


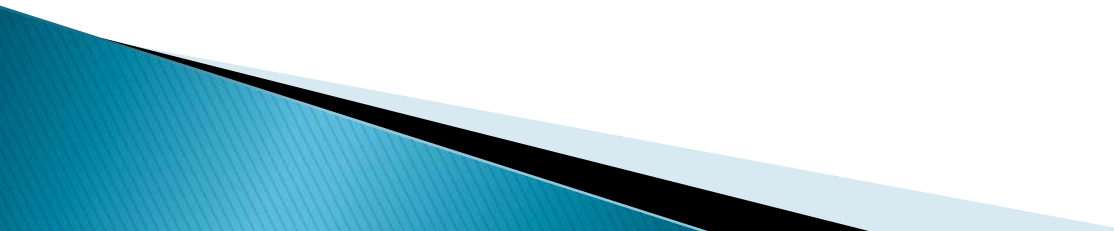
*Exploring conformity and
resistance in young women's
'anorexic' embodiment*

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Aims

- ▶ Exploring the significance(s) of bodies and images-of-bodies in understanding 'anorexia'
 - ▶ The relationship(s) of (young women's) 'anorexic' bodies to images-of-bodies and to bodies-treated/experienced-as-images
 - ▶ Reading social control and resistance into anorexic bodies and their relationship to images/social values
 - ▶ 'Anorexic' bodies as symptomatic of both 'over'–control and/or resistance to images of bodies and their cultural values
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Background

- ▶ Anorexia: a condition impacting (increasingly) on people of all ages, ethnicities, genders
 - ▶ 1% girls and young women (12–20yrs)
 - ▶ characterised by BMI < 18, ‘fear of fatness’ severe distress, effects of self-starvation, high mortality
 - ▶ Multiple aetiological factors
 - ▶ ‘Anorexia’ as culture-bound syndrome
 - ▶ Associated with culturally dominant ‘thin ideal’ and widespread body dissatisfaction
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Anorexia as culture bound

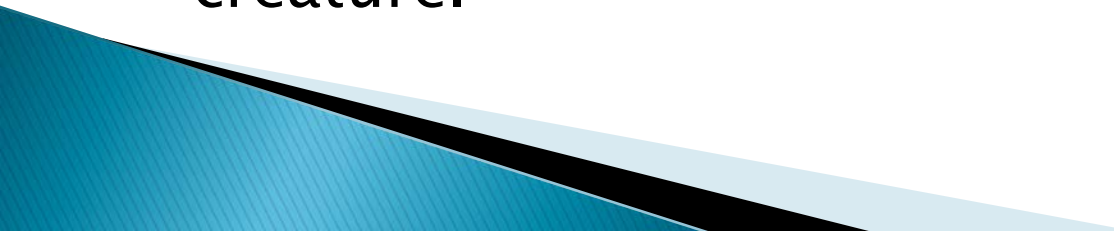
- ▶ As a problem of body image?
- ▶ As an 'over-conformity' to the thin ideal?
- ▶ As response to hegemonic images of idealised thin female bodies?



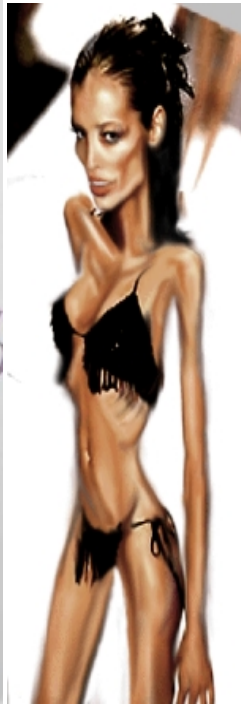
Interviews with young women

Wendy: It was all tied up with the image that it was good to be slim and you'd attract the boys if you were slim.

Elaine: It seems to be the big thing that that a pop star can say: well I was anorexic ten years ago. It's like: poor you, kind of thing or something like that. I'm not exactly sure what they want. *They want to be seen* as having this illness for some reason.... There's this whole glamorous thing about (.) you know (.) this poor yeah poor ill creature seems so glamorous to the world for some reason. (.) And it was the same with Princess Diana. Everybody wanted to *know* about this poor creature.



*Anorexia as problem of body image :
As itself a spectacle caused by (images of)
spectacular female bodies*



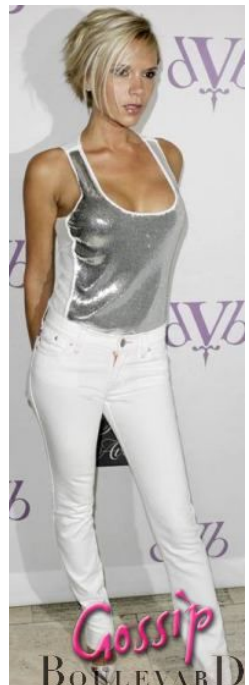
Yes but....

