plate of fried chicken; the film’s character “horror” music rises as the viewer is confronted with what Karen feels—a comingling of desire, hunger, repulsion and fear (fig. 10a). The viewer—and Karen—is offered relief through a box of Ex-Lax that appears on the screen, the camera then zooming in on the box’s logo as the sounds of an angelic choir swell (fig. 10b-c). The aural shift from discordant, synthy horror music to melodic, harmonious choral music illustrates Karen’s emotional shift from anxiety, as she is confronted with the pressure of eating at a buffet, to relief, offered in the form of laxatives. In a later “(wo)man on the street”-style segment, in

which a somewhat dowdily styled middle-aged woman asks, “Do anorexics think they look good like that?”—the narrator’s answer, that for anorexics, self-starvation is more about “getting high,” leads into The Carpenters’ song “I’m on Top of the World.” Though Karen’s voice tells the audience that it is “your love” that puts her on top of the world, Haynes’s placing together of the anorexic’s high and Karen’s song makes evident that, in his eyes, there is something else present—the high of self-starvation.

There is a similarity between the scenes of Bunny Glamazon’s production through sneezing brought on by pollen, and Karen’s implied but not seen production through defecation brought by laxative, simply by virtue of their being necessary bodily functions in which one gives over to the body’s need and control, that are, in these cases, provoked. In *NoNoseKnows*, Glamazon sneezes out plate of noodles after plate of noodles, and Rottenberg oscillates between showing Glamazon’s nose and the product of her sneezes. Similarly, Haynes oscillates between between showing plates of food and Karen’s Ex-Lax boxes. Though he seems to offer these sequences as a part of his narrative on “anorexia”—Karen uses laxatives as a means of relief, of allaying the fear and guilt that fuel her weight loss, and of exerting control when she feels out of it, either because of her mother, Richard, or her “chubby” body—reading these sequences in relation to *NoNoseKnows* opens them up to other interpretations. In *NoNoseKnows*, Glamazon’s action is production-oriented. Her Rube-Goldbergian pulley contraption is a means to an end—she sets it up so that she may produce noodles by sneezing. Similarly, the pearl workers only introduce an irritant to the oysters they farm so that the oysters will produce pearls. Reading *Superstar* using *NoNoseKnows* as a lens thus allows a shift from an anorexia-minded narrative of bulimia,

which centers the act of eating (or not eating) and treats induced vomiting and defecation as a necessary guilt-driven after-effect, to a bulimia-minded narrative, centering vomiting and defecation and positioning them—like Rottenberg does with sneezing—as acts of production. The irritant—whether pollen or chicken—might be the catalyst, not the main event, even if what it catalyzes, in Karen’s case, is not shown.

It is also worth noting that the use of fully intact foods in both shots, as opposed to the possibly more expected materials of vomit and scat in an eating disorder narrative, does not preclude a bulimic interpretation. After all, it is not uncommon for bulimics to vomit very soon after eating, causing them to throw up entire chunks of food, even able at times to see the order of the individual foods that they ate—of course, in reverse—as they vomit. A similar effect happens to bulimics who use laxatives, as the speeding up of the natural process of digestion prevents the food’s breakdown and absorption, causing some bulimics to report passing bowel movements with chunks of food intact.⁴⁴

While it is most obvious to see this only as food emerging undigested, it is also possible to see another implication—not that food never turns to waste, but perhaps that the food, for the bulimic, always already is and begins as waste. For Rottenberg’s

⁴⁴ This information comes from written studies and personal narratives of the bulimic experience, rather than from medical studies, which the former often being more useful than the latter. As writes Paul Robinson in his book on the subject, *Severe and Enduring Eating Disorder (SEED): Management of Complex Presentations of Anorexia and Bulimia*, “There is a sharp difference of opinion between doctors and patients about the efficacy of laxative abuse as a way of preventing absorption. The former point to the efficiency of the small intestine’s absorptive power, and the lack of evidence for laxative-induced malabsorption, while patients say that they see chunks of undigested food in their stools. I suspect that the necessary research to settle this has yet to be done, because of the difficulty of interesting a grant giving body to fund a study and the reluctance of potential researchers to analyse large quantities of diarrhoeal stool in pursuit of an answer to the question!” Bulimia’s viscerality and “grossness” are part of what has left it further behind anorexia in understanding, both medically and publicly. (Chichester, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 25.

performers, the focus of their actions is the body's potential for labor. In *NoNoseKnows*, Rottenberg places Glamazon's "work" in an office setting to make it clear the viewer is to be looking at her body as a laboring body, at her production as labor, even if this is shown to an absurd end. Our intrigue is not due to the noodles—though appetizing as they might look at times—but due to the fact that Glamazon's body is able to produce them in the way that she does. She does not stop, however, satisfied when one plate is made; instead, the cycle continues. The Chinese laborer in the factory below her feet continues to turn the handle that turns the fan that blows the pollen that triggers the sneeze mechanism that creates the noodles that go onto the cart. The cycle only ends when it is time for Glamazon to clock out for the day, when she breaks the link by removing the flowers, and by sticking her nose—now at its longest—through a small circle in the wall, an act which pops the bubbles in the other rooms (fig. 11). The bubbles are broken, the link is broken, and the cycle is done—at least for the day. Glamazon leaves all the materials in the room for her to pick up again tomorrow, when she will presumably return to the office by way of her typical office commute, continuing another cycle. We do not know what happens when Glamazon's noodle cart becomes too full, but Rottenberg gives no inclination that rot is a part of the noodles' life-cycle. Her noodles are expressed as waste in the same way that her pearls are—as excess, unable to fulfill their intended capitalist destiny.

What is so truly interesting then about *NoNoseKnows* is that, although the food created by the process of Bunny Glamazon sneezing is not only possibly edible for humans but even maybe appetizing, it's never eaten. And while the noodles look appetizing in isolation, there is something so off-putting about seeing them in excess and abundance as

we do on the piled-up plates. Their appearance is also too reminiscent of the way in which they were formed – as waste, as detritus from a sneeze, long noodles taking the place of long strings of snot and mucus leaving from the nose and mouth. Rottenberg's focus on potentially perfectly edible yet wasted food shows an incredibly radical way of imagining the value of the producing body, despite its position in a capitalistic paradigm that only appreciates labors and the substances it produces through an evaluation of exchange and use values. *NoNoseKnows* is not only about labor, it is about waste, about producing waste, and about opening up dialogues about labor and reproduction. We are intrigued by Glamazon's character not because she feeds anyone with the food her body creates, but because she merely has the ability to produce, and to produce something that will never be used and was never meant to be. Using *NoNoseKnows* as a lens for looking at *Superstar*, then, presents new ways of representing and discussing bulimia, ones which center not on food and in relation a deprived body, but on waste and in relation to a fruitful body, even if that fruit may be unappetizing or even repulsive.

Thinking of bulimia as "failed anorexia" is inevitable if one only looks at bulimia through the lens of analysis and interpretation used for anorexia. Once freed from that paradigm, bulimia becomes much more multivalent. Food becomes akin to pollen, to laxative, to ipecac, to sand in a river oyster, to an irritant oyster skin in a factory oyster. In Haynes's film *Safe* (1995), Julianne Moore plays Carol White, a California housewife whose body begins to give way to an invisible "environmental illness." At multiple points in the film, White vomits suddenly and uncontrollably, her actions catalyzed by seemingly nothing. Though the driving force behind *Safe* is White trying to find the invisible catalyst

and in doing so, evade it, she is left unfulfilled by this search. Instead, once at Wrenwood, the New Age health colony/retreat where she settles at the end of the film, she is far from recovered. Interestingly, when tested for allergies, doctors are only able to find one allergy: milk, which she drinks almost religiously throughout the film, and that nonetheless, could not have caused the extremity of White's illness. White is set up to fail in her quest to find the source of her illness, and the revelation that White's only answer is a minor one, that she is lactose intolerant, allergic to the thing she believes to be key to her health, highlights the futility of her search. Haynes shows that it is not the irritant, but the illness that matters, not what goes into her body, but what happens within it and eventually comes out. It is perhaps the same for Karen Carpenter.

AUTOPRODUCTION, REPRODUCTION, AND THE POLITICS OF THE "LEAKY BODY"

Rottenberg's vision of labor presented in *NoNoseKnows* can be contrasted with the way reproductive processes, such as breastfeeding, are treated in the United States, (often relegated to private, hidden spaces), and with the vastly unequal policies toward maternal and paternal leave, which often expect women to take extended maternal leave, or even to quit their jobs instead of returning to work, the assumption being that having carried children, they are better suited to privately raising them. The other option for mothers returning to the workplace is to be stuck in an almost dystopic private space, allocated within the public sphere, such as in Mamava nursing suites, designed to make it look as though the chance for privacy is a luxury; in actuality, nursing mothers are being

relegated to and hidden in small metal lockers, more akin to Port-a-Potties than to any kind of luxury (fig. 12).

Caroline Gatrell, a researcher at University of Liverpool's Management School whose work centers around labor, family, and health, addresses this hiding in her 2008 book *Embodying Women's Work*. In it, she describes the maternal body as the "leaky reproductive body," and writes that it is this tendency to leak that may be why the pregnant and postpartum body are unwelcome in the workplace.⁴⁵ She quotes philosopher Elizabeth Grosz, who writes in her 1994 text *Volatile Bodies* that, "Women's corporeality is inscribed as a mode of seepage...The association of femininity with contagion and disorder, the undecidability of the limits of the female body (... in the case of pregnancy) leads to the social definition of women as liquid, irrational bodies and incites revulsion."⁴⁶

This revulsion, however, is matched with control that is socially enforced in the so-said "interest of the fetus." Writes Gatrell:

Once pregnant, women are under immediate pressure to conform to a particular set of obstetric and health guidelines, which are presented as "choices" but which are in practice hard to resist, and which require adherence to some fairly rigid, Taylorist-style standards of behaviour. However, the intensive nature of such pregnancy "work" is not accounted for because it is hidden behind discourses of good mothering and maternal duty which obfuscate the notion that forms of compliance, involving intense, embodied self-regulation, are "work."⁴⁷

The intense self-regulation and limiting of self-production, in terms of the hiding of the

⁴⁵ Caroline Gatrell, *Embodying Women's Work* (Berkshire, U.K.: McGraw-Hill Open University Press, 2008), 69.

⁴⁶ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 203.

⁴⁷ Gatrell, *Embodying Work*, 54.

“leaks,” are often obscured in conversations about labor, as they work to make the necessary sacrifice of messy bodily production in order to smoothly uphold sanitized ideas of labor, production, and work.

Rottenberg, however, makes reproduction, autoproduction, and public office work inseparable through Glamazon, the food-cum-waste producing office worker. though she is located in a private office, Glamazon’s very bodily production still occurs at a public office building, signaled by the presence of other rooms, even if her co-laborers are smoke-filled bubbles rather than other persons in suits. In the video’s opening journey, Glamazon rides through the city past a body of water filled with littered bottles and piles of abandoned trash. The only sound is the whirring of her mobility scooter’s motor. Glamazon’s commute is not arduous; she does not encounter any traffic, she experiences no delays as she might on public transit—two experiences often associated with commuting—but it is incredibly visceral—she is confronted with the smell of trash and the disturbance of its accompanying bugs, as well as the rumble of her scooter as she drives over brick sidewalks—another feeling often associated with commuting, though usually from the presence of other bodies in a packed subway car or the hazy air pollution of gridlocked traffic. Haynes illustrates the latter in *Safe*, as one of Carol White’s fits occurs after inhaling exhaust fumes from the car in front of her when returning home one day. Glamazon’s *plein air* journey on her mobility scooter places her at the mercy of her surroundings. A pedestrian who walks before Glamazon in one shot is seen wearing a surgical mask to protect herself from outside irritants, which may perhaps be a good idea for Glamazon, as well, as Zhuji, the city in which *NoNoseKnows* is filmed, is reported by the World Health Organization to be within

the top 200 most polluted cities in the world—its PM2.5, which measures concentration of particulates in the air, measuring over five times higher than that of Los Angeles, where Carol White collapsed (fig. 13a-d).⁴⁸

The viscosity of Rottenberg's journey is only compounded as she moves through the cramped office building's low ceiling, which Rottenberg intercuts with images of smoke-filled bubbles that the viewer impatiently waits to burst. The office journey is tied up with the body and with waste as much as it is the public and urban planning. Once at the office, her work is both public and private, regimented and completely and viscerally organic. It is notable that despite the other irritants she comes into contact with on her journey to her office—air pollution, the smell of trash, the smoke in the bubbles—she does not sneeze until she chooses to trigger her sneeze response with flowers. She maintains a type of control over her bodily production; however, once the process begins, she sneezes uncontrollably, her control over this process ending at the fact that she sits in front of the pollinic flowers she knows will irritate her. When and how she sneezes, however, is automatic.

In one sequence, Glamazon sneezes out multiple plates of noodles, one after another. Her last one is cut off in the middle, right before the “choo” of the onomatopoeic “achoo,” and the video cuts to a Chinese worker banging open a large oyster. The comparison between the oyster body and Glamazon's auto-producing body is apparent, as

⁴⁸ The Ambient Air Pollution Database, published by the World Health Organization, found Zhuji to be the world's 179th most polluted city, with an annual mean PM2.5 of 59 ug/m³ (micrograms per cube meter; 1 microgram is equal to 1x10⁻⁶ gram), and found Los Angeles to be the 2013th with an annual mean PM2.5 of 11 ug/m³.

is the difference between the work done by Bunny Glamazon and that done by the Chinese laborers. The difference in these sequences is that, as Rottenberg said, Glamazon is both boss and employee, her own factory. However, this difference does not exist only in *NoNoseKnows*; the contrast between the work of Glamazon and that of her Chinese counterparts also highlights that the ability to be one's own boss is often not allowed for women of color and physical laborers. I cannot help but notice that Bunny Glamazon sits alone in a small and contained office of her own, in direct contrast to the crowded pearl factory just below her feet. I would be more than remiss if I were to ignore that for many families, taking maternity leave is not an option, and that the awe mixed with revulsion with which "leaky productive body" is socially surrounded, is *always* revulsion for many women of color and lower-income women. Pregnant incarcerated women are given no privacy, forced to give birth in shackles. And there is a disgusting history of forcing enslaved black women in this country to give birth to their master's children, conceived through rape, and to wet-nurse those they did not themselves give birth to.

With this in mind, I do believe that Rottenberg attempts to rethink such restrictions on reproductive labor by lessening the difference between auto-production and bodily processes connected to reproduction, through its evocation of breastfeeding through Glamazon's body's ability to produce food, while also removing any sexual stimuli for this ability, as well as any of the awe, reverence, and revulsion generally socially written onto reproductive bodies. While it may seem that by giving her performers the ability to do seemingly superhuman feats, such as sneeze out noodles or produce milk with hair, she does not actually infuse the body with new powers, only distorts and exaggerates the form

of powers already present in the body. The body has the ability to create; in breastfeeding, it even has the ability to create a food that is complete—perhaps not in noodle form, but with all of the vitamins and nourishments needed, even adjusting when it senses the child it is feeding is sick.

The ability to reproduce is coded into the femme body, in such a manner that it is read as not only innate, but crucial to its existence and identity. I should note here that not all femme bodies belong to cis women, and not all child-rearing bodies are femme. Further, not all cis women are able to bear children. But the metanarrative that connects child-bearing and femininity is a ciscentric one that both assumes and perpetuates the dominant narrative of an innate and strict gender binary. In placing my analysis within this narrative, I am not supporting it—only acknowledging that to talk about ways in which bodies are dominantly coded, I have to accept that such social coding is almost always hegemonic and excludes those exceptional to the norm. When I conflate the femme body with the cis woman's body and the ability to produce, it is because to talk about the ideological impact of this conflation, I at times have to assume it. Cis women carry children, cells growing, almost out of nowhere as far as can be seen by the naked eye, as the only external evidence of the cellular multiplication occurring inside is the growing roundness of their bellies. It is a weight gain that comes from within, as opposed to from the outside from overeating, and that occurs because of the body's own production. The presumed innateness of their ability to reproduce is then socially extrapolated onto other forms of production and labor. Breastfeeding is assumed to be the best option for children, and is thus pushed on new mothers, even while public breastfeeding is banned or frowned upon in public spaces,

including some workplaces. It is important to note that, as a part of Glamazon being her own boss and laborer, she is also not subject to any consumer's whims or needs. She does not produce for anyone in particular. And when she leaves her office at the end of the day, the noodles sit there, waiting for her to return in the morning.

Though she uses food, the image of waste and the process through which it is made – in *NoNoseKnows*, a sneeze, in *Cheese*, milk comes from hair rather than breasts—also keeps the video from being essentializing, as well as avoids the classically essentialist argument of cis-women as bearers and keepers of life. This is exemplified in her exaggeration of feminine features, satirization of the act and “naturalness” of bodily production, and use of women of color and working women, categories often excluded from the public ideal of “mother.” Rottenberg plays with ideas of womanhood socially constructed around notions of essentialism – her feminine body, it would seem, is the body that is decidedly feminine, not just the body of cis women. Reproduction demands a very specific set of economic and biological circumstances. Auto-production as shown in Rottenberg's videos, however, is equal opportunity. By having her performers produce food—whether cherries, cheese, or noodles—Rottenberg is able to draw upon the arguments already associated with food and nourishment that her viewer will bring when viewing. In *NoNoseKnows*, because the food very explicitly is not marketed as food nor functions as food, she forces these arguments open to include waste. Not all bodies are capable of carrying babies, of producing breast milk, but all can shit and piss and sweat and sneeze and vomit.

This positioning of perfectly edible food as waste complicates the auto-producing body, when looking for value to the labor and production of such bodies—the catch being, of course, that it is not that the value we find is innate, but instead socially assigned. While it is easy to assign moral and political value to producing food for children or giving birth to future citizens, it is harder for us to place value onto things we know will only sit there, things that are explicitly already or slated to become waste. This is perhaps part of why Rottenberg uses a fetish performer in *NoNoseKnows*, the fetish community being perhaps the sphere of our public that most values that which we consider detritus, such as in urophilia (piss play) and coprophilia (scat play), and otherwise unmarketable, undesirable excess, such as seen in the appeal of Glamazon’s size.⁴⁹ As a performer, Glamazon performs body domination, using her size as her tool. It is a size that is considered by cultural standards to be too much, but by fetish standards to be a great asset (fig. 14a-b). In her bio, Glamazon talks about her size and the impact it had on her life. She says:

Life can be difficult for a 6th grader who is already six feet tall and wearing a size ten shoe. I towered over my fellow students and teachers alike. And to top it all off, my real name was Bunny Sue. Not only was I harassed because of my height but can you imagine what I went through being over six feet tall with a name like Bunny? It gave me a real appreciation for “A Boy Named Sue (fig. 14c).”⁵⁰

She is here, of course, referring to Johnny Cash’s 1969 song that features a boy named Sue by his absent father who, as a result of having to constantly defend himself against bullies, learns how to fight. When he finally meets his father, he finds out this was his plan all

⁴⁹ Rottenberg also uses fetish performers in *Cheese*, their fetish appeal in this case, being the length of their hair.

