

The Wavering Mouth

The mouth of the anorexic wavers between several functions: its possessor is uncertain as to whether it is an eating-machine, an anal machine, a talking-machine, or a breathing-machine.¹

Deleuze & Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*

Anorexia is a symptomatic dissent from the mode of production. The anorexic is a dignified narcissist who scoffs at the pleasure of consumption. Her proud mouth refuses designation and functionality.* She makes breaks in the flow of production by giving it *nothing*, just the nothingness itself.² In the absence of a *thing*, she finds solace in what isn't seen or there, what isn't produced and consumed.

Her wish to disengage from the material world is synonymous with the amputated *lowercase i*; this detachment is what results in the gap between the i-head and i-body. The hovering i-head of the anorexic, however, does not feel remorse. The disconnection only magnifies the compulsion to cut up everything that lays in front, like the initial crack in a glass wall fanning out of control. The anorexic i is fragmentary by nature. Her mathematics is of division and multiplication, not of addition or subtraction. She divides and multiplies to grapple with the fear of what she doesn't understand or what she finds horrifying.³

To spot a modern anorexic at the local grocery store, one must look out for a bag filled with coke zero, sugar-free jello, low-fat cheese, and other things accompanied by the prefixes such as low-x, zero-y, or z-free. These products signify a substitute of a thing by cutting off or out the original, and as a result, the nothing replaces the thing. The nothing in a bottle of diet coke, for instance, replaces the desire for regular coke, where the subject receives only a hologram of the real thing.

¹ Deleuze, Gilles & Guattari, Felix. "The Desiring-Machines." 1-50. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by Robert Hurley et al. New York: Penguin Group

* Throughout the chapter, I will be using female pronouns to refer to the anorexic for metaphorical and grammatical uniformity. Meanwhile, this shall not preclude the population of male anorexics. I use the term 'anorexia' as a descriptor for the illness, as well as a state of mind, a certain compulsion or ideology which inhabits the psyche. Later in the text, I discuss the 'proana' movement as a desire to echo this ideology.

² Domenico Cosenza, "Body and Language in Eating Disorders," *European Journal of Psychoanalysis* (2016): <https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/body-and-language-in-eating-disorders-1/>

"Lacan introduces 'nothing' as an object cause of anorexia nervosa, debunking a common belief and clear phenomenal fact: that the anorexic patient does not eat. Lacan writes, instead, that: the anorexic subject eats the object 'nothing'"

³ Laing, R.D.. 1959. *The Divided Self*. London, England: Penguin Books

"The self tries to destroy the world by reducing it to dust and ashes, without assimilating it. Its hatred reduces the object to nothing, without digesting it."

I have a habit of watching Mukbangs for hours when i get into bed, as i fast regularly, and it helps satisfy cravings. But, lately I realised that I have become delusional and thought momentarily I had eaten the food myself! Like I have begun to feel guilty for watching someone eat. Has anyone else experienced this, or something similar? This accompanied with nightmares of eating is driving me crazy!⁴

It is not uncommon for anorexics to indulge in these types of content as a way to circumvent their anxiety around food. The anorexic voyeur enjoys the performative engulfment of the very thing she avoids, simultaneously disgusted and astonished at the sight of this being.⁵ The pornographic character of the *Mukbang** enables the anorexic to sublimate her desires in a form of aesthetic voyeurism. Her desires are satisfied without having to participate in the actual activity.⁶ She is able to maintain her voyeuristic gaze by deliberately refraining from her desire for the thing.

She simultaneously begins to develop a guilty conscience; she hallucinates and dreams of the grotesquerie, which further amplifies her fear for the object. It seems as though even her own senses could no longer be trusted.