Derogatory stereotypes

“the image of anorexia as a transitory, self-inflicted problem developed by young women lost in their world of fashion and calorie restricting is a belittling stereotype that may mask women’s real worries.” (Katzman and Lee, 1997: 389)

‘Anorexia’ as itself a high profile media spectacle expressing ambiguity about femininity

Digital media: Proliferation of niche media.
No longer the (singular) thin ideal.
Many meanings



Engaging with cultural contexts and multiple meaning

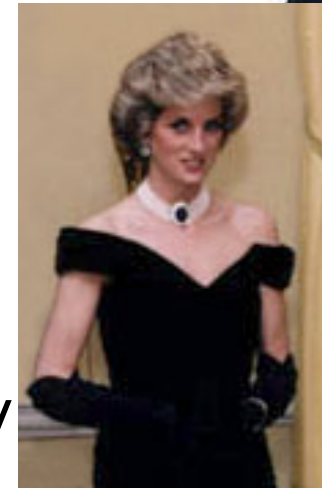
- ▶ Anorexia as response to patriarchally prescribed femininity (e.g. Orbach 1993; Fallon et al., 1994; Chernin, 1983)
- ▶ Critical perspectives: 'anorexia' as collectivities of heavily gendered discursive constructions
- ▶ Multiple meanings
 - hyper-feminine (beauty, fragility, pathology, petite femininity) *and* as rejection of femininity
 - a process of self-production *and* self-destruction
 - a search for selfhood *and* sainthood
 - exerting control *and* losing control
 - expressing ethic of anti-consumption *and* conformity to values of mass-consumer culture – hyper-thin as 'hyper-cool'
 - becoming both more *and* less visible: **anorexia as spectacle**
 - Resisting and (over) conforming to social control
 - denying and insisting on the body

Anorexia as spectacle

Elaine: ...There's this whole glamorous thing about (.) you know (.) this poor yeah poor ill creature seems so glamorous to the world for some reason. (.) And it was the same with Princess Diana. Everybody wanted to *know* about this poor creature.

Conforming to 'the thin ideal' and femininity

A spectacle with many contradictory meanings

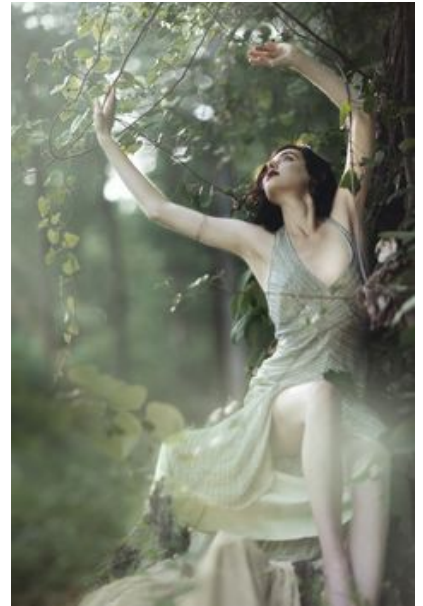


Multiple meanings

Nicki: if they say you look dreadful today that just makes you feel good. ... I mean I just wanted to die anyway so not eating, becoming smaller is very relevant to that.

Tricia: I remember sort of looking in the mirror and actually being surprised that I saw a form in the mirror and not just a nothingness

- ▶ Self-destruction
- ▶ Liminal / ethereal femininities
- ▶ Appearing *and* disappearing




Dis/appearing bodies

Nicki: Its just a way of like trying to disappear ...

Penny: I think it was a fear of being me ... I just wanted to fade away ...

Mandy: I think um a lot of doctors tend to just focus on: somebody looks that thin, they're actually *wanting* somebody to see what's going on. ... And the actual um, the physical appearance is much more to do with um *not* wanting to be seen in in some ways, um. There's sort of a a feeling there of wanting to just fade into the background literally.



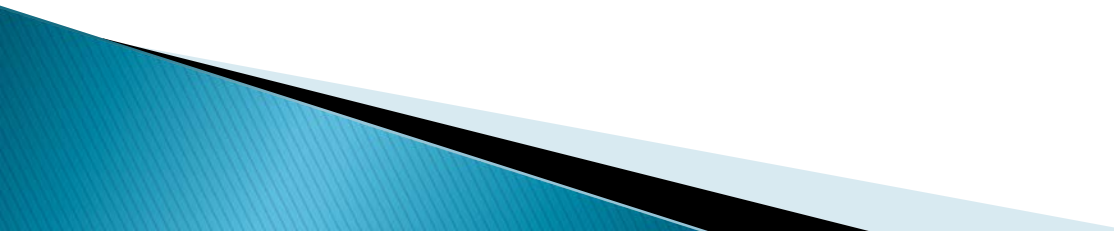
Dis/appearing bodies

Anorexia as

- ▶ becoming more *and* less visible
- ▶ a pursuit of a 'look'
- ▶ a process of disappearing
- ▶ a form of self-destruction
- ▶ an attempt to evade appearing (feminine) and appearance
- ▶ evading the tyranny of images
- ▶ a protest against cultural regulation of the body-as-image

The body as (only) image

If, today, there can be such an intense fascination with the fate of the body, might it not be because the body no longer exists Everywhere today the aestheticization of the body and its dissolution into a semiurgy of floating body parts reveals that we are being processed through a media scene consisting of our own (exteriorized) body organs in the form of second-order simulacra Never has the body (as a floating sign-system...) been so necessary for the teleonomic functioning of the system and yet never has the body ... been so superfluous to the operation of advanced capitalist culture. In technological society, the body has achieved a purely rhetorical existence Indeed, why the concern over the body today if not to emphasise the fact that the (natural) body in the postmodern condition has already disappeared, and what we experience as the body is only a fantastic simulacrum of body rhetoric. (Kroker & Kroker, 1987: 21–23)



Conclusions

Anorexia as

- ▶ spectacular conformity and spectacular resistance
 - ▶ 'anorexia' as hyper-conformity to images of idealised thin femininity
 - ▶ multiple contradictory meanings – including rejection of image of idealised thin femininity
 - ▶ gendered performance of living in the body-as-image
 - ▶ a protest against cultural regulation of bodies as commodified image vs fleshly embodiment
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