⁵⁰ Bunny Glamazon, “Bunny’s Bio,” Bunny Glamazon.

along. With no one to teach him to fight, it would have to come from himself, from his name.

Rottenberg may have been interested in hiring Sue, as she states in an interview with *The Art Newspaper* that it is ownership of the abnormal that draws her to her performers. She says:

I look for people who feel comfortable in their body and completely own it. I find some of them online, advertising their extraordinary bodies for hire. They take something that is not considered to be average, such as their height or body size, and turn it into a commodity. They isolate a part of themselves and offer it for rent. I'm interested in this and the question of ownership, empowerment and objectification. They own the means of production, which is their own body. This idea of renting part of yourself, being able to isolate that part, is fascinating.⁵¹

Fetish performers exemplify this ownership, as they take their “extraordinary bodies,” which leave them out of standard conversations about and exchanges of desire governed by bodily norms, and turn them into their own “means of production.”

“CLOSE TO YOU”: OVERDUBBING, OVERSINGING, AND THE BULIMIC THROAT

In one of *Superstar*'s first sequences, the opening sounds of “Close to You” begin to play, and as the soundtrack arrives to the part where Karen asks why birds suddenly appear, she coughs instead.

“Goddamn, I’m really flubbing it up today,” she says.⁵²

⁵¹ Mika Rottenberg, “Mika Rottenberg: Capitalism as you’ve never seen it before,” interview by Emily Sharpe, *The Art Newspaper* (Dec. 7, 2017).

⁵² Karen’s hesitancy to say the real f-word was documented. In 1979, Karen made a solo album while Richard was in a rehabilitation facility for his use of Quaaludes. Filled with more sensual ballads and references to sex, it was meant to be her departure from the squeaky clean image that The Carpenters had built for themselves. After Richard returned to L.A., he forbade Karen to release it. In 1983, she played the album for friends; the *New York Times Magazine* reports that the following conversation occurred when on the phone with them. ““Can I use the F-word?” Karen asked. [Producer of the album Phil] Ramone replied:

“Just do what I tell you—it’ll be great,” Richard responds.

“I just want it to be perfect.”

Barbie Karen begins singing, and the sound cuts back to “Close to You,” picking up where it had ended. The track comes to the audience by way of The Carpenters’ discography, not as a voice in the act of recording, but as a full track post-production. And with the editing process Richard would put their songs through, perfect it is indeed.

In this shot, Haynes sets up a dichotomy between a natural bodily function—a cough, which, like a sneeze, is caused only by a small irritation but can be much larger, and uncontrollable—and Karen’s technologically perfected voice. It is a voice made perfect not through intense editing of the voice itself, but through Richard’s use of overdubbing, a process in which multiple voice recordings are layered on top of each other, achieving the impossible, the inhuman. In “Close to You,” though it is presented in *Superstar* as though it is being sung within the studio, there are actually twelve vocal tracks dubbed over each other throughout the song. Karen’s voice harmonizes with Karen’s voice, presenting to the audience a wholeness and abundance that is impossible without the overdubbing process.

Overdubbing is present in most, if not all, of the Carpenters’ songs. It is an obsession that reportedly came from Richard, and was then imparted to Karen: while Karen participated in Richard’s production process, however, obsession with overdubbing’s technological perfection was mainly conveyed by Richard. In an interview recorded for the

‘You’re a grown woman. Say whatever you want.’ ‘It’s a \$(expletive\$) great album.’ She died 36 hours later.” (Rob Hoerburger, “Karen Carpenter’s Second Life,” *New York Times Magazine*, Oct. 6, 1996.)

NPR show *Fresh Air*, which aired on November 27, 2015, Richard describes his early childhood obsession with the technique to host Dave Davies:

Even as a little boy, of course, my ears were always attuned to melody and arrangements and music in general and records because Patti Page was overdubbing at the time, as well, say, with “My Eyes Wide Open,” “I’m Dreaming,” or “Tennessee Waltz.” But her harmonies were one voice per harmony, where Mary Ford’s were at least two for the same part, if not more. And see, as a kid, I heard the difference even then because it’s the overdubbed sound in addition to what - what’s being overdubbed that got to me. And of course, I had (laughter) no idea, along with just about the rest of the world, how it was done. I remember asking my mom, how does she do it? And - how does Mary Ford do it? And it reminded me when I later learned, the old joke about how do you get to Carnegie Hall? And she said how’s - I said how does she do it? Mom said - yeah, ‘cause Mom didn’t - she said, well, she practices... And I would go around the house trying to get my voice to - no kidding, I - so when I later found out how to do it...

(Davies: You thought that you could create two voices at the same time and sing in harmony with yourself?)

Well, you know, I was a little kid. It’s my mom, you know, the world’s authority on just about everything. So I said - years later, when I learned how it was done, *Karen and I took right to it because - well, obviously we’re, among other things, we were born to do that.*⁵³

What can it mean to be “born” to do something that is humanly impossible? The term “a born singer” is far from foreign to descriptions of Karen Carpenter. She has been named on numerous “Top Voices” lists, including *Rolling Stone*’s from 2008, which also quotes Elton John, who called her “one of the greatest voices of our lifetime,” and Madonna, who said that her own sound was “completely influenced by [Karen’s] harmonic sensibility.”⁵⁴

⁵³ Richard Carpenter, “Richard Carpenter Weighs in on How to Craft the Perfect Pop Song,” interview with Dave Davies, *Fresh Air*, NPR, podcast audio, Nov. 25, 2009, rebroadcast Nov. 27, 2015. Italics added for emphasis.

⁵⁴ “100 Greatest Singers of All Time,” *Rolling Stone*, Nov. 27, 2008 (print), chosen by a panel of 179 experts with an introduction by Jonathan Lethem. Republished online Dec. 2, 2010.

The same *Rolling Stone* list even states that her “white-bread image,” which was carefully crafted and controlled, “overshadowed her chocolate-and-cream alto voice,” which was not (at least, was not pre-production). Unlike the meticulous editing that Richard did on the duo’s tracks, Karen’s voice was very much in the state in which it was born. In a 1974 *Rolling Stone* profile of the band, writer Tom Nolan writes that Karen changed from the moment she started singing, from the insecure and naïve “gum-chewing comedienne or spoiled princess” she became in front of strangers to someone more natural, wiser. He writes:

When she really comes alive is when she sings; she changes completely. Joking or talking one moment, she becomes a different person the very next, as soon as she opens her mouth. Out comes that unique and wonderful voice, exactly as on record, expressing fascinating contrasts: chilling perfection with much warmth; youth with wisdom. Then she seems to be someone who knows something of life. She must be aware of the transformation she brings about, yet when asked to describe what happens at such a moment, all she will guardedly say is, “I don't know what you mean. I'm not thinking of anything in particular. I'm just...trying to get it right.”⁵⁵

Though she says she “tries to get it right,” her previous statement that she is “not thinking of anything in particular” may be more accurate. In fact, Karen only received formal training once in her life, from Richard’s college choir director Frank Pooler, from whom he also took lessons. While Richard’s lessons focused on his technique and ability, however, Karen’s only ever covered her top register, working on getting her to a three-octave range. Her low voice, which is what is heard most on Carpenters records, and her technique as a singer were never touched.

⁵⁵ Tom Nolan, “The Carpenters: Up from Downey,” *Rolling Stone*, July 4, 1974.

In his 2010 biography *Little Girl Blue: The Life of Karen Carpenter*, Randy L. Schmidt, a music educator and biographer writes that:

Unlike Richard, who practiced endlessly, Karen rarely, if ever, rehearsed between her lessons with Pooler...Pooler told Karen her voice was “arty” and “natural” and discouraged the idea of subjecting it to any sort of intense vocal training. “He said I should not train it...Something else you don’t think about is being able to sing in tune. Thank God I was born with it! It’s something I never thought about. When I sing, I don’t think about putting a pitch in a certain place, I just sing it.”⁵⁶

In this statement, unlike in the *Rolling Stone* interview, in which she answers after a pause, Karen states that singing is something she doesn’t think about. For Karen, singing was not a learned skill, but an innate talent. It was, for her, less a honed craft and more a form of automatic and natural production. Like a sneeze or a cough, she did not have to “think about it.” She just sang.

This trust in her natural ability sets Karen Carpenter apart from many of her contemporaries and successors, however. Journalist Bernhard Warner, in an article entitled “Why do stars like Adele keep losing their voice?,” explores the phenomenon of singing megastars going under the knife following complications to their vocal cords resulting from over strenuous singing practices, such as hemorrhages, polyps, cysts, nodules, or “holes” that leave a singer is unable to produce a certain note.⁵⁷ These complications can be gathered underneath the term “dysphonia,” which describes physical impairments to the vocal cords and vocal flaps that hinder vocal and singing ability. For this article, Warner spoke to Lisa Paglin and Marianna Brilla, former opera singers and current vocal coaches,

⁵⁶ Schmidt, *Little Girl Blue*, 30.

⁵⁷ Bernhard Warner, “Why do stars like Adele keep losing their voice?” *The Guardian*, Aug. 10, 2017.

whose teaching practice focuses on coaching singers out of the over strenuous techniques they have been trained to use. According to Paglin and Brilla, the risk for dysphonia can be almost eliminated with their training, as they train singers out of techniques that they say started when the practice of demanding extreme vocal intensity from performers by 19th century composers Verdi, Wagner, and Puccini leaked into the popular music sphere—in contemporary music, it is easy to see what Paglin and Brilla are talking about. As for Karen’s contemporaries, it’s hard to tell if only time has impacted their vocal cords or if their singing technique had as well. Cher received surgery from the same doctor, Steven Zeitels, as *The Guardian* article’s titular Adele, and Dionne Warwick, a close friend of Karen’s and a collaborator as well of Burt Bacharach and Hal Alpert, has had reported voice issues throughout the years.⁵⁸ They are just a few examples of the many.

What is interesting, however, is that Karen may have sustained—or have gone on to sustain if she had lived longer—injuries similar to those with strain-induced vocal dysphonia, though from a different cause. In a study done in 1989 by Drs. Murray D. Morrison and Brian D. Morris from the Division of Otolaryngology and Department of Psychiatry at the University of British Columbia on dysphonia symptoms in singers with bulimia, 8 out of the 11 singers studied reported symptoms brought on by vomiting, such as hoarseness, throat infections, sore throat and decreased pitch, and 9 out of the 11 exhibited physical signs of injury as a result of their bulimia, such as hemorrhage, mild to

⁵⁸ A commenter on The Burt Bacharach Discussion Forum, a website devoted to conversations about Burt Bacharach and people associated with him, even wrote that “There is probably no topic more discussed here than Dionne’s voice,” in response to another poster commenting on her vocal issues after the 1980s.

severe scarring, and polyps. Only 2 of the 11 had completely normal larynges.⁵⁹ Karen didn't abuse her voice through her singing technique: she never had formal training to affect her technique, only her range; she was known to be a "one-take wonder," getting the perfect track in only a few takes and never wearing out her voice in studio. Her voice is frequently described as "intimate;" for example, *Rolling Stone's* Top 100 Greatest Singers list described as her voice as "shockingly lush and almost impossibly intimate...a new kind of torch singing, built on understatement and tiny details of inflection that made even the sappiest songs sound like she was staring directly into your eyes."⁶⁰ But she did abuse her throat through her use of Ipecac and the vomiting it induced.⁶¹

There is, then, perhaps a double mechanism in bulimia and its function in Karen's life. Though Karen was a natural singer, Richard felt he and Karen were "born" to do more than sing, to be edited and overdubbed to perfection. Thus, while vocal coaches and music critics like Frank Pooler and Tom Nolan were enchanted by Karen's natural voice, and found it more than sufficient, Richard did not. In Nolan's, profile, Richard is described as a self-modeled man with a one-track mind:

His face reflects his sarcasm, talent, arrogance and pride; his mere good looks are a product of careful grooming. He is a *creature of his own design*...Richard never stops working. It is he who is the driving force

⁵⁹ Murray D. Morrison. and Brian D. Morris, "Dysphonia and Bulimia: Vomiting Laryngeal Injury," *Journal of Voice* 4.1 (1990), 79.

⁶⁰ An article by the now defunct *Voice Council Magazine* reports that "Karen was known to be a 'one take wonder.' That is, she would step into the recording studio, sing the song through once, and that was that. The single take would be so good, there was no need for another. Urban myth tells us that if Karen ever got to a third or fourth take, the producer would send her home stating, 'It isn't happening today...let's try again tomorrow'" (Daniel Kay, "What Singers Can Learn from Karen Carpenter," June 15, 2016); "100 Greatest Singers." Compare her "torch singing" to, say, Adele's, as discussed in Bernhard's *Guardian* article and the strain that occurs there instead of Karen's "understatement."

⁶¹ Karen's autopsy ascribed cause of death to "emetine cardiotoxicity as a consequence of anorexia nervosa" (Kornblum). Emetine is found in Ipecac.

behind the Carpenters. It is he who selects the material, arranges it, makes most important decisions and in general keeps the ball in the air. If he is not actively making music, he is thinking about it. His preoccupation extends from the most obvious attention to his own group's performance, through a general and encyclopedic awareness of current pop product, down to the *tiniest particular factors bearing on actual sound*...Music is almost his sole interest in life. He does not read books. He is not concerned with politics.⁶²

If Karen's approach to music was intimate and natural, Richard's is thought-through and heavily controlled. While this control, which extended to Karen, has been at the center of many of the anorexic narratives about Karen—including Haynes's in *Superstar*—it can also lead to a bulimic reading of Karen's actions. The double mechanism of Karen's bulimia is that it 1) allowed for a completely uncontrolled, unfettered production by Karen, that was otherwise denied her by Richard's editing process, and 2) fulfilled the physical impact of Richard reflexively "training" Karen's voice to do the unnatural through editing. Bulimia would produce the same effects of dysphonia as overtraining and oversinging would. Dysphonia in these cases occurs as singers push their voices to the humanly impossible; as Richard did the same in his editing process, it is possible that bulimia could have served to make real what he had figuratively and technologically done to Karen's voice.

It is even possible to see signs of the effects of bulimia in the examples of narratives about Karen I've discussed already, such as *Superstar* and Tom Nolan's profile for *Rolling Stone*. The cough in *Superstar*, which appears when the viewer expects music, could be a sign of bulimic wear on the voice. In addition, that cough is the only "natural" sound in

⁶² Nolan, "Up from Downey."

that shot, as opposed to the edited and overdubbed 12 harmonious voices in the actual track of “Close to You.” This “naturalness” is highlighted by the absurdity of hearing a Barbie cough—the track, at the very least, functions almost like background music, a concept we are more than familiar with. Nolan makes special note of Karen’s gum chewing and her sore throat, the latter a known side effect of bulimia, and the former a common method of covering the bad breath that comes with self-induced vomition.

This is not to say, of course, that these examples from constructed narratives about Karen’s life and health, created either after her death or after only brief contact with her, are definitive proof of Karen suffering vocal injuries from her bulimic tendencies. By her anorexia doctor, Steven Levenkron’s account, Karen’s Ipecac use occurred only after her laxative abuse had ended. In a radio interview soon after her death, he said:

Karen, after fighting bravely for a year in therapy, went home and apparently decided that she wouldn't lose any weight with Ipecac, but that she'd make sure she didn't gain any. I'm sure she thought this was a harmless thing she was doing, but in 60 days she had accidentally killed herself. It was a shocker for all of us who treated her.⁶³

For her, according to Levenkron, Ipecac came as a solution not to lose weight, but to keep her weight steady, so that she could fulfill her doctor’s diet suggestions and stay at a weight that would not concern her family and friends, while still maintaining a weight she deemed comfortable as well. Whether this is true or not, if Karen had actually used Ipecac before her treatment or only after, is still up for debate. After all, Levenkron himself states that he never thought to ask about Ipecac. In a *People Magazine* report on Ipecac abuse from 1985,

⁶³ Qtd. in Schmidt, *Little Girl Blue*, 285.

Levenkron told reporter Gioia Diliberto that he would often call and ask Karen “Are you losing weight? Are you taking laxatives?” to which she would say, “No.” “Ipecac was something that never occurred to me to ask her about.” Levenkron is not an entirely trustworthy source either; his approach to treating anorexia, in which he believes the patient must become wholly dependent on him before they are able to craft an identity independent of anorexia, blurs the lines between the psychiatrist and patient in a perhaps uncomfortable way.⁶⁴ But whichever the way the facts lean, it is fair, at least, to propose a new narrative from them. Narratives of Karen’s life, including Haynes’s *Superstar*, approach her disorder with a very specific image of anorexia in mind. Even her doctor, Steven Levenkron, approached her anorexia with a narrative already shaping his treatment of her. My mission is not to get closer to the truth of Karen’s motivations, but merely to offer a different narrative, and to ask what that narrative can allow in terms of achieving an alternate understanding of Karen’s life and illness.