I can only trust my breasts now. I like my breasts, nothing can be killed by them. Hand, foot, tongue, gaze, all weapons from which nothing is safe. But not my breasts. With my round breasts, I'm okay. Still okay. So why do they keep on shrinking? Not even round anymore. Why? Why am I changing like this? Why are my edges all sharpening – what am I going to gouge?⁷

One day, a horrifying dream turns her suddenly repulsed by the flesh and blood of animal meat, including her own. The strong reaction to the dream instigates a hunger journey, quitting animal products altogether. The more Yeonghye trims her body, the sharper it gets. The rejected body has turned itself into a weapon against Yeonghye herself. Her organs are no longer organs, slowly failing to serve their organic function as they are met with the host's perpetual hostility. It

⁴ @bvenus02. 2019. "THOUGHTS ON MUKBANGS." mpa. Oct 16, 2019 8:37am. <https://www.myproana.com/index.php/topic/3870291-thoughts-on-mukbangs/>.

* The term Mukbang 먹방 originates from a Korean internet phenomenon where a media person, often an online personality or influencer, eats a theatrical amount of food in front of a camera for the viewer's entertainment.

⁵ Freud, Sigmund. 2005. *On Murder, Mourning, and Melancholia*. London: Penguin Books.

"The ego may enjoy in this the satisfaction of knowing itself as the better of the two, as superior to the object."

⁶ Domenico Cosenza, "Body and Language in Eating Disorders."

"Anorexia highlights the importance of not confusing the object of desire, which is in front of us, a phenomenal object of the world, with the object that causes desire,..."

⁷ Han, Kang. *The Vegetarian*. Translated by Deborah Smith, Hogarth, 2015.

seems that no matter how hard she tries to defend herself, her body takes the shape akin to a stabbing knife, a pointy finger, or a pair of sharp scissors. Her body is betraying her and she's resisting it, but it's only a losing game on her part.

The Vegetarian visualizes the notion of power and its paradoxical nature through a female protagonist who suffers from a deep hatred for animal consumption. The formal dynamics of the round shrinking breasts versus the sharpening rest of the body portray the antagonistic shapes of social and societal power structures.⁸ Among all the parts of her body that are turning against her, she feels most grieved by her quietly surrendering breasts, which she had favored over the rest. Younghye's self-inflicted starvation is not taken so kindly by her family, turning into a justification for further abuse and harassment. Her resoluteness and silence only anger her surroundings, including her own severed body.

Likewise, the anorexic takes pleasure and feels entitled to the degree of control she is able to impose on her body, however the body slowly begins to devour the anorexic the more she believes to be in control.⁹ Her abstinence becomes an obsessive regime to prove her sense of autonomy, such as isolating herself in order to refuse external temptations and achieve maximized focus. The nothing that the anorexic desires is the refusal of the other. This conscious refusal, on one hand, is a conspicuous display of luxury and superiority, and on the other hand, a paranoid response to the glut of mass production and consumption. But the nothing has a deceptive face of a *something* to give meaning and virtue in the face of profound loss.

For a long time now I have been rendered into a state of disarray. I'm a guy with an eating disorder but my eating disorder voice is a girl. You often hear of "goddess ana" as a passing joke, but could she actually be real? If not, what is this that I'm experiencing? After watching starving in suburbia, noting the similarity between the purportedly fictional "goddess ana" and the voice that I hear in my head has left me awestruck. It's the same alluring voice.¹⁰

⁸ Bordo, Susan. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. 1993. California: University of California Press. "the "relentless pursuit of excessive thinness" is an attempt to embody certain values, to create a body that will speak for the self in a meaningful and powerful way."

⁹ Ibid.

"Within a Foucauldian framework, power and pleasure do not cancel each other. Thus, the heady experience of feeling powerful or "in control," far from being a necessarily accurate reflection of one's social position, is always suspect as itself the product of power relations whose shape may be very different."

¹⁰ @Guest_vitriol_*. 2016. "If ana or 'goddess ana' isn't real then what is this?..." mpa. Jul 01, 2016 7:50pm. <https://www.myproana.com/index.php/topic/643202-if-ana-or-goddess-ana-isnt-real-then-what-is-this-do-you-guys-hear-her/>.