⁶⁴ This approach is first outlined in his 1982 book *Treating and Overcoming Anorexia Nervosa*, and is continued in later books such as *Anatomy of Anorexia* in 2001. In addition, in a bizarre “book” self-published in 2017 but maintained online only on archive.org, Dr. Levenkron’s daughter, Gabrielle Levenkron, states, “My father is a very bad man...To Dad, I hope you rot in prison until you die. Karen Carpenter was killed by an over-the-counter drug that was given to her by my father Steven Levenkron.” The title of the book is indeed *How My Father Steven Levenkron Killed Karen Carpenter*. Whether Gabrielle Levenkron is reliable, however, is even more debatable than her father. Her other books include *Princess Diana Was the Roman Goddess Libertas on Statue of Liberty and Sacrificed to Satan*, and a book called *Neo-Islam and the End of Paleo-Islam: End of Terrorism as We Know It*, which was written with a partner, Patrick Leonardo, whose bio in his Amazon author page says, “Grand Wizard of Astoria-Flushing NYC Masonic Lodge. If you want to be rich and successful, arrange a meeting with him, sell your soul, get everything in this world free of charge lifetime guaranteed! I also work as a Bank Accountant,” and whose other titles include *Random Ramblings of a Troubled Mind: How to Become a False Prophet, a Faux-Philosopher* and *Patrick Leonardo: A Prophet? A Visionary?*

MARX AND MATERIAL

I understand it may seem strange to have spoken so much about labor without addressing Marx. And indeed, Marx is often the route writers take when writing about Rottenberg. Her language—factory and worker, boss and employee, means of production—begs such an interpretation. However, in the same breath, she tends to discourage a purely Marxian reading of her work. In *The Art Newspaper*, she says of *NoNoseKnows*:

[I]t is labour you don't see. I'm interested in exposing that, making it visible.

But I also love movement and the magic of making stuff as an artist. You could put a Marxist, feminist read on it, which is something I'm definitely interested in, but I think of it on more of an abstract or visual level without attaching an ideology to it. It is about many things... saying what it is about kills nuance and flattens it. Like life, it's sometimes this and sometimes that...⁶⁵

Similarly, in *Border Crossings*, she says:

The whole body of work started when I was reading Marx. I was fascinated by the connection between value and labour and time. And I am a feminist, so that reading is not completely off. But I feel my responsibility is to make the best art piece I can and not necessarily make a political statement. I have to say that my fascination with Marx came from the way he would describe a person making something. There was this whole description about weaving, and what attracted me was the complete self-absorption involved in that making. It was a poetic, beautiful and abstract moment.⁶⁶

Again, in an interview with Ossian Ward for Deutsche Bank's *db artmag* about her video *Dough*, she states, "I suppose it really was based, somewhat literally on Marx's theory of

⁶⁵ Rottenberg, "Capitalism."

⁶⁶ Rottenberg, "Fetishizing."

labor and value, but as more of a joke about surplus and product. It's also this general idea of how much material there is in the world, of having an excess of something."⁶⁷

Though an artist's statements must be taken with a grain of salt, Rottenberg's work does demand an interpretation that considers more than Marx, or at least takes Marxian analysis as a tool only and not an all-encompassing framework. Indeed, a *New York Magazine* profile on the art world's "Young Masters" describes Rottenberg as "post-Marxis[t]," and a recent *Brooklyn Rail* review of her 2018 self-titled solo show at the Bass Museum of Art by Emily Watlington begins:

Readings of Mika Rottenberg's work nearly always herald it as Marxist (or at least anti-capitalist) critique. It's undeniable that her works address issue of labor, and that such a topic is imperative. But such readings of Rottenberg's work are too simplistic: taking on factory work does not a Marxist critique make, but moreover, such readings overlook her works' strongest points.⁶⁸

The points that a purely Marxian reading misses in Rottenberg are the forms of production that stand outside of commerce, the labor that happens without market intervention, but purely because the body chooses to labor, but not to any ends of use or exchange value. While there is nothing more capitalist than excess that goes to waste, perhaps there is nothing more outside of capitalism—or truly outside of any economic system—than waste that begins and ends as waste, waste created not as byproduct, but as the main event. Consider Glamazon's form of waste in *NoNoseKnows*: when she sneezes, she does not just

⁶⁷ Mika Rottenberg, "The Body Factory," interview with Ossian Ward, *db artmag* 38, Deutsche Bank, Oct. 4, 2006 – Nov. 3, 2006.

⁶⁸ Rachel Wolff, "Young Masters" *New York Magazine*, Oct. 7, 2007, and Emily Watlington, "Mika Rottenberg," The Bass Museum review, *Brooklyn Review*, Feb. 7, 2018.

sneeze mucus, or any other waste we are accustomed to seeing and discarding. Instead, she sneezes noodles that are not only fully cooked, but are fully plated. They are ready to be sold and delivered; they await only a waiter to load them onto trays or wrists and serve them to paying customers. However, nothing is done with them. Glamazon puts them on a cart, layers them on top of each other to create a pile of dizzying, even nauseating excess, and then leaves them when she proverbially clocks out at the end of the day. Like in her interviews, Rottenberg infers Marx and the market here. But, again like in her interviews, she then quickly turns away from them. We are meant to think of Marx, but we are also meant to think beyond him. Further, while Rottenberg uses pearls to beg a comparison in terms of making—both the noodles and the pearls are spawned from irritation—they also show what happens when waste is commoditized and marketed. Unlike Glamazon’s noodles that are all unceremoniously dumped onto the same cart, the pearls are deftly sorted by the Chinese workers into the sellable and the rejects. They also do not appear in their final form—although the pearl itself is, of course, complete, they await placement into jewelry settings.

In the article “Parallel Logic” for the May 2015 issue of *Modern Painters*, Thea Ballard writes:

Describing the arc of her video output, Rottenberg turns to spatial metaphors. This most recent work in progress, she says, “has the overall structure of parallels or mirroring: between the buildings and the oysters, or the pearls and Bunny’s allergy. The pieces always have a basic shape, but in an abstract way. Some have horizontal structure, like *Tropical Breeze*, where they are driving a truck and it’s about these linear lanes. Some are circular, like *Cheese*. Some are vertical. The last one, *Bowls Balls Souls Holes*, was kind of a solar system, based on stars and magnetic fields and electrons and all of that stuff.” As she runs through these narrative shapes,

she delineates them with her hands, as if the information can really be communicated only through gesture, not words. For Rottenberg, spatiality and narrative are, in many ways, inextricable. Returning to the work at hand, she posits, “The actual structure of the entire piece is like a weird building that has these different compartments or ideas that buzz around each other. In a romantic novel, the course of events is motivated by emotion, whereas in my work, it’s motivated by material behavior.”⁶⁹

While there are undoubtedly parallels between the structures of the oysters and Glamazon, there is also a place at which the metaphor stops. The oysters’ process is circular in the way in which its pearls are formed—an oyster’s skin is put into another oyster, who is then left in the water to culture, and then emerges back into its place on the table to be harvested and utilized in prepping a young oyster for pearl culturing. Similarly, Glamazon’s process is literally circular—like the pearls are also literally round—as the pulley system in Glamazon’s office creates a route between her office, her body, and the pearl factory. But the parallelism of the structures falls apart when one realizes that the pearls will travel outside the factory, breaking their circle, while Glamazon’s waste product, the noodles, will never leave.⁷⁰

Glamazon’s labor is process-centered rather than product-centered, and her waste is thus also imaged through the process of waste rather than its product—the sneeze is more important than the noodles, even if the pearl is more important than the hidden process of its formation. Rottenberg, through Glamazon, allows us to look at material over market, and to look at material in a very specific way, not in a Marxian analysis of the material

⁶⁹ Thea Ballard, “Parallel Logic,” *Modern Painters* (May 2015), 68.

⁷⁰ It is also important to consider that we do, however, see Glamazon leave the building, but that even this is circular. She goes to the office, when she leaves, she returns home, and when she wakes up, she will return again to the office. We don’t, however, ever see the Chinese workers leaving their factory, which is another important distinction to make as we consider the racial implications in *NoNoseKnows*.

impacts of the economy on the body or the ways in which the body materially exists within the economy, but simply at the body as physical, as material, and as auto-productive: it is the body's materiality bursting outward, quite literally, in the form of waste production.⁷¹

This material reading is crucial to being able to read bulimia separately from narratives about anorexia. A reading that only considers cultural pressures and influences—the pressure to be thin, the pressure to be the perfect image, the response to a bombardment of images—will only ever succeed in seeing bulimia as a failed attempt at anorexia, with similar aims, but worse results. Bulimia is, of course, not clean; it often does not achieve the same kind of weight loss that anorexia does, and it disturbs the image—puffy cheeks, red eyes, eroded teeth. A material process-based reading, however, will not see these things as failures. Anorexia disavows the body's internal processes as they move them outward: menstruation stops, circulation slows, with nothing to digest, the body's digestion slows. Externally, hair grows into a little peach fuzz covering the surface, fat deposits wither until the anorexic looks almost like all surface with minimal internal structure—only “skin and bones.” It's easy to see why Deleuze and Guattari consider the anorexic as attempting to achieve a Body without Organs. Conversely, bulimia brings the inside out, it makes visible the body's internal processes. Things we usually do not consider appropriate to be shared become public—vomiting, defecating, with laxative and Ipecac use accelerating the two.⁷²

⁷¹ A good example of a structural reading of waste would be *The History of Shit* by Dominique Laporte.

⁷² It should be noted that I do not mean to imply that moving to a process-based reading of eating disorders completely precludes a Marxian reading. There is a reason that eating disorders are often considered wealthy diseases—bulimics can spend upwards of \$100 a day on binge food, and this economic waste is indeed part of why their private processes become public. It is not only the forcing outward of waste from

NoNoseKnows helps us reach this material reading. Rottenberg's video demands that we find value in that which we consider too much, the surplus that we want to turn to waste, and in doing so, find value in the processes inherent in each of our bodies.

HAYNES'S VALLEY OF THE DOLLS

A closer look at Haynes's Barbies assists us well in a material reading of his portrayal of Karen's bulimia. To limit interpretation to a reading of Barbie as a cultural image and artifact is to stop analysis of Haynes's dolls at a "skin-deep" level, so to speak, and to miss the intricacies of his process of working with the dolls—which quite literally broke the surface as he mutilated them—and the other implications of dolls outside of the body-image narrative. Thinking of this narrative alone ignores what dolls are first used for: playacting, due to their ability to be imagined as any number of individuals—a girl's doll can be herself, her child, her mother, her best friend, or even a superstar like Karen Carpenter. Dolls have a history of being used to playact in therapy; one can almost image Karen in therapy with Levenkron, using Barbies to act out her life history and disorder. But the corniness of the dialogue in *Superstar* (an oft cited example in literature on *Superstar* is when Richard, in response to his mother's suggestion that the duo "do something

the body, but also the forcing of bulimics (and anorexics!) into public care. It does not help that trying to throw up in a public bathroom always leaves witnesses, or that one—like Karen—can never totally dispose of the evidence of her disorder (leaving Ex-Lax boxes, Ipecac bottles, chunks of food in toilets). Take, for example, the episode *The Switch* from the nineties television series *Seinfeld*. In one of the episode's subplots, George, a self-described "Lord of the Idiots" played by Jason Alexander, suspects his girlfriend Nina, a model played by Charlotte Lewis, might be bulimic because she often "freshens up" in the bathroom after eating large meals. To check, he enlists the help of his friends, Jerry, Kramer, and Elaine, and Kramer's mother, who is a bathroom matron, to find out the truth. Nina's health becomes public concern, as her right to privacy is forfeited by her publicly exercising her disorder. George's concern, however, isn't for her wellbeing, but for the money he spends on her meals. He says, "Elaine, of course I'm concerned. I'm payin' for those meals. It's like throwing money down the toilet."

charitable with [their] money,” says hokily, “That’s a great suggestion, Mom—and its *very* in keeping with our image), the melodrama of Karen’s disorder, and the grandeur of the Carpenters’ success more readily evoke a child playing make-believe with their dolls. In the film’s earnestness and almost unreal images of success, it is easy for the viewer to imagine a child acting out the story of Karen Carpenter with their dolls, or even to imagine a young Karen herself acting out her own dreams of stardom, even as they go—in this vision—almost over-the-top wrong. This latter situation raises an important question, especially as it implies Karen choosing a tragic future for herself: Can a young girl imagine stardom without also imagining downfall?⁷³

In her essay for *Camera Obscura*’s 2004 issue on Todd Haynes, entitled “The Incredible Shrinking Star: Todd Haynes and the Case History of Karen Carpenter,” film scholar Mary Desjardins writes that Haynes’s use of Barbies and other surrogate bodies is indicative of the struggle in representing an anorexic body. She writes, “Another body must substitute for Karen’s anorexic body, whether it is the concentration camp victim or the Barbie body in its shiny plastic carapace.”⁷⁴ While this may be true, Haynes does not leave Barbie just as a “shiny plastic carapace.” Instead, he mutilates his dolls, burning them,

⁷³ I can’t help here but think of the following passage from Chris Kraus’s (in)famous book from 1997, *I Love Dick*: “Let a girl choose death—Janis Joplin, Simone Weil—and death becomes her definition, the outcome of her ‘problems.’ To be female still means being trapped within the purely psychological. No matter how dispassionate or large a vision of the world a woman formulates, whenever it includes her own experience and emotion, the telescope’s turned back on her. Because emotion’s just so terrifying the world refuses to believe it can be pursued as discipline, as form. Dear Dick, I want to make the world more interesting than my problems. Therefore, I have to make my problems social” (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 1996).

⁷⁴ Mary Desjardins. “The Incredible Shrinking Star: Todd Haynes and the Case History of Karen Carpenter.” *Camera Obscura* 19.3-57 (2004): 48.

cutting them, painting them, and coating them in make-up until they resemble only ghastly shadows of the perfect dolls they once were. There is, in this, a certain liberatory act for the Barbies. Often spoken of only in terms of their image, they are able to regain physicality; perhaps this is also what the bulimic strives for.

In the essay “Pig bodies and vegetative states: Diagnosing the symptoms of a culture of excess,” Jennifer Parker-Starbuck explores Terri Schiavo’s story and her ability to be a “wasting, vegetative body – alive but in a process of decay, wasting but still already rendered waste,” which she identifies as Schiavo’s goal in her bulimia.⁷⁵ She writes:

Her husband, after trying experimental treatment to be faithful to his wife’s return to consciousness understood a different faithfulness, a faithfulness to her story, to her body – to have fidelity to this event, Terri’s encounter with bulimia, Michael Schiavo could not wait for her inevitable natural death...Perhaps for Terri Schiavo to emerge as subject, her husband had no recourse but to have her feeding tube removed.

The feeding tube is an invasive object so at odds with an encounter with bulimia, the object at the center of the heated battle between the husband and the parents, and this is where fidelity breaks down. The imperative of the event then, is a sustained faithfulness to this encounter with bulimia, something her parents could not understand. Perhaps this was an encounter that demanded total fidelity to it in order to see through the squalor and find a truth in love.⁷⁶

This offers a bleak image of recovery, and indeed, in attempting to allow agency to remain in the hands of the bulimic, goes too far, removing any semblance of dependency or servitude to the disorder, which generally exists in treatment purposes, separate from the patient. But Parker-Starbuck does offer an important point: bulimia may be a form of

⁷⁵ Jennifer Parker-Starbuck. “Pig Bodies and Vegetative States: Diagnosing the Symptoms of a Culture of Excess.” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 18.2 (2008): 134.

⁷⁶ Parker-Starbuck, “Pig Bodies,” 143.

becoming-subject, and its act of producing waste may also be a form of subject-formation. While it is undoubtedly dangerous to think of eating disorders purely as a form of self-expression and subjectivation, as that may be used as evidence against the necessity of treatment, as well as would grossly overlook societal pressures that are part of the motivation for eating disorders, it is also dangerous to allow the story of a dead woman to be told only through the eyes and mouths of others. This is perhaps what makes the dolls that Haynes uses so important—as opposed to an actor, the dolls are unable to express Karen’s story in a specific way through body language, facial expression, and gesture. What we are instead left with are the purposefully overly campy tones of the voice actors being played through the motionless smiles of the various dolls of *Superstar*. Also unlike with actors, Haynes was able to mutilate these dolls as he saw necessary (fig. 15a-c). While the argument that Barbie is used because of her image and the body anxiety it has provoked in women over the years remains fit, it is not enough to look at Barbie only as her image. It does not actually seem that Haynes was making the argument that Karen wanted to be more like Barbie, an argument we often see in discussing anorexia—the anorexic denies herself body and food in order to become smaller, more plastic, less human. Instead, Haynes’s Barbie almost wants to become more like Karen. In a 1988 interview with the now defunct *Graffiti* magazine, Haynes says:

For certain shots we would just put an arm on a stick or something. We did whatever sick thing we could think of. In order to make the parents look older, we tried to paint their faces with enamels. But I hadn’t worked a lot with plastics. I’m sure there are paints that don’t conflict or whatever with plastic, but the enamel reacted in a strange way. It came out looking pretty weird. As for Karen, well, the Barbie doll is very skinny, and I found a particularly skinny one for the later scenes. But all the faces are very full,

with round cheeks. So I tried carving them down, but it made these huge sort of gashes in her face. So we ended up using pancake make-up to fill in the gashes, and it created a very kind of *otherworldly* effect.⁷⁷

The otherworldly effect is perhaps the one in which the doll becomes physical. By painting the dolls with enamel, creating a physical reaction, Haynes has offered a very material reality to the doll—its reaction signals that it has begun to have its own bodily processes. Like a bulimic after purging, Barbie’s face is messy, it is bloated, disfigured. Compare this physicality to that of Cynthia Gibbs, who played Karen in the 1989 TV movie. Davis writes that the thinness of Gibb’s body is shown only through two shots: one in which she pinches at her “tight and toned stomach” and one in which her ribcage is visible (fig. 16a). Otherwise, the viewer is dependent upon the reactions of her co-stars to tell us that we are to be shocked at Gibbs’ body, which is, in fact, not that shockingly thin—certainly not enough to elicit the kind of worry that the film is supposed to convey—as actually bringing Gibbs to that point would have been dangerous (16a-d).⁷⁸ Davis writes that dolls allow Haynes to “move from ‘normal’ Karen to anorexic Karen without harming actors.”⁷⁹ However, I do not believe this is the only effect, nor even the main advantage to using dolls.

Dolls allow Haynes to approach the inhuman. While the body of the anorexic does appear this way, almost alien in the exaggeration of now disproportionately large head and joints, bulimics often do not achieve this image, their weight being, on average, closer to a

⁷⁷ M. Dickie, “*Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*,” *Graffiti*, December 1988.

⁷⁸ Davis, *Superstar*, 91.

⁷⁹ Davis, *Superstar*, 93.

healthy weight than that of anorexics'. What is inhuman—or superhuman, perhaps—about the bulimic is not how the body looks but what it does. The bulimic “digests,” produces and expels waste at a superhuman rate. She is able to eat an inhumanly large amount of food, while still living on an inhumanly low amount of nutrients. Food in a bulimic does not follow a typical digestive process; instead it races, liquefies, and boomerangs through—and out of—the body. Haynes is able to mutilate his dolls, to draw attention to the physicality of the doll and the processes it goes through. His Barbie thus ceases to be of a stable form, the ubiquitous doll we see all over, each one the same as the last. It is, instead, a formally unique object, a Barbie marked with processes—the processes of burning, of gouging, of a seeming allergic reaction to enamel. In an essay on plastic in *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes writes:

So, more than a substance, plastic is the very idea of its infinite transformation; as its everyday name indicates, it is ubiquity made visible. And it is this, in fact, which makes it a miraculous substance: a miracle is always a sudden transformation of nature. Plastic remains impregnated throughout with this wonder: it is less a thing than the trace of a movement.⁸⁰

In contrast, however, Christine Malabou, whose work on Hegel focuses on his otherwise neglected concept of plasticity, writes:

[T]he adjective “plastic,” if it is certainly opposed to “rigid,” “fixed,” and “ossified,” is not to be confused with “polymorphous.” Things that are plastic preserve their shape, as does the marble in a statue: once given a configuration, it is unable to recover its initial form. “Plastic,” thus, designates those things that yield themselves to being formed while *resisting* deformation. From this it is possible to understand a further

⁸⁰ Roland Barthes, “Plastic,” *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Levers (New York: Noonday Press, 1972): 97.

“extension” of this term into the terrain of histology, for which “plasticity” represents the ability of tissue to reform itself after a lesion.⁸¹

The plastic material of the Barbie reminds us of infinite potential, how Karen’s fans often lamentingly speak of her potential unrealized due to her untimely death and the disorder that caused it, while the form of the Barbie reminds us of the permanence of physicality—in burning and painting the Barbie, Haynes makes permanent marks. He is unable to get to anything pre-Barbie in his changes, and even when whittling, he is never able to make a smaller Barbie, or a skinnier Barbie (as the inside of a Barbie is hollow and thus only allows so much whittling before it is punctured), but only a visibly changed Barbie, one with a visible process now stuck in its form. It is never “Less-Barbie” but “More-Barbie,” Barbie and more, Barbie-plus.

A starved body looks to us like the absence of a process, as we are only able to think of the lack of eating and digestion that happens. Culturally anorexia is the “face” of eating disorders. If anorexia is the face, then, perhaps bulimia is the digestive tract and bowels behind it. To change our body, there is always consequence, and always output. The anorexic keeps that inside; the processes of weight loss happen internally as the body begins to eat itself, and we see the effects on the outside, on the surface. While the anorexic’s inners become more visible to us—gaunt cheeks, protruding ribs and hips, bones and joints appearing more near the surface than they should be—the bulimic actually shows the body’s output by the waste she produces. Anorexia slows down or denies bodily

⁸¹ Christine Malabou, “The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality, Dialectic,” *Hypatia* 15.4 (Fall 2000): 204.

processes, while bulimia speeds them up or exaggerates them. There is a similarity here to *Superstar* itself, in its physical form. In the film's banning, audiences were forced to propagate the film on their own terms. Because of this, however, VHS tapes were replicated far beyond their built limits, and each original tape produced exponentially. The tape was sped up, as the oysters were sped up, as Karen's weight loss and digestion were sped up. But despite the speeding up of these processes, the processes still remained within the bodies' own control: once digesting laxatives, Karen had no control over the process it would kick off. Once the pearl farmers inserted irritants into oysters, they had no control over the pearl's formation. Once Mika started her fan, she had no control over her body's sneeze response. And once a tape was copied, the original tape owner had no control over the new copy's own propagation and the degradation it would cause. Control always gives way to natural physicality. The bulimic's processes remain natural, even if they are provoked or accelerated.

Chapter 3: Methodologies in Use

GOING SOLO AND GOING TOGETHER: LABORS OF LOVE

In order to have any conversation about labor with regard to Karen Carpenter, it is imperative that we discuss what the nature of Karen's labor was. As mentioned in the section "'Close to You': Overdubbing, oversinging, and the bulimic throat," Karen was deeply alienated from her singing, as Richard was the sibling with ultimate creative control over the band. Richard was controlling, was obsessed with his vision of the duo and of himself. Nowhere, perhaps, was this more apparent than in Richard's response to Karen's solo album, recorded during Richard's time spent in rehab for his addiction to Quaaludes. In *Little Girl Blue*, Schmidt writes that for Karen, Richard's extended absence into the six-week treatment program was the perfect chance to try building a name for herself as an artist, rather than as just one part of the Carpenters duo, something she had been desiring for a while. Upon hearing her plans, however, Richard was furious. Family friend Evelyn Wallace recalls to Schmidt that Richard was "madder than hell. He did *not* want her to go to New York and record on her own. I think that he realized that Karen could sell more records than he could."⁸² Richard took it even further, saying to his sister, "What the hell are you talking about? Going and doing a solo album?! Why don't *you* go and check into something like this that is meant for anorexics?"⁸³ Richard received treatment in 1979, but Karen did not receive her anorexic-specific treatment until 1982. Though Richard brought

⁸² Schmidt, *Little Girl Blue*, 189.

⁸³ Ibid.

it up in 1979, it is clear his threat of treatment for Karen was not out of care, but out of resentment and effort to keep her from being able to record a solo album.

Karen, however, persevered, and teamed up with producer Phil Ramone to make her solo album in 1979. She was joined by a number of other stars, including Paul Simon, Rod Temperton, and the members of Billy Joel's band. Unlike her process with Richard, Karen was able to enact agency in the studio while recording with Phil, and she ultimately had creative control. In the studio, people were there for *her*; her friend Frenda Franklin said that the men she worked with "treated her like an equal in the studio, and she loved the process. She had the best time!"⁸⁴ Karen's close friend and Ramone's girlfriend at the time (later wife) Karen Ichiuji added that stars such as Billy Joel and Paul Simon "treated her like a major mega artist...It was her environment, and everyone was there to support her, and she absolutely loved it."⁸⁵ Recording her solo album made it clear to Karen that she was a star, and more importantly, one in her own right.

However, Richard felt threatened by this revelation, and thus banded together with A&M to keep the record from being released. Franklin told Schmidt that Richard told Karen it was "*shit*," adding:

All Karen ever wanted was his approval. It could have turned everything in her life around, but it wasn't there. What's sad is that he has to live with that, and I don't think it even fazes him...What does it take to just be kind? They could see she was melting away like a snowman in front of their faces, but they couldn't do it. It was brutal.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Ibid, 201.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 203.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 212.

Franklin possibly said that Richard's approval "would have turned everything in her life around" because of the control it would have allowed her; *NY Times Magazine* writer Rob Hoerburger wrote in "Karen Carpenter's Second Life," "If anorexia has classically been defined as a young woman's struggle for control, then Karen was a prime candidate, for the two things she valued most in the world—her voice and her mother's love—were exclusively the property of Richard. At least she would control the size of her own body."⁸⁷ Franklin's statement could support the anorexic narrative of control that Hoerburger, Haynes, and others put forth in discussing Karen—this is especially true when considering her reaction to the album's promotional shoot. Schmidt writes:

When the photo proofs were delivered, Karen was amazed by the transformation; she looked sexy and provocative. She was ecstatic when she showed them to Itchie.⁸⁸ "Itch, will you *look* at these?" she said, her eyes wide and mouth open in astonishment.

"Yeah, so how do you feel about them?" Itchie asked.

"I look *pretty*," Karen said in astonishment. "I actually look pretty."

"But Kace, you've always looked pretty," she was assured.⁸⁹

An argument can certainly be made here that returning control to Karen through her agency over her album would have lessened certain aspects of her eating disorder, the beginnings of which can be seen here in Karen's newfound confidence, but this does not preclude an explanation for Karen's eating disorder that goes beyond only a traditional narrative of control, replacing the desire for active, calculated control with desire for the body to have

⁸⁷ Hoerburger, "Second Life."

⁸⁸ Karen's nickname for Karen Ichijji, used as a way to differentiate between the two Karens.

⁸⁹ Schmidt, *Little Girl Blue*, 210. Kace was a nickname Ichijji used for Karen.

control. Validating her control would moreover have validated her production; the control returned to her through the process of creating a solo album was very specifically control over the bodily process of her voice, alienated from her as Hoerburger said. For Karen, a loss of control of her voice was inherently the same as an alienation from her economic labor and her bodily processes, as for her they were closely intertwined. It is interesting in context of this to consider Richard's reaction to the solo album, very specifically that he told her it was *shit*. Richard's choice of word, though colloquially fitting, becomes especially poignant in thinking about Richard's intimate knowledge of Karen's bowel movements evidenced by the empty laxative boxes that orbited around her, and when considering that referring to this album as the product of a natural process may have actually been quite appropriate. Karen could have had everything in her life "turned around" by a return to a state in which her natural processes were once again natural, close to her body, identity and agency, rather than alienated into Richard's control.

Karen's life, however, wasn't turned around, and her control and return to a more organic form of production were both short-lived. In the end, A&M sided with Richard. Though Herb Alpert apparently still liked the album, even if he did not love it, he and Jerry Moss, A&M's other co-founder, acted in the interest in the Carpenters, the group, rather than the Carpenters, the individuals.⁹⁰ Ramone said, "Richard decided that he wanted to get going with the Carpenters again—and the label got behind him on that. I think we were in a situation where people did not want to break up this team."⁹¹ The Carpenters, the group,

⁹⁰ Hoerburger, "Second Life."

⁹¹ Schmidt, *Little Girl Blue*, 211.

after all, was more Richard than it was two equal individuals. In spite of this, however, Olivia Newton-John, a close friend of Karen's who was often in the studio with her said to Schmidt, "I remember Richard said, 'You've stolen the Carpenters sound.' That was kind of ironic because she *was* the sound of the Carpenters. Her *voice* was 'the Carpenters.'"⁹²

Perhaps because he knew this, Richard was controlling, and Haynes portrays this in *Superstar* as often as he can, showing Richard's critical treatment of Karen in the studio—

Richard: Just do what I tell you and you'll be great.

—in restaurants—

Richard: (sliding plate of meat to Karen): Eat this. I just want to *see* you take a bite. Come on, Karen—

Karen: I don't want to!—Just—stop it--!

Richard: Why? Why can't you take just even *one bite*?

—at performances—

Richard: (after finding Karen passed out in her dressing room with empty laxative boxes nearby) What're you trying to do, ruin *both* our careers?! Jeez...Now get up, you drink some coffee. We got fifteen minutes! Jeez and re-do your makeup—You're a *mess*!

—in their shared apartment—

Richard: (after finding more laxatives) Oh you LIAR!...You know you're just *ruining* us!...You little BITCH!

—and back in the studio—

Richard: We have *obligations*, we have contracts that we have to fulfill. We are still catching up from the setback that you had six years ago! Karen, people are talking about you. Your fans are *worried*. I can hear them gasping

⁹² Ibid, 212.

when you walk onstage. Now what the hell are we supposed to do about that?!

Richard enacts control over Karen's food intake, health, singing and career, and though his pleas for her to eat may seem as if they can read as care, Haynes positions them as more selfish than considerate, concerned more with audience reactions to Karen's shrinking body than with her body itself.

While Haynes positions Richard as the main controlling force in Karen's life, other narratives, including Schmidt's *Little Girl Blue*, tend to place more blame on Karen's mother Agnes. This is not surprising as the mother-daughter relationship is prevailingly thought of to be important in psychiatric literature on anorexia. For example, in an article published in 2012 in the journal *Trends in Psychiatry and Psychotherapy* entitled "Psychological characteristics of mothers of patients with anorexia nervosa: implications for treatment and prognosis," psychologists and psychiatrists Lia Keuchguerian Silveira Campos, Anna Beatriz Ribeiro Ferreira Sampaio, Celso Garcia Junior, Ronis Magdaleno Junior, Maria Marta de Magalhães Battistoni, and Egberto Ribeiro Turato write that, "The psychic dynamic of AN [anorexia nervosa] is essentially feminine; its core elements are eating, the body, sexuality and the mother-daughter relationship."⁹³ This statement, though set forth by the authors with an air of absoluteness and authority, is more than debatable. It is also, however, indicative of prevailing ideas about anorexia and those affected by it. They discuss in depth the role of the mother in the anorexic's life, writing:

⁹³ Lia Keuchguerian Silveira Campos, et al. "Psychological characteristics of mothers of patients with anorexia nervosa: implications for treatment and prognosis," *Trends in Psychiatry and Psychotherapy* 34.1 (2012): 14.

A common problem in patients with AN is the invasive desire of the mother, which imposes itself and takes possession of the daughter's body and desire. A love-hate struggle is initiated, to which mother and daughter are confined and in which they are fused.

As a result of this dynamic, many caregivers, especially mothers, express deep anxiety, which can become clinically severe, with negativist concerns, hostility, criticism, and an over-protective attitude towards the daughter. This emotional response has been described as an exacerbated emotional expression, and has a negative impact on the prognosis of AN.⁹⁴

The image of the over-controlling, ever too present mother is an easy stereotype to place onto Agnes Carpenter. Agnes was success driven, devoting her efforts to making her children succeed, even creating a car washing business in Richard and Karen's childhood to help pay for their music.⁹⁵ That drive led to control, "running the show" when at her children's concerts, even earning a comparison to the Gestapo by Karen Ichijji, who also stated, "With Agnes there was no list of dos and don'ts. It was just don'ts."⁹⁶ These descriptions paint a picture of a woman who couldn't be satisfied. But she was, at times—by her son Richard.

Though Karen may have been "the sound of the Carpenters," to Agnes, Richard was all the rest. Wallace told Schmidt, "From the time Karen was little, everything was 'Richard, Richard, Richard.' It was always 'Richard and Karen' and 'if it wasn't for *Richard*, there would be a Karen.'"⁹⁷ Unsurprisingly, Agnes sided with Richard on Karen's solo album. As Wallace told Schmidt, "As far as Agnes was concerned, regardless of how

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Schmidt, *Little Girl Blue*, 15.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 162 and 207.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 114.

many records Karen would have made, to her mother they'd never be as good as Richard's."⁹⁸ Agnes also shared the fear that Richard and the studio seemed to have, that a solo album by Karen might threaten the strength and lifespan of the two Carpenter siblings together.

Barry Morrow and Richard Sargent's television movie *The Karen Carpenter Story* from 1989 very publicly put forth a narrative that places the majority of the blame on Agnes. With Richard as the film's producer, he had ultimate control over the story told, and though he shows a degree of vulnerability in showing his own occasional cruelty to Karen, the most moving moment of the film shows Agnes to ultimately be the cruelest: Levenkron asks the family members if they have told Karen that they love her. Agnes responds, "We don't do things that way." Levenkron says, "Would it hurt to try?" Karen then enters the room and Levenkron says, "Mrs. Carpenter, go ahead." But she is unable to say it. Karen sighs and looks away briefly, visibly disappointed, and the shot then cuts to a zoomed-in image of Karen's emaciated ribs as she stands on a scale. We see over her shoulder an older female nurse, who looks strikingly similar to Agnes, measure her weight and then shake her head—Karen is still too thin. Karen sighs and looks to the side, disappointed again by the denial of the news she wants by this Agnes-figure. This is Karen's last encounter with her family before leaving treatment; in contrast, her first extended encounter with family after leaving takes place in the studio with Richard, as Karen records the song "Now," the last song she recorded before her death, and Richard

⁹⁸ Ibid, 207.

looks on from the control room. The film plays the song in whole, and when it ends, Karen looks toward Richard and says, “One more. Rich, come on, we never stop at just one take. Let me try it one more time.” Richard shakes his head and wipes invisible tears from his face as he sniffs. “Nah, it was perfect.” This is Richard’s redeeming moment in the film, as he exhibits an acceptance of Karen’s production as is. It is important to remember the hand Richard had in shaping the contents of this movie. However, it is also interesting to note that Cynthia Gibb, the actress who played Karen, swallows the word “we” in this shot—it is difficult to tell if she says “we” or “you.” Which one is the Carpenters?

Part of Levenkron’s treatment of Karen was a diagnosis of her mother as “oppressive-dependent,” domineering out of the fear of losing control of her daughter. That fear, it seems, manifested in a withholding of love that precluded even the simple concession of telling her daughter “I love you.” As Karen dies shortly after leaving treatment, and after Richard’s redemption in the film, it is hard for viewers not to place blame on Agnes for Karen’s treatment failing to take. But while Agnes played an important role in Karen’s illness, it is irresponsible to blame her completely. It is often the tendency not only in anorexia treatment, but also in psychiatric treatment in general, to blame the mother for the patient’s illness. A 1985 article in the *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* published by Paula J. Caplan and Ian Hall-McCorquodale entitled “Mother-Blaming in Major Clinical Journals” explores this phenomenon. In a review of 125 articles, they found significant discrepancies in the methodology of examining patients, including that: the mother was specifically named in examples of problems almost five times as often as the father was, and that during those mentions, the mother’s relationship to the child-patient

was never described as healthy or in positive terms, while the father's often was, even described in one instance as "ideal in virtually every respect."⁹⁹ Caplan and Hall-McCorquodale concluded that mother-blaming was a persistent "significant and serious problem."¹⁰⁰ Agnes was aware of the blame that was placed on her. When meeting with Morrow, the writer of *The Karen Carpenter Story*, her first words to him were, "I want you to know I did not kill my daughter."¹⁰¹ Caplan and Hall-McCorquodale also cite Letty Cottin Pogrebin's parenting book *Growing Up Free: Raising Your Child in the 80's* in which Pogrebin, activist and founding editor of *Ms. Magazine*, states a well-known cultural example of this mother-blaming. She writes, "A nasty woman is a 'bitch,' but a nasty man isn't nasty in his own right: he's a 'son of a bitch' or a 'bastard,' both words reflecting badly on his mother."¹⁰² If Agnes is remembered as a nasty woman, as a domineering Gestapo, a controlling and withholding bitch, where does that leave her son? And where did that leave her daughter?

As important as the gap left by the absence of her mother's love and praise was Karen's adoption of Agnes's adoration of Richard. According to Franklin, Karen "thought Richard was God, just like her mother thought he was God."¹⁰³ Karen even internalized Agnes's "Richard-first" mentality, crafting a needlepoint image for him that reads, "There

⁹⁹ Paula J. Caplan and Ian Hall-McCorquodale, "Mother-Blaming in Major Clinical Journals," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 55 (1985): 347-348.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 352.

¹⁰¹ Schmidt, *Little Girl Blue*, 3.

¹⁰² Letty Cottin Pogrebin, *Growing Up Free: Raising Your Child in the 80's* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980): 540, qtd. in Caplan, "Mother-Blaming," 346.

¹⁰³ Schmidt, *Little Girl Blue*, 114.

is no K.C. without R.C.”¹⁰⁴ According to reports from friends and from herself, Karen desperately wanted to be married and start a family, but the demands of her career, her family, and her eating disorder made this difficult.¹⁰⁵ In the absence of this possibility, Richard took over the role of her husband. Critics would often cite the discomfort of seeing and hearing two siblings perform love songs together, and their album covers at times look like Glamor Shots of young teen sweethearts, or prom photos of a couple’s last dance together before the changes and trials of post-graduation tear them apart. It is perhaps because of this strangeness that some also stated that hearing the more sexual songs on Karen’s solo album felt awkward and forced—if the “Carpenter sound” located so firmly within Karen’s voice became sexualized, what would audiences have to make of the brother-sister duo, close as they were?

Though Karen did eventually marry, it was far from a storybook romance. Karen met Tom Burris through a mutual friend on April 12, 1980. Karen was instantly taken with Burris, an attractive blonde real estate developer with a silver Rolls Royce who claimed not to know who the Carpenters were. Karen said to Franklin that meeting him was the first time she had ever been attracted to anyone on the first date, adding, “Oh, Frenny, he reminds me of Chard!”¹⁰⁶ Burris was there for Karen when her solo album was officially

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Karen’s ex-boyfriend, music executive Terry Ellis, stated that in addition to watching Karen “wither away,” and the traveling both of their careers demanded, he felt that Agnes sabotaged their relationship because she viewed him as a threat to the Carpenters as a duo (Schmidt, *Little Girl Blue*, 149-152). Karen also stated that she did not believe in bringing boyfriends on tour with her, saying in 1975 that, “Not only didn’t I agree with it, but I never met anybody I wanted to have on the road... We tend to think when you go out [on tour] you go to work.”

¹⁰⁶ Chard was another of Karen’s nicknames for Richard. Schmidt, *Little Girl Blue*, 217.

shelved one month after they met. He allowed her, it seemed, to turn her attention to a different type of production she craved—starting a family and finally having children of her own. In June, Burris proposed to Karen, and they planned their wedding for August 31, 1980, just four and a half months after meeting. Karen’s family and friends were nervous about the speed of the relationship, but Karen was “determined to get married at any cost.”¹⁰⁷ It was, perhaps, because of this determination that Karen was so blindsided when Burris revealed a secret to her just days before their wedding—that he had had a vasectomy, and he did not plan to get it reversed. Devastated, Karen made plans to cancel the wedding, but was stopped by her mother. “The wedding is *on* and you *will* walk down that aisle,” Agnes said. “You made your bed, Karen. Now you’ll have to lie in it.”¹⁰⁸ Karen went through with the wedding, but the marriage was now essentially over before it had even begun. Both *Superstar* and *The Karen Carpenter Story* portray this, playing the Carpenters song “This Masquerade” during the wedding sequence. Burris himself also made a mockery of the wedding, mimicking the reverend at the altar when he said, “Do you take this woman?” and in his “I do.”¹⁰⁹ After their wedding, it was revealed that the wealth Burris appeared to possess was a lie, and he began to drain Karen’s bank accounts, as well as her will. In one of his cruelest moments, he rejected her advances, stating that he would never consider having children with her and calling her a “bag of bones.”¹¹⁰ Karen was left financially and emotionally vulnerable by another man, yet again kept from

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 223.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 227.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 231.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 239.

fulfilling a form of unadulterated production for which she yearned. Though most of Karen's intuitions about Burris were incorrect, there was one she got right—he was, in fact, like Richard.

Haynes highlights this similarity as well. In the sequence in which she sees Burris for the first time, Karen says, “You didn’t tell me that Richard was coming,” mistaking him from afar for her brother.¹¹¹ There is an air here of Karen keeping it “all in the family,” perhaps replacing Richard, whose affection she felt she had lost after his reception of her album, with Burris. Richard did, in fact, keep it in the family. He married his adopted first cousin Mary Rudolph, eleven years his junior, who he began dating when she was only eighteen. Karen despised their relationship, and often tried to set up Richard with other women, but to no avail. Maria Galeazzi, Karen’s former stylist and Richard’s ex-girlfriend said of this, “What do you expect?...[The family had] thrown daggers at everybody he’d hooked up with. Now he had resorted to staying within the family.”¹¹² Because the two are not biologically related, they were able to have children without worry of genetic difficulties, and have five children together: a new family of Carpenters. Tom Burris remarried after becoming a widower—they never officially divorced, as Karen meant to sign the divorce papers the day she died—and has a son with his new wife.¹¹³

In Karen Carpenter, we see an alienation from the body similar to that in anorexia; but importantly, it is from the body as a site of production more than from the body as

¹¹¹ Haynes also takes liberty in this sequence, having Agnes, as opposed to friends, introduce Karen to Burris. Burris also gushes over Karen and her music when they first meet in the film, though in reality he pretended not to have heard of her.

¹¹² Schmidt, *Little Girl Blue*, 225.

¹¹³ *Ibid*, 298.

anything else. She was denied her creative agency, her “voice” both literal and metaphorical, and her chance at reproductive labor. Richard finally allowed Karen’s solo album to be released posthumously in 1996—the liner notes, written at the time of its recording but unearthed only at the time of its release, read, “Dedicated to my brother Richard with all my heart.”¹¹⁴

“AS IF ALL WE DO ALL DAY IS DRINK MILK”

The year is 1970, and suddenly the nation finds itself asking the question: ‘What if instead of the riots and assassinations, the protests and the drugs, the angry words and hard rock sounds, we were to hear something soft and smooth, and see something of wholesomeness and easy-handed faith?’

With this voiceover early in the film, Haynes introduces the Carpenters as pop music’s antidote to the political confusion of the 1960s. These kids next door from Downey who “led a raucous nation smoothly into the seventies” were loved across the nation, and it showed in their fame.¹¹⁵ They were even invited to the White House on three occasions in the midst of the ongoing Watergate scandal, and performed a special concert there in 1973. During this concert, the Carpenters were introduced by President Richard Nixon as “young America at its very best.”¹¹⁶ More than just Nixon’s apparent appreciation of the Carpenters, aligning himself with them was a strategic move in the midst of an imploding White House marred with scandal. Throughout his career, even before Watergate, Nixon had been deeply concerned with his image and with public relations. In the book, *Richard*

¹¹⁴ Hoerburger, “Second Life.”

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ See DianaPark, “Carpenters at the White House 1973 (Complete),” DailyMotion, uploaded Aug. 29, 2015.

Nixon and the Quest for a New Majority, Robert Mason, a professor of 20th century history at the University of Edinburgh, writes that Nixon was deeply concerned with the PR of not only his policies, but also “more trivial issues of presidential image.” He writes:

The concern with public relations was constant. Ehrlichman later estimated that Nixon spent as much as “half his working time on the nonsubstantive aspects of the Presidency.”¹¹⁷ As a key media aide, Herbert Klein was keenly aware that Nixon was very sensitive about his portrayal in the press. “From the President on down,” he wrote, “an amazingly excessive amount of time was spent worrying about plans to conjure up better and more favorable coverage.”¹¹⁸

Barring the fact that the Nixon Administration experienced one of the worst PR nightmares the President’s office had seen until then, this focus on image makes sense in the light of the political atmosphere of the 1960s into the 1970s.

Like the Carpenters took the nation, who craved something “soft and smooth...of wholesomeness and easy-handed faith,” into the 1970s, Nixon took the Republican party, and those it had previously forgotten, forward into the decade as well. As Mason explains, Nixon’s election was dependent upon a reconfiguration of the Republican Party that expanded the class borders of the party, and gave us the GOP that we know today. In 1961, Arizona conservative senator Barry Goldwater issued the paper “A Statement of Proposed Republican Principles, Programs, and Objectives,” in which he laid out a plan to revitalize the Republican Party: speak to the “silent” and “forgotten” Americans “who quietly go

¹¹⁷ John Ehrlichman, Assistant to the President for Domestic Affairs in the Nixon Administration and a key figure in Watergate.

¹¹⁸ Robert Mason, *Richard Nixon and the Quest for a New Majority* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004): 41. Ehrlichman qtd. from *Witness to Power: The Nixon Years* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 239, and Klein qtd. from *Making It Perfectly Clear: An Inside Account of Nixon’s Love-Hate Relationship with the Media* (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 107.

about the business of paying, praying, working and saving” by campaigning against big government and the economic elites who support it.¹¹⁹ Though Goldwater lost when he ran for the presidency on this campaign in 1964, Nixon utilized similar ideas in his victorious presidential campaign in 1968. In this campaign, Nixon appealed to the “reaction to the tumult of the 1960s,” and seized upon Democrats and independent voters who had become alienated from the Democratic Party by Lyndon B. Johnson’s presidency.¹²⁰ Crucial to Nixon’s success was his ability in the late 1960s to pair Goldwater’s theory of silent and forgotten Americans with attention paid to the “middle” Americans—White blue collar middle class workers, who sat at the middle of the political spectrum, and lived in middle America. He called them the “silent majority” in a speech in November 1969.¹²¹ And majority—or at least significant presence—they were. The “middle American” was named TIME’s 1969 Man and Woman of the Year. Described by Kevin P. Phillips, a strategist for Nixon’s 1968 campaign, in his book *The Emerging Republican Majority* as “the great, ordinary, Lawrence Welkish mass of Americans from Maine to Hawaii,” middle Americans united under Nixon against eastern elites and for the American dream.¹²² In this way, the Republican Party was able to brand itself as populist even while maintaining its financial base of the extremely wealthy.

Karen and Richard Carpenter, two young, white, all-American kids whose family

¹¹⁹ Qtd. in Mason, *Richard Nixon*, 5.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 6.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Kevin P. Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority* (New Rochelle, DE: Arlington House, 1969), qtd. in Mason, *Richard Nixon*, 48.

had supported their dreams, who started in small competitions and were able to work themselves up to being two of the most well-known music stars in the country, who embraced traditional values like “individual enterprise and self-reliance,” were ideal representatives of “young America at its very best” and of a changing Republican Party.¹²³ Just as the Republican Party could be populist while maintaining hands-off domestic policies that catered to the economic elite, Karen and Richard, ultra-white, ultra-wholesome (or at least on the surface) could still be the kids next door while also making, as President Nixon pointed out at the end of their 1973 White House performance, 3.5 million dollars in record sales in one year.¹²⁴ It should also be unsurprising then that Nixon, who fashioned himself as the people’s president based on his appeal to the “silent majority” and his focus on PR, yet was also the only US president to ever resign from office—which he did during his impeachment process—chose “kids next door” whose legacy has been deeply colored by Karen’s eating disorder and Richard’s Quaalude addiction. Like Nixon, the success of the Carpenters lay in large part in their wholesome image and their appeal through this to middle Americans starting at the turn of the decade. In “The Carpenters: Up from Downey,” Nolan writes:

When the Carpenters tour certain parts of America it would not be much of an exaggeration to say that Richard and Karen are like visiting deities. A paucity of entertainment in these areas combined with the Carpenters' huge appeal ensures almost entire towns will turn out for their concerts. Thus it was in Beckley, and Wheeling, West Virginia; in Richmond, Virginia, and in Hershey, Pennsylvania. They bring glamour to scenes of devastation, to small cities scarred by open mines and strewn with tornado debris. Their limousine glides through narrow streets suited to Dublin slums, past felled

¹²³ Mason, *Richard Nixon*, 5, and DianaPark, “Carpenters at the White House.”

¹²⁴ DianaPark, “Carpenters at the White House.”

trees, railroad yards, mounds of coal, wrecked house trailers...

Glimpsed from the driver's seat the three figures in the rear look like a Fellini parody of *Don't Look Back*.¹²⁵ Karen, in dark glasses and fox fur collar, chews gum as she gazes at the dreary town gliding by [...]

In every town they play, mention of their names brings smiles to faces young and old. "They're really special. Lotta groups been through here, but...they are the only ones *really worth seein'*." Their records are on all jukeboxes, squeezed between the country records that predominate. Muzak plays their hits, and Karen and Richard prick up their ears, comment on the arrangements. This is Carpenter country. (But then, so is Las Vegas. So is Europe, and Japan.)¹²⁶

Though the Carpenters are loved by middle Americans for their proximity to them—both Nolan and Haynes highlight Karen and Richard coming from Downey in their texts—they are admired for their distance. Like “deities” in their limousine, the Carpenters stand apart from the small towns they tour, but it is the ability of these towns’ residents to imagine they, too, might produce a young star like Richard or Karen one day—“Up From Hershey” or a “smooth-voiced girl from Wheeling”—that really draws them in.¹²⁷ This fantasy of the pop star’s American Dream is dependent upon the Carpenters’ wholesome image, and of course, upon great PR.

An interesting feature of this squeaky-clean “young America” image, however, was the way in which milk often came up in reference to the purity and Americanness of the young Carpenters, and more importantly, that the Carpenters themselves seemed to fixate

¹²⁵ The 1967 documentary by D.A. Pennebaker covering Bob Dylan’s 1965 England tour.

¹²⁶ Nolan, “Up from Downey.”

¹²⁷ Haynes describes Karen as “this smooth-voiced girl from Downey” in *Superstar*.

at times on these references. In *Rolling Stone*, Richard discusses the subject of the Carpenters image:

Press conferences with 80 photographers, all saying. Smile! Cheer up! Come on, smile smile smile! I'm *sick* of smiling. But they're all upset if you don't. So we oblige them, and we get it back in the press. 'The sticky-sweet Carpenters – *still smiling those Pepsodent smiles!*'

This . . . *thing* they've built up, where it's implicitly understood the Carpenters don't smoke, the Carpenters don't drink. Never would swear. Never would listen to rock music. They can't figure out how the fast car could have gotten in there. It's like we're Pat Boone, only a little *cleaner*. As if all we do all day is drink milk, eat apple pie and take showers. I don't even *like* milk.¹²⁸

Karen adds after him, “The image we have, it would be impossible for Mickey Mouse to maintain. We're just . . . normal people.”¹²⁹ Later in the article Richard angrily recalls a rude disc jockey who “went on and on about ‘the vitamin-swallowing, milk-fed Carpenters’” during a particularly exasperating interview.¹³⁰ Throughout Nolan’s interview with the Carpenters, Richard and Karen allude to many symbols associated with them—Pepsodent, abstinence, Valentine’s Day cards, high school proms—but milk is the only one that Nolan and the Carpenters mention more than once. Why milk? What is its significance for the Carpenters and for the people that use it to describe them?

In a short and lesser-known essay from *Mythologies* entitled “Wine and Milk,”

French theorist Roland Barthes writes:

In the basic morphology of substances milk is the opposite of fire by all the denseness of its molecules, by the creamy, and therefore soothing, nature of its spreading. Wine is mutilating, surgical, it transmutes and delivers; milk

¹²⁸ Nolan, “Up from Downey.”

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

is cosmetic, it joins, covers, restores. Moreover, its purity, associated with the innocence of the child, is a token of strength, of a strength which is not repulsive, not congestive, but calm, white, lucid, the equal of reality. Some American films, in which the hero, strong and uncompromising, did not shrink from having a glass of milk before drawing his avenging Colt, have paved the way for this Parsifalian myth.¹³¹

To Barthes, if there were to be an official national drink of the United States, it would be milk. Jenny Splitter echoes this sentiment in an article for *Thrillist* entitled “The Strange American Obsession with Cold Milk,” writing, “Milk is stuck in a time warp in America...Don't mess with milk. Americans grow up drinking milk. Milk and cookies are our first comfort food. Milk is what we rush to the store for during storms, even if we don't understand why. A tall, frosty glass of milk is *pure drinkable Americana*, and that's just how we like it.”¹³² “Pure drinkable Americana” is a bold metaphor, but it's one that rings true. Milk is the American way—in a 2006 collaboration between the California Milk Processor Board and the film *Superman Returns* starring Brandon Routh as the titular superhero, even Superman drinks it (fig. 17). The poster features the familiar slogan “got milk?” underneath “Super. This is how milk makes you feel. The calcium helps bones grow strong, so even if you're not from Krypton, you can have bones of steel.”¹³³ The famous *Got Milk?* campaign that became a visual staple in school cafeterias, magazines, TV commercials, and more, began in 1993 and ran for twenty years. It is not beyond any stretch of the imagination to assume that, had Karen recovered from her eating disorder and lived

¹³¹ Roland Barthes, “Wine and Milk,” *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Levers (New York: Noonday Press, 1972): 60.

¹³² Jenny Splitter, “The Strange American Obsession with Cold Milk,” *Thrillist*, Oct. 10, 2017. Italics added for emphasis.

¹³³ California Milk Processor Board, “Got Milk?” promotional advertisement featuring Brandon Routh to promote *Superman Returns*, *Blender*, May 2006.

into the 90s (and beyond), she and Richard would have sported twin milk mustaches for their own poster.

Much like Nixon's GOP, the Carpenters' wholesome kids-next-door image, and its famous *Got Milk?* campaign, milk as we know it is the result of a very thorough PR campaign. Environmental Studies scholar E. Melanie DuPuis lays out this campaign and history in her 2002 book *Nature's Perfect Food: How Milk Became America's Drink*. Contrary to commonly held beliefs, drinking fresh fluid milk—as opposed to milk that has been churned or clotted into butter or cream—is a fairly young and urban tradition. While common histories tell its consumption as a vestige of rural life, milk consumption actually begins in American cities in the 19th century, and was used as a substitute for breast milk. During this time, however, milk was far from safe, and its consumption by infants brought the city death rate for children under five to 50 percent, much higher than the rate in the countryside.¹³⁴ This is far from the image that milk has today, which is regularly fed to children on a daily basis, and in common belief is thought of as crucial for a child's health and strength. This image started in the 1830s and 1840s, after Robert Hartley, a New York City evangelist was reportedly visited by an angel, who told him to save the city's children by bringing forward milk reform. To do this, Hartley created the narrative of milk that has become historic in America: that of milk as the “perfect food,” complete with everything that the body needed, and having been drunk “universal[ly] through space and time,” even

¹³⁴ Melanie DuPuis, *Nature's Perfect Food: How Milk Became America's Drink* (New York: NYU Press, 2002): 19-20.

though this was not historically true.¹³⁵ Hartley drew his evidence from the Bible, stating that milk was present in the Garden of Eden, and that Abel, whose offerings were viewed as more precious to God than those of his brother Cain which contained only fruits and vegetables, brought milk along with his livestock to the Lord. Evangelists like Hartley touted the “wholeness” of milk as a sign of the divine design of God. Even modern arguments, though now secular, follow a similar pattern: advocating that milk

is the first food to sustain the human body, and it contains within itself the universe of nutritional needs. Therefore, milk is not only universally used over time and space, but contains within itself the universe of nutrition. These three universals: history, geography, and the commodity itself, make milk boosterism almost a spiritual quest for the unification of time, space, and the body.¹³⁶

Under the efforts of Hartley and other evangelists, milk evolved from what some called “white poison” to America’s perfect food.¹³⁷ DuPuis writes:

Intrinsic to the rise of milk as the ‘perfect food’ is the idea of perfection itself. Ideas about perfection provide a key to understanding modern society. The modern story of the march of progress entails the march to a perfect world. The industrial form of production, the hierarchical form of managerial bureaucracy, and the economic idea of supply and demand meeting at a single point all imply that there is one, single, perfect way to make, organize, market, and consume today’s commodities.¹³⁸

Or to put it succinctly, “Milk is more than a food, it is an embodiment of the politics of American identity over the last 150 years.”¹³⁹ Though milk was touted as the “perfect food,” with proponents citing everything from the Bible to false histories to evolution, it

¹³⁵ Ibid, 27.

¹³⁶ Ibid, 38.

¹³⁷ For example, PJ Atkins’s article entitled “White poison? The social consequences of milk consumption, 1850-1930,” *Social History of Medicine* 5.2 (1992).

¹³⁸ DuPuis, *Nature’s Perfect Food*, 4.

¹³⁹ Ibid, 8.

was only able to be perfect under industrial production; the perfection comes not from the natural but from the constructed, the “one, single, perfect way to make, organize, market, and consume.” The United States is similar—the greatness of the country touted by its citizens and government, touted by Nixon in his courting of the “silent majority,” is a naturalized construction. And so, in their own way, are the Carpenters, kids next door with devastating personal lives.

In his film *Safe* (1995), Haynes takes a very different approach to milk. In this film, Carol White, played by Julianne Moore, slowly takes ill, succumbing to what she believes to be “environmental illness,” a disease of the 21st century impacting those too sensitive to handle the deeply unnatural, chemically regulated modern world. Carol experiences mysterious and traumatic syndromes—vomiting, wheezing, seizures—but her doctors are unable to find any physical source. It is because of this that she reaches out to a New Age clean desert retreat called Wrenwood, where she lives in a small bunker to protect herself from outside contamination. By the end of the film, we are left unsure if Carol is healed or not, and even more unsure if she is in a healthier environment in the physically clean but emotionally toxic Wrenwood. While everything that Carol does leads to the audience’s slight discomfort, there is one habit that is particularly unsettling. Carol drinks milk everyday.

In October 2016, *The Awl*, the now defunct website for weird news (journalistic leftovers, perhaps), published an article by Silvia Killingsworth entitled, “Why Is It So Creepy to Drink Milk?,” asking exactly that. Killingsworth writes, “What is it about an adult taking a big swig of white cow liquid? Milk drinkers are weird and creepy because

milk is a children's beverage and its pure white color brings to mind words like 'virgin,' 'non-alcoholic,' 'plain,' 'wholesome,' 'mother,' and 'comfort.'"¹⁴⁰ She cites examples from pop culture in which milk is used as a telltale sign of a character's "creepiness," including Javier Bardem's cattle-gun-wielding Anton Chigurh in the Coen Brothers' film adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* (2007), protagonist Alex of bowler hat fame in Stanley Kubrick's adaptation of Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), and the incestuous Liam McPoyle, a man who makes out with his sister and wears bathrobes out of the house and an enemy of "The Gang," in the dark comedy series *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* (fig. 18a-c). It is perhaps these associations that bring forward the Carpenters' frustration at their "milk-fed" reputation—"I don't even *like* milk."

The only physical ailment doctors can locate during Carol's visits is an intolerance to milk. Milk, the one thing she does not give up throughout her perpetual cleanings and detoxes, the American super food that isn't meant to do harm, is the only thing modern medicine can find to be affecting her system. Carol's 21st century disease echoes Haynes's portrayal of Karen's; Haynes employs a very targeted rhetoric when discussing Karen's anorexia. His interpretation is specific to the post-WWII West; he mentions "contemporary femininity," intercuts the film with images of Nixon, the Vietnam War, victims of the Holocaust (fig. 4a-d and 5h). In one sequence, a female voice narrates over images of supermarket refrigerated aisles with printed intertitles (fig. 3b). She says:

¹⁴⁰ Silvia Killingsworth, "Why Is It So Creepy to Drink Milk?," *The Awl*, Oct. 24, 2016.

Following World War II and the end of rationing in the early fifties, America was reacquainted with food as plentiful and cheap...The growth of supermarkets with their rows and rows of dairy products, canned goods meats, condiments, bakery goods, vegetables, fruits, and staples, brought a large display of food into everybody's range. Few could leave the supermarket without more than they intended, and the kitchen—the center of the home—contained an ever-expanding variety of foods. Home life in America connoted the cozy kitchen, food preparation, and mealtime.

The narrator's exhaustive list echoes the abundance Americans were offered following World War II, and the leaking of the supermarket's industrial profusion and variety into the now more regimented kitchen, both public and private then structuring "home life in America," is indicative of mid- to mid-late 20th century America. The intertitles further read:

Card 1: The self-imposed regime of the anorexic reveals a complex internal apparatus of resistance and control. Her intensive need for self-discipline replaces all her other needs and desires.

Card 2: Anorexia can thus be seen as an addiction and abuse of self-control, a fascism over the body in which the sufferer plays the parts of both the dictator and the emaciated victim, whom she so often resembles.

Card 3: In a culture that continues to control women through the commoditization of their bodies, the anorexic body excludes itself, rejecting the doctrines of femininity, driven by a vision of complete mastery and control.¹⁴¹

Though Haynes describe anorexia as a deeply personal disease—"internal apparatus," "self-discipline," "self-control"—he also places it very firmly within a wider culture. While the anorexic may be both dictator and victim, there is undoubtedly a third role that culture plays. If dictator is master and victim is slave, then Karen's surrounding culture is the

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

dialectic that binds them and determines their interaction. Anorexia as Haynes defines it is specific to Karen's cultural moment, and our understanding of his understanding of her disease must acknowledge this. Bray points out in "The Anorexic Body: Reading Disorders" (1996) that anorexia has often been portrayed as a passive disorder responding to a barrage of media that demands the female body fit a certain image and paradigm.¹⁴² This view is prominent in the writing of Maud Ellmann, who calls anorexia a "disease of the McLuhan Age."¹⁴³ In this imagining, popular media becomes the host and transmitter for an unseen virus: anorexia takes hold of the body invisibly, with no apparent physical cause for the body's dwindling, much like Carol's environmental illness. The two female protagonists of these Haynes films are actually very similar, in their diseases as well as in their demographics—well-off, sheltered, American white women.

Karen's whiteness was crucial to her popularity—she was, after all, Richard Nixon's example of the best of America's youth. Richard's editing and arrangements of the songs she sang heightened that—let us not forget that many of Karen's hit songs actually began as Dionne Warwick's songs, and were then adapted for the Carpenters. In fact, when Karen showed her solo album to Richard and record executives, a friend of hers recalls that one told her she was trying to sound "like some black chick," a negative in that executive's eyes.¹⁴⁴ To be America's best and brightest, Karen had to be conspicuously white. Nixon's new Republican party capitalized on "economic unease [that] was not

¹⁴² Bray, "Reading Disorders," 414.

¹⁴³ Maud Ellmann. *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing and Imprisonment*. London: Virago, 1993: 24.

¹⁴⁴ Hoerburger, "Second Life."

absolute but relative, generated by the sense that African Americans were advancing faster than whites were.”¹⁴⁵ And the “milk-fed” image that Karen had was also made possible by a—quite literal—whitewashing of America through the propagation of milk. Dupuis writes that, “Contemporary studies of American populations show a vast difference in the ability to digest lactose, from a high of 80 to 90 percent in northern Europeans to a low of 40 to zero percent among Black, Asian, and Native American populations.”¹⁴⁶ If milk is American, then America must be white. We see this play out in *Safe* as well, as the milky white Carol White orders her Latinx maid to bring her milk multiple times in the film (fig. 19).

Milk literally poisoned Carol, but it symbolically poisoned Haynes’s Karen as well. While it wasn’t milk in its physical form, it was the pressure of being milk-fed, of being a perfect performer with a perfect voice, manipulated in postproduction and in PR; whereas Carol’s milk allergy represents an ironic response of the body to the things we think hurt and harm it, for Karen, milk is a symbol of constructed narratives and industrial perfection. In a documentary-esque section in the middle of *Superstar*, different fictional figures in music state their opinions on the Carpenters. Michelle Hoyt, a “music critic,” says, “For me their sound was too smooth and manipulative, and their image was too clean and...sweet. And so...they epitomized for me the return to reactionary values in the seventies. And... I never trusted them.” Following her is Joanne Barnett, “singer,” who says:

¹⁴⁵ Mason, *Richard Nixon*, 44.

¹⁴⁶ DuPuis, *Nature’s Perfect Food*, 28.

I think Karen Carpenter was a very underestimated performer. She was one of *my* main influences. Her vocal range, her phrasing. They were totally unique. The way she—evoked a kind of irony in a song. I mean just listen to “Rainy Days and Mondays.” Nobody was doing that at the time—she was totally unique. But instead she became this kind of joke, this goody-goody girl. I feel like she never got the recognition she deserved.

Haynes sets up these two views in opposition. Hoyt responds negatively to the hyper-constructed wholesome images of the Carpenters, believing that there is something off about these milk-fed, politically reactionary musicians. Barnett, however, responds lamentingly, finding the uniqueness in Karen’s natural talent while recognizing that her “goody-goody girl” image kept her from being fully appreciated in her time.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ Karen became a cult figure after her death, (helped in part by the cult popularity of *Superstar*), even prompting an album of covers, “If I Were a Carpenter” by 90s rock bands, including the Kim Gordon fronted Sonic Youth, who covered “Superstar.” Gordon also recorded “Tunic (Song for Karen),” which addressed Karen’s eating disorder, and wrote a letter to her that was later printed in the Sonic Youth biography *Sonic Youth: Sensational Fix* (Köln: Walter König, 2010). It reads:

“Dear Karen,

Thru the years of The Carpenters TV specials I saw you change from the Innocent Oreo-cookie-and-milk-eyed girl next door to hollowed eyes and a lank body adrift on a candy-colored stage set. You and Richard, by the end, looked drugged—there’s so little energy. The words come out of yr mouth but yr eyes say other things, “Help me, please, I’m lost in my own passive resistance, something went wrong. I wanted to make myself disappear from their control. My parents, Richard, the writers who call me ‘hippie, fat.’ Since I was, like most girls, brought up to be polite and considerate, I figured no one would notice anything wrong—as long as, outwardly, I continued to do what was expected of me. Maybe they could control all the outward aspects of my life, but my body is all in my control. I can make myself smaller. I can disappear. I can starve myself to death and they won’t know it. My voice will never give me away. They’re not my words. No one will guess my pain. But I will make the words my own because I have to express myself somehow. Pain is not perfect so there is no place in Richard’s life for it. I have to be perfect too. I must be thin so I’m perfect. Was I a teenager once?... I forget. Now I look middle-aged, with a bad perm and country-western clothes.” I must ask you, Karen, who were your role models? Was it yr mother? What kind of books did you like to read? Did anyone ever ask you that question—what’s it like being a girl in music? What were yr dreams? Did you have any female friends or was it just you and Richard, mom and dad, A&M? Did you ever go running along the sand, feeling the ocean rush up between yr legs? Who is Karen Carpenter, really, besides the sad girl with the extraordinarily beautiful, soulful voice?

your fan – love,

kim”

Though Karen never received “cool girl” status in the ‘80s, she did in the ‘90s and after. As a side note, ‘90s It Girl and Academy Award-winning screenwriter and director (and friend of Kim Gordon) Sofia Coppola designed a clothing line called “Milk Fed.”

What E. Melanie DuPuis makes clear is that while fluid cow's milk is praised as the all-natural perfect food, all-natural it is anything but. What is interesting, however, is that though feeding infants cow's milk almost immediately evokes images of breastfeeding, as cow's milk was first fed to children in the 19th century as a substitute for breast milk, milk reform activists such as Hartley did not acknowledge this, instead arguing for its perfection due to its design by the first man of life (God) rather than due to its source from the first woman of life (the mother).¹⁴⁸ DuPuis writes:

Throughout the history and prehistory of the human species, breast milk provided the major sustenance for a person's first year of life. European women provided breast milk not only to infants but to invalids. It was also widely used in women's healing remedies. In other words, women's breast milk production represented a significant part of the human food economy. It is an unrecognized part of women's contribution to the human food system.¹⁴⁹

In fact, in Hartley's 1842 treatise on milk reform the perfection of milk, *Essay on Milk*, he only mentions breast milk twice—even though the treatise is over 350 pages. This omission is a clear devaluation of the woman's ability to produce and an alienation of her body. The turning of milk into a symbol and the construction of a "perfect history" obscured milk as

¹⁴⁸ DuPuis, *Nature's Perfect Food*, 5. Mothers would have weaned for various reasons, depending on class; upper-class women often weaned because of the Cult of Domesticity and the limits this put on what was proper for women to do with their bodies, while working-class women would have been more likely to wean because of their return to work. Both classes, however, may have weaned because of nutritional deficiencies in their diet, whether due to poverty or to perverse ideas about femininity that still remain today (DuPuis, *Nature's Perfect Food*, 52-56). Further, the association of women and motherhood here is not to say, of course, that all women are mothers or that all mothers are women. I use this ciscentric language to point out the misogyny inherent in Hartley and other evangelists' strategies—they would have equated motherhood with womanhood.

¹⁴⁹ DuPuis, *Nature's Perfect Food*, 47.

a substance and its material history, which connects cow's milk and breast milk through the substitution of the former for the latter.

In the essay "America, 'Fat,' the Fetus," literary theorist Lauren Berlant discusses the alienation of the reproductive body due to the elevated citizenship status of the fetus and the devaluation of pregnant women as female and fat bodies. Consider two texts she discusses: the short story "Fat" from Raymond Carver's collection *Will You Be Quiet, Please?* (1974) and Arlene Eisenberg, Heidi E. Murkoff, and Sandee E. Hathaway's *What to Eat When You're Expecting* (1986), a follow-up to the best-selling parenting book *What to Expect When You're Expecting* from 1984. In "Fat," a server in a diner waits on an incredibly fat man, and she becomes fascinated with him despite the disgust of her server friend Rita and her boyfriend who works as a cook in the diner. On "Fat," Berlant writes:

For her bored friend Rita, she compulsively lists details of this man, his clothes, his "long, thick creamy fingers," his "strange way of speaking" with its "little puffing sound[s]" and its shifting personal pronouns that shuttle between "I" and "we"...In this short space of time, the waitress becomes addicted to the fat man. *She hovers over him like a mother, or a lover, feeding him creamy, milky things, such as butter, sour cream, pudding, and ice cream.*¹⁵⁰

From *What to Eat When You're Expecting*, she includes the following quote:

In short, your fetus is what you eat-and what you don't eat. As you can probably guess, a baby made up of candy bars and colas is quit different from a baby made up of whole grain breads and milk.... Not a pretty picture.... While you can eat what you choose to eat, fetus has no choice. It eats what you've chosen, whether the selection serves its nutritional interests or not. It can't order in a bowl of shredded wheat to supplement your breakfast doughnut, or an extra serving of protein to augment that lunchtime

¹⁵⁰ Lauren Berlant, "America, 'Fat,' the Fetus," *boundary 2* 21.3 (Autumn 1994):160. Quote from Raymond Carver, "Fat," in *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976). Italics added for emphasis.

hot dog. *It can't leave the fries if it's surfeited with fat, or opt for a glass of milk instead of that cola when the craving is for calcium.*¹⁵¹

The server in “Fat” takes an exuberantly physical approach to milk. With it, she is a mother, a lover, serving up creamy fatty milky products to a man already creamy, fatty, and milky. Milk isn’t the world’s perfect health food here—it is a visceral, physical substance with the ability to make one fat, but also to bring one joy. There is an association of milk with purity, and with the presexual. A baby drinks at the breast because of physical need, not because of sexual desire, and one who drinks breast milk certainly cannot also be producing breast milk. This is at the heart of the Carpenters’ image as “milk-fed”—they are like awkward prepubescent siblings, their arrested development upholding the sanctity of their platonic familial relationship even as they sing love songs to each other. Burris turned Karen away when she approached him sexually, saying he would never procreate with a “bag of bones.” Karen’s sexuality is thus tied up in her ability—or inability—to be a mother. As a milk-fed prepubescent girl, she is denied motherhood, denied sexuality. The waitress in “Fat” offers an alternative image of milk, in which the act of feeding one milk can be erotic rather than only maternal, and without any psychic guilt caused by the proximity of the two. In contrast to “Fat,” in *What to Eat*, milk is back to the “perfect food.” Though the authors associate it with the natural, placing it next to “whole grain breads” and against “colas,” it is important to note that the baby craves “a glass of milk.” It wants

¹⁵¹ Arlene Eisenberg, Heidi E. Murkoff, and Sandee E. Hathaway, *What to Eat When You’re Expecting* (New York: Workman Publishing Company, 1986), qtd. in Berlant, “America,” 178. Italics added for emphasis.

not breast milk, but milk that has arrived to it via years of technological and industrial planning, served in a glass to complete its image as a perfect but alienated beverage.

Ironically, in “Fat,” which takes place in a diner, a space of commerce, milk is a substance liberated from the commercial and industrial world. The server and the fat man take on a relationship more intimate than economic. *What to Eat*, though highlighting the closeness of the fetus stuck within it’s mother’s body, gives us a relationship that is almost transactional and is certainly hierarchical. The “you” of the text is contracted to its fetus; the fetus can’t “order in” or “supplement” or “augment.” And because its choice is limited in utero, the mother must sacrifice her choice to the fetus. The mother may be “eating for two,” but she is really eating at the behest of one.

Rottenberg gives us a similar nontransactional look at food production to that of Carver’s, even though her work *NoNoseKnows* also takes place in a space traditionally coded as commercial. Her noodles are not made for anyone, are not sold, never leave her office. Looking at Karen Carpenter through the lens of Nixon and Thomas Hartley, we are only able to see this “milk-fed” girl as an image of perfection and historical construction.¹⁵² But if we look at Karen through the eyes of Berlant and Rottenberg, “milk-fed” comes to mean something very different. Karen’s natural voice, intimate and lush, “totally unique,” becomes a joke when subjected to the manipulation of press, of Richard, of her studio. Rottenberg also gives us the ability to think about milk as material rather than as symbol. If Karen was negatively impacted by milk the symbol, what of the materiality of milk? It

¹⁵² Interestingly, a large part of Nixon’s Watergate scandal was also the revelation of Nixon taking bribes from Big Dairy.

is common lore in singing that milk has a negative impact on the throat due to its tendency to thicken mucus. It is also common knowledge that milk consumption can lead to constipation due to high instances of lactose intolerance. Karen's laxatives then take on a different connotation: she takes them because her natural production is interrupted by the material consequences of a symbolic diet.

Conclusion: Bulimia, Process, and Images in 2018

Today, with social media, women are bombarded with more images than ever. In addition, however, they are able to produce and propagate more than ever. The bodies showcased in media—now divided (uncleanly) into popular and social—and used to sell products are no longer determined by only a small number of executives making decisions on behalf of the fashion or movie industries. And endorsement deals are now easier to do than ever and with more people—while only one person can be on a Wheaties box, and it takes a whole team of creatives, executives, laborers, and distributors to choose that person (not to mention all they must have achieved to be chosen), photograph them, advertise the cereal and the endorsement, create and fill the boxes, and make sure they land in every possible home in America. Now, brands are able to give one set of influencer guidelines to myriad celebrities and microinfluencers, and allow them to photograph their own bodies, to put on their Twitters and Instagrams, and deliver their product endorsement directly to every possible phone in America and worldwide. Despite the inversion of this production triangle—from countless workers and one model to a few workers and several models—and the condensing of the steps it takes to get from endorsement to consumer, there are still those that exist outside of the production and only as consumers.¹⁵³ They have influence insofar as they help determine which influencers have enough followers to be deemed commercially useful. But as for the production of images in any meaningful sense, though

¹⁵³ Consumers online are always, of course, producing data and giving feedback to brands and brand executives through the way they traverse the internet and use social media. However, I am differentiating between the acts of producing data and producing images here.

the precise number of average followers per user is unknown, in 2015, the average number for teens was only 150 followers.¹⁵⁴ If similar numbers are true for older users, as well, it is clear that the majority of users are still more inundated with images than they are able to speak back—even if they post, in the grand corporate scheme of things, they are barely heard. Still, though, they are not entirely passive. Users with few followers can still participate in brand hashtags, are still able to be seen in “the scroll” alongside celebrities and influencers, can tag brands in their posts and show up in that company’s tagged photos, can even be chosen by some brands to appear on the brand’s own page. It is curious to wonder where anorexic-minded, image-driven theories of eating disorders must go from here.

There is something notable for the purpose of this thesis, however, in the images proliferated in this endorsement scheme. It is the marketing of so-claimed detox, or “skinny,” teas through the use of celebrity and influencer sponsored posts. Skinny teas are among the most common sponsored products found on Instagram.¹⁵⁵ The influencers for skinny teas range from celebrities like Britney Spears, the Kardashians, and Nicki Minaj, to smaller microinfluencers. In the latter category, the influencers tend to look eerily similar, as though they have all seen the same Kylie Jenner makeup tutorials on Instagram and have the same glute-heavy workout plan. The teas’ reach is immense: FitTea, perhaps the most famous detox tea, has over 1.7 million Instagram followers and its hashtag, #fittea,

¹⁵⁴ Amanda Lenhart, “Teens, Social Media and Technology Overview 2015,” Pew Research Center, April 2015.

¹⁵⁵ Kara Brown, “The Big Bad World of Products Celebrities Promote on Instagram,” *Jezebel*, July 21, 2015.

is on over 165 thousand posts; Flat Tummy Tea, one of the other largest, has 1.6 million followers and over 72 thousand posts on its hashtag; Teami Blends, whose models even include failed vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin and former bulimic Demi Lovato, has 602 thousand followers and over 123 thousand posts on its hashtags (fig. 19). What is so astounding about these teas, their reach, and the way in which they market themselves through the use of a mixture of envy and sex appeal on more attainable levels than prior advertisements, is that these teas are essentially laxatives. Flat Tummy Tea and Teami both contain senna leaf, a laxative that can be potentially dangerous when used long term, as it can decrease bowel function and shift electrolyte levels in the body.¹⁵⁶ Recommended use is less than one week and at most two weeks; Teami, which has a 30 day detox, and Flat Tummy Tea, which offers two or four week packs, certainly exceed the healthy limit.¹⁵⁷ FitTea and Flat Tummy Shake, created by the makers of Flat Tummy Tea (and which was also promoted by Kim Kardashian in a photo showing her holding, interestingly enough, a jug of milk), both contain hydroxycitric acid (HCA) from the plant *garcinia cambogia*, which also has laxative properties and has been shown to be dangerous to the function of the gastrointestinal tract and liver (fig. 20a).¹⁵⁸ In addition to the danger they pose to consumers,

¹⁵⁶ For ingredients, see “Frequently Asked Questions,” Flat Tummy Co, last modified 2018, and “Teami Detox 30 Days Pack,” Teami Co, last modified 2018. For information on senna leaf, see “Senna,” WebMD, last modified 2018.

¹⁵⁷ “Senna,” National Health Service, last modified 2018.

¹⁵⁸ For ingredients, see “FAQ,” Flat Tummy Co, and “Ingredients,” FitTea, last modified 2018. For information about toxicity in HCA, see Ano Lobb, “Hepatotoxicity Associated with Weight-Loss Supplements: A Case for Better Post-Marketing Surveillance,” *World Journal of Gastroenterology* 15.14 (2009): 1786–1787 and Lily Dara, Jennifer Hewett, and Joseph Kartaik Lim, “Hydroxycut Hepatotoxicity: A Case Series and Review of Liver Toxicity from Herbal Weight Loss Supplements,” *World Journal of Gastroenterology* 14.45 (2008): 6999–7004.

these teas and shakes also mainly help their costumers achieve a “flat tummy” at best by increasing their bowel movements. This, of course, is never acknowledged. The companies use terms like “de-toxify,” “de-bloat,” and “cleanse,” all euphemistic for the fact that Instagram’s hottest celebrities, influencers, and models are likely fairly constantly shitting.

While the dissonance of this image is laughable, it is also dangerous. Laxative use is bulimic and dangerous for the body. And the disavowal of the actual process behind “detoxification” betrays the very real, very physical mess between the images of “perfect” bodies presented en masse in sponsored posts. There is an interesting connection between the inhuman speeding up of the creation of waste caused by laxatives and the intimidating number of posts and their archival under these brands’ hashtags. The hashtag collapses the act of archival, taking a task that would take hundreds of man hours—cataloguing all these posts together—and making it automatic. It is also perhaps because of the seemingly never-ending archive this creates that tea brands have chosen such similar-looking models. More than just having one “look” to promise their clients, the homogeneity makes the archive less intimidating: to see one section of it is to see it all. The branding comes to offer no surprises, so the consumer believes the product won’t either—overfunctioning of the bowels be damned.

In its purest form, a hashtag’s vitality operates in a manner similar to Glamazon’s sneeze-induced pastas and the laxative- or ipecac-induced waste of a bulimic. A seed is planted, but the growth and production it causes is out of its control. Will he hashtag be picked up? Will others use it? Will it multiply, exponentially, creating a phenomenon out of seemingly nowhere? But skinny teas pervert the hashtag, don’t allow for this natural

growth; they rig the game, paying influencers to use the tag and artificially simulate organic growth. The excess is monetarily controlled, and similarly, the waste the teas produce is too. A hashtag is already sped up, superhuman; the marketers behind the teas accelerate the already accelerated, not into the unpredictable, but into the regulated. Similarly, skinny teas, with their 14- or 28-day detoxes, the ability to hashtag what day you're on in a community of other detoxers, places an external schedule on an otherwise personal ritual. They make bulimia into something done en masse, as opposed to the deeply personal, ritualistic disorders of Karen and other bulimics and anorexics.

Skinny teas have found a way to market waste and to make it sexy. Unsurprisingly, however, their foray into anorexic rather than strictly bulimic tendencies has been less well received. Flat Tummy Co recently started producing appetite suppressant lollipops, and Kim Kardashian took to Instagram to market them. However, both the company and Kardashian faced immediate backlash for the lollipops, even causing Kardashian to edit the caption on her Instagram post to remove the ad content (fig. 20b). The issue made the news cycle, and several articles were published condemning the use of appetite suppressants and Kardashian's irresponsibility in promoting them.¹⁵⁹ These articles, however, fail to mention that similarly dangerous behaviors are promoted by the teas already produced and normalized by companies like Flat Tummy Co. In 2018, bulimia

¹⁵⁹ For a small selection, see Cory Stieg, "The Problem with Those Appetite-Suppressant Lollipops Kim Kardashian Is Advertising," *Refinery29*, May 16, 2018, updated July 11, 2018; Helena Horton, "Warning over 'appetite suppressant' lollipops advertised by Instagram celebrities as they send 'toxic' message to young girls," *The Telegraph*, May 16, 2018; and Korin Miller, "Kim Kardashian Is Selling 'Appetite Suppressant' Lollipops—And People Are PISSED," *Women's Health*, May 16, 2018.

remains misunderstood and understudied. Looking forward, making visible the processes in bulimia and understanding eating disorders in a holistic manner will help rectify this.

Appendix of Images

Fig. 1. Screengrabs from *Superstar*, the first from the film's titlecard and the second from an early scene showing a Carpenters performance, show the graininess and image degradation of the film—already low-budget, the image reaches toward illegibility with each illegal copy. These images are taken from an upload of the film to YouTube.



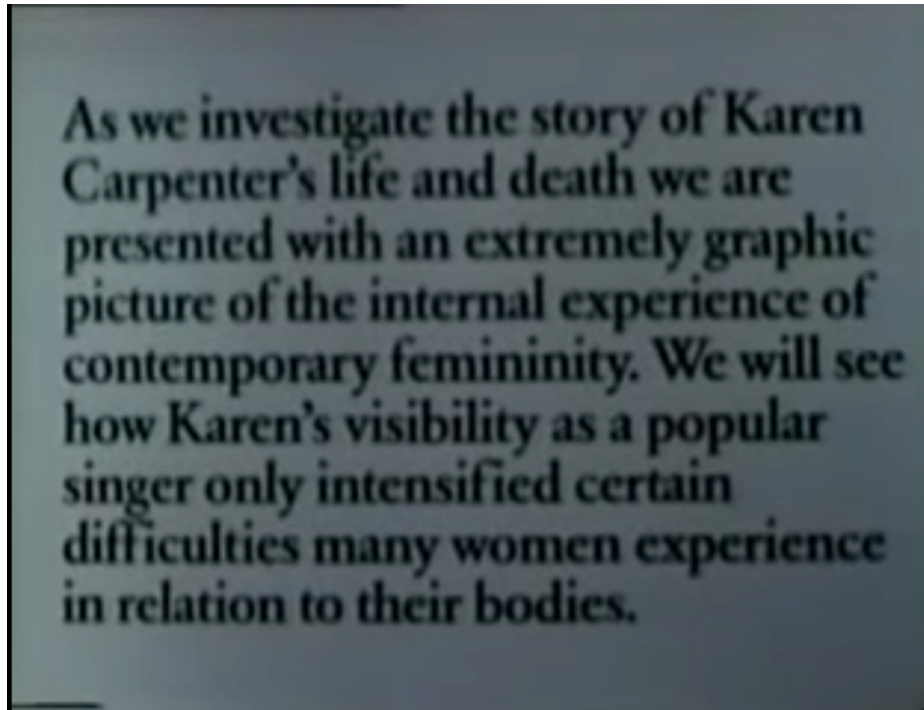
Fig. 2. Anxieties about Barbie’s size over the past few years have prompted a number of articles and studies about the impossibility of Barbie’s proportions. An article published online by the *BBC News Magazine*, entitled “What would a real life Barbie look like?” contains the following illustration.

HOW WOULD A REAL WOMAN LOOK WITH BARBIE’S PROPORTIONS?



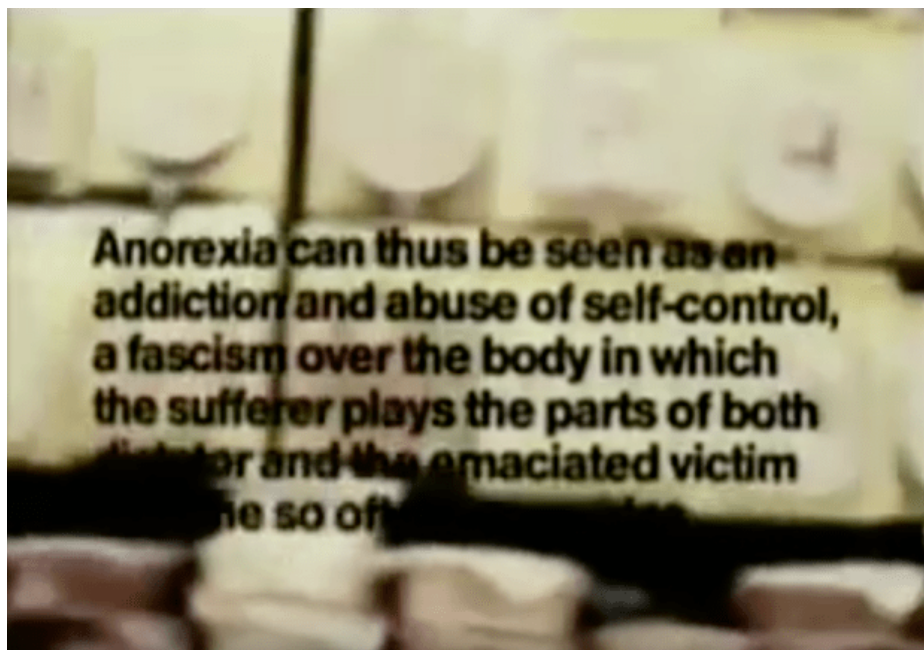
(Source: Denise Winterman, “What would a real life Barbie look like?” *BBC News Magazine*, Mar. 6, 2009.)

Fig. 3. Didactic intertitles from *Superstar*. Fig. 3a appears near the beginning of the film, to silence that fades into “We’ve Only Just Begun,” while Fig. 3b appears in a sequence of intertitles superimposed over a refrigerated grocery aisle, as a voiceover explains postwar changes to food shopping and storage.

A black and white photograph of a rectangular intertitle card with a dark background and white text. The text is a paragraph discussing Karen Carpenter's life and death, and the experience of contemporary femininity.

As we investigate the story of Karen Carpenter's life and death we are presented with an extremely graphic picture of the internal experience of contemporary femininity. We will see how Karen's visibility as a popular singer only intensified certain difficulties many women experience in relation to their bodies.

a.

A black and white photograph of a rectangular intertitle card with a dark background and white text. The text discusses anorexia as an addiction and abuse of self-control. The card is superimposed over a blurred background of a refrigerated grocery aisle.

Anorexia can thus be seen as an addiction and abuse of self-control, a fascism over the body in which the sufferer plays the parts of both dictator and the emaciated victim. The so off...

b.

Fig. 4. Images played during a montage played to the voiceover: “The year is 1970, and suddenly the nation finds itself asking the question: “What if instead of the riots and assassinations, the protests and the drugs, the angry words and hard rock sounds, we were to hear something soft and smooth, and see something of wholesomeness and easy-handed faith?”



a. News footage of bombs dropping.



b. President Ronald Reagan.



c. Young people rioting against police, who hold bayonet-style weapons.



d. President Richard Nixon and daughter Tricia.

Fig. 5. Images from a montage toward the end of the film, shortly before Karen's death, in which Karen deliriously watches television while binge eating.



a. Footage from a beauty pageant.



b. A distorted image of a dance number by the Brady Bunch.



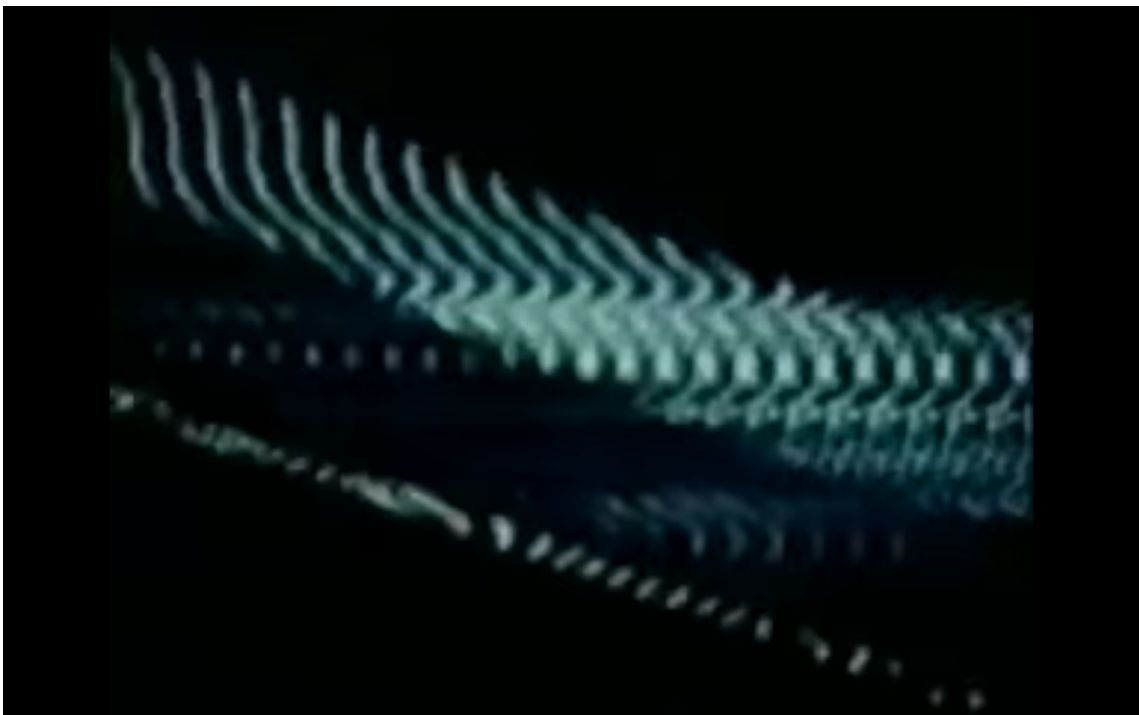
c. A plate of fried chicken with a glass of milk that Karen is perhaps eating, perhaps remembering from a prior meal (such as her smorgasbord at Scandia early in the film).



d. More of Karen's binge food.



e. Karen, both watching television and backdropped by the media she watches as she eats.



f. Static and signal distortion.



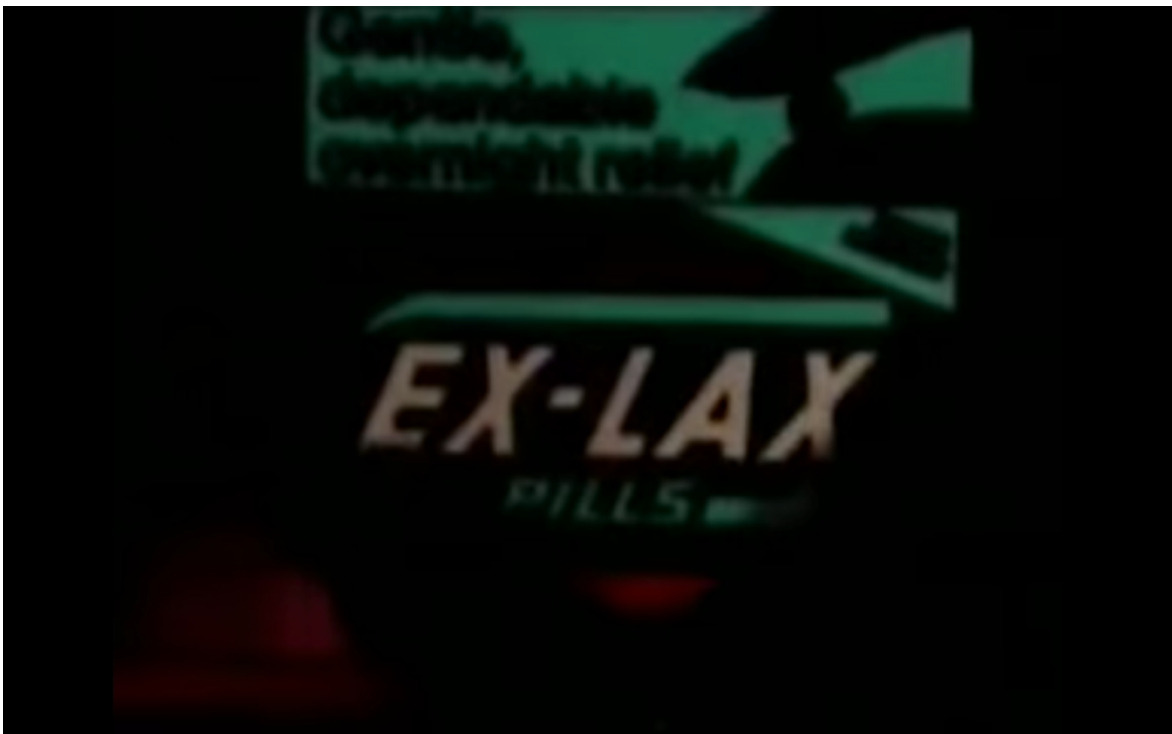
g. A doll being spanked.



h. The body of a female Holocaust victim being dragged by two Nazis, shortly before she is thrown into a mass grave, which Haynes matches with Karen dropping a plate in this scene.



i. A toilet bowl.



j. An Ex-Lax box.

Fig. 6. Stills from *Mary's Cherries*, Mika Rottenberg, 2004.



a. Image from *Border Crossings*, courtesy Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York.



b. Close-up of Mary's red nails. Courtesy Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York.

Fig. 7. Stills from *Tropical Breeze* by Mika Rottenberg, 2004.



a. Bodybuilder Heather Foster in the front cab of her semi truck. Pictured is her end of the pulley system that connects Foster and Felicia Ballos. Image from *Border Crossings*, courtesy Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York.



b. Dancer Felicia Ballos, pictured in the act of picking up a tissue with her feet before sending it forward via pulley to Foster. Courtesy Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York.

Fig. 8. *Cheese* by Mika Rottenberg, 2008.



a. C-print of a still, courtesy Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York.



b. Still courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

Fig. 9. *NoNoseKnows*, Mika Rottenberg, 2015.



a. Bunny Glamazon, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.



b. Chinese workers from the pearl factory, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.



c. Installation view from the 2015 Venice Biennale. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery.



d. Bunny Glamazon driving her motorized scooter through a Chinese city park. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery.



e. One of the rooms with smoke-filled bubbles in Glamazon's office building. Also in the room are bags of pearls, such as those included in the video's installation. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery.



f. Glamazon sitting at her office desk, surrounded by noodles on one side and flowers on the other. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery.

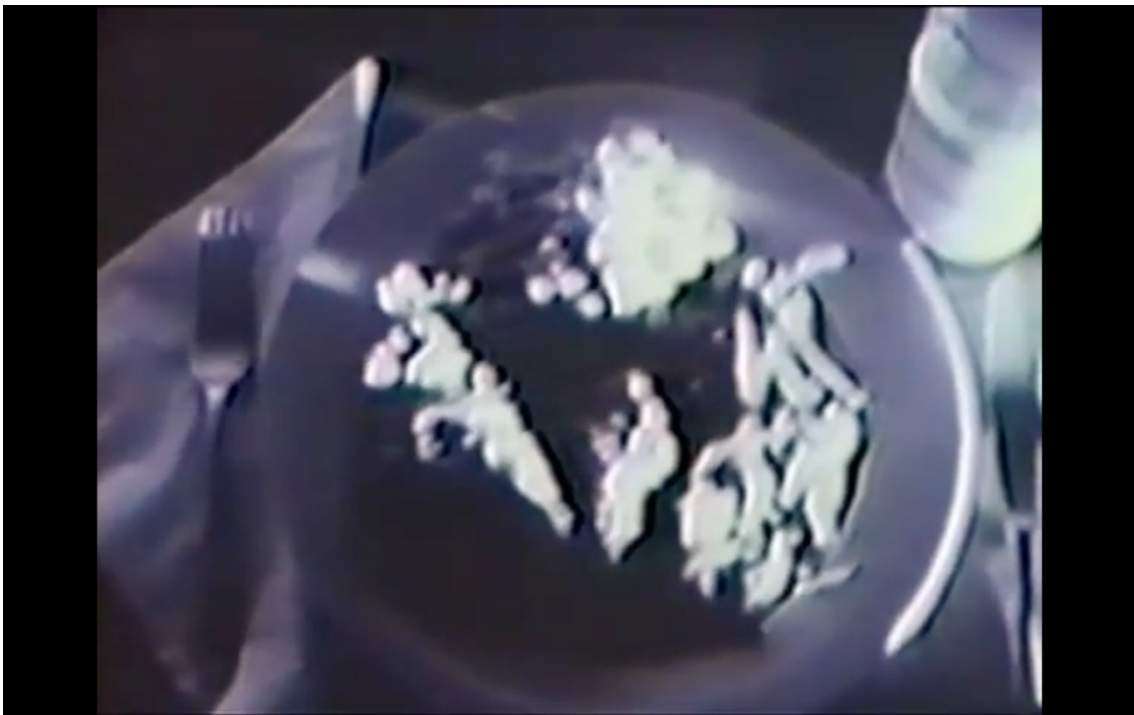


g. Bunny Glamazon's nose immediately pre-sneeze. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery.



h. Noodles stacked on top of each other; the plates Glamazon sneezes are added to the pile of plates already present. Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery.

Fig. 10. Images of the binge-purge visual cycle from *Superstar*.



a. Image of fried chicken that Karen presumably eats at the “smorgasbord” at Scandia



b. Fried chicken image fading into the image of an Ex-Lax box



c. The Ex-Lax box fills the screen as peaceful music plays.

Fig. 11. Bunny Glamazon sticking her nose through a hole in *NoNoseKnows*.



Fig. 12. The Mamava suite for nursing; images courtesy of their website, mamava.com, © 2018.



Fig. 13. Pollution in *NoNoseKnows* and *Safe*, dir. Todd Haynes, 1995.



a. Surgical mask on pedestrian in *NoNoseKnows*. Glamazon appears only after this pedestrian has left the screen. Zhuji, where *NoNoseKnows* was filmed, is in the top 200 most polluted cities in the world.



b. Trash seen during Glamazon's office commute in *NoNoseKnows*.

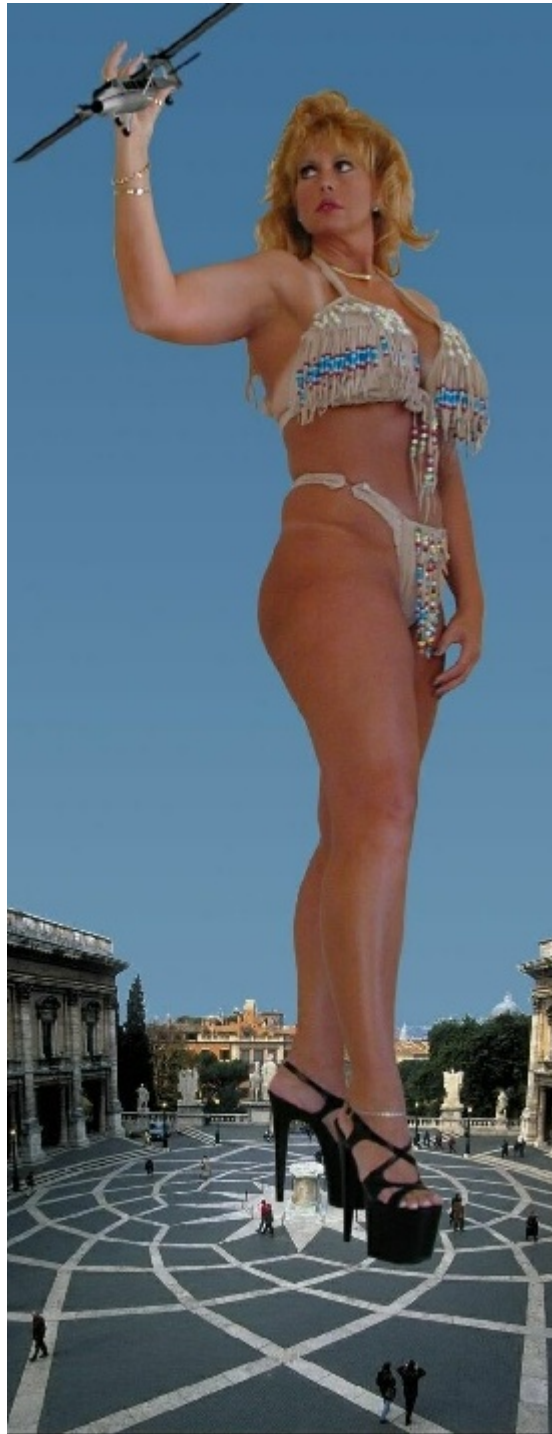


c. Exhaust fumes coming from the truck in front of Carol White's car in *Safe*, triggering her to have an asthma-cum-panic attack.



b. Carol coughing and wheezing in pain.

Fig. 14. Images of Bunny Glamazon as a fetish performer and “Bunny’s bio,” courtesy of her website, bunnyglamazon.com, © 2003-2012.



a.



b.

Bunny's Bio

Hello. My name is Bunny Sue, but you may know me as Bunny Glamazon. Raised in a southern town in Indiana, I moved around the country until finally settling in Georgia in 1990.

Life can be difficult for a 6th grader, who is already six feet tall and wearing a size ten shoe. I towered over my fellow students and teachers alike. And to top it all off, my real name is Bunny Sue. Not only was I harassed because of my height but can you imagine what I went through being over six feet tall with a name like Bunny? It gave me a real appreciation for "A Boy Named Sue."

To support my two children, I started out my career as an exotic dancer. This led to a traveling feature show and wrestling and domination at clubs throughout the country. After retiring for a couple of years, I attempted to re-enter the industry and was told my only option was porn. I gave them a "no thank you" and proceeded to build my own career.

After doing well on a couple of wrestling sites, I went on to open my own web site. I had a good relationship with my, then, partners but after some creative differences and failing to come to an understanding, It was time to move on to "bigger and better" projects.

I have opened a new, user friendly website. I hope you enjoy what I have to offer. I am fortunate to enjoy what I do in my sessions. I bring your fantasies into reality and our sessions are always private, confidential and discrete. I am also looking for my soul mate. I have more information about that in my member's area.

Welcome to my world. Enjoy.

Bunny

c.

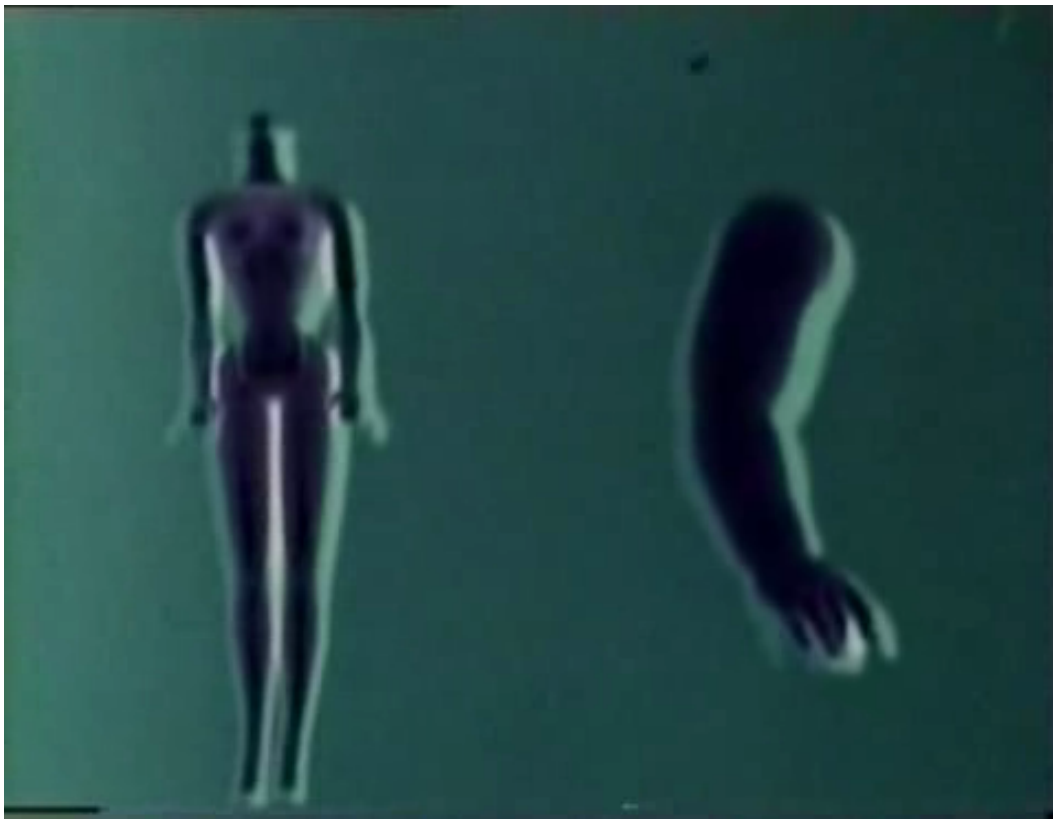
Fig. 15. Todd Haynes mutilated the dolls he used in *Superstar* by carving, burning, and painting them.



a. Because of the quality of the movie, it is difficult to see too much detail, but gashes and carving are evident in the doll's cheek and arm.



b. Similar cutting, disfiguration, and gashes are seen here.



- c. An image showing a headless Barbie and a dismembered doll's arm. To show a similar image with a human body would have elicited a very different reaction.

Fig. 16. Cynthia Gibbs, who played Karen Carpenter in *The Karen Carpenter Story* (dir. Joseph Sargent, 1989), had limitations on the amount of weight she could healthily lose for the film. Compare Gibbs and Karen Carpenter in these images.



a. One of only two shots in which Cynthia Gibbs's thinness is shown, from when Karen is still in rehab and at her almost thinnest.



b. Karen at one of her lowest weights. © Michael Ochs, 1977.



c. Gibbs's face in *The Karen Carpenter Story*.



d. Karen Carpenter's face at her lowest weight, from a ABC's Good Morning America interview on August 10, 1981. From Karen-Carpenter, "Karen Carpenter at her Anorexic Worst Anorexia Nervosa Part 2," YouTube.

Fig. 17. Brandon Routh's "Got Milk?" campaign for the film *Superman Returns*, California Milk Processor Board, May 2006.



Fig. 18. “Creepy” characters in popular culture drinking milk. Images taken from Silvia Killingsworth’s “Why Is It So Creepy to Drink Milk?” *The Awl*, Oct. 24, 2006.



a. Javier Bardem as Anton Chigurh in *No Country for Old Men* (2007).



b. Alex, played by Malcolm McDowell, in *A Clockwork Orange* (1971).



c. Liam McPoyle, portrayed by Jimmi Simpson, from *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, pictured here with his brother and sister.

Fig. 19. Carol White after having been handed milk by her maid in *Safe*.



Fig. 19. Sarah Palin's Teami Blends Instagram from April 19, 2018.



Fig. 20. Images from Kim Kardashian's Instagram selling products by Flat Tummy Co.



a. Kim Kardashian selling Flat Tummy Co shakes to little backlash, using a jug of milk.



b. Kardashian's post selling appetite suppressant lollipops. The caption was changed after she faced backlash; it originally read, "#ad You guys... @flattummyco just dropped a new product. They're Appetite Suppressant Lollipops and they're literally unreal. They're giving the first 500 people on their website 15% OFF so if you want to get your hands on some... you need to do it quick! #suckit." Flat Tummy Co, however, remains tagged.

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