The other has been superseded by the voice in his head, the *Goddess Ana*. Ana embodies the shared existence of the desire for nothing and an anorexic superego. She is a symbol of feminine sainthood, a sublime object beyond the realm of mortal concerns.¹¹ Ana is a beautiful young girl who isn't particularly interested in food, which is the secret to her *je ne sais quoi*. Her voice is characteristically and univocally female because she is a figure of a collective consciousness, the icon-object of the nothing.¹²

Around the same time as film noir rose to popularity, there has been perhaps a relevant cultural shift from anorexia as a form of neurosis to narcissism. The voiceover is a cinematic device, often employed as a means to keep a nonchalant distance between the speaking subject and the acting subject. Copjec examines the "intemporal voice" of the narrator in film noir, suggesting that the voice bears "the burden of a living death, a kind of inexhaustible painful/pleasurable suffering."¹³ She continues, "the voiceover narration serves less to describe or attempt to describe the world that the narrator inhabited than to present that world at the point where he is abstracted from it."¹⁴ Similarly, the delocalized voice of Ana further withdraws the anorexic from the world of the other, creating a delirious echo chamber.

Although no less authoritative, the goddess Ana is an antithetical being against the faceless patriarchy. The Ana voice proves to be useful insofar as it is understood as a symbolic tool to express the inexpressible, to bring desire to the horizon of consciousness without turning it into a cheap object of consumption. Her existence is yet an oxymoron, as it painfully contradicts the anorexic desire to become and to consume nothing. She annihilates the anorexic's resistance against the materialist economy. Once defined and turned into a thing, it is no longer the nothing that the anorexic had initially wished for. The Goddess Ana surveils the anorexic and imposes

¹¹ Bordo, Susan. *Unbearable Weight*.

Bordo analyzes a FibreThin commercial: "...she has achieved a state beyond craving. Undominated by unsatisfied, internal need, she eats not only freely but without deep desire and without apparent consequence."

¹² Domenico Cosenza, "Body and Language in Eating Disorders."

"Freud discovered in the symptom: there is not only the satisfaction arising from the compromise between the pulsion forces and the repression forces; there is also the enjoyment of the symbolic satisfaction that involves disappointment and the capture of an empty object and not simply a satisfaction of a supposed need."

¹³ Copjec, Joan. *Read My Desire*.

¹⁴ Lasch, Christopher. *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*. New York: Warner Books, 1979.

"The decline of the institutionalized authority in an ostensibly permissive society does not, however, lead to a decline of the superego in individuals," writes Christopher Lasch, "It encourages instead the development of a harsh punitive superego that derives most of its psychic energy, in the absence of authoritative social prohibitions, from the destructive, aggressive impulses within the id."

strict demands. This is the kind of drawback that the anorexic reveals in her effort to consolidate her desire.¹⁵

The anorexic-narcissus can be differentiated from the traditional anorexic-martyr, a saint who sacrifices her appetite to compensate for the impending guilt in the suffering of others. The modern anorexic, by contrast, is committed to a performative image of suffering, feeling heroic as she takes an individualist stance against the world she so despises.

Unable to insert the other in the equation of the self, she is reverted back to an infantile state, like a child locking himself in his room as a way of protest. This child believes that, by temporarily removing himself from the other, he will gain a sense of sovereignty. A narcissist intuitively understands that the most upsetting response from the other is a null one, a silence that propels the subject to a feeling of invisibility and inner emptiness. In the case that the parent decides to liberate the child as he wishes (by letting him stay in his room), he is met with an unexpected coolness, feeling altogether abandoned and ignored.¹⁶ The child eventually associates his sovereignty with this sense of unknowability and self-preservation.

I started controlling again. I'm eating less calories and walking more steps. I'm back to being the freak that I used to be. I know I don't want to get back with him. That comes from my heart. But part of me still wants to control his emotions from afar. I realized this is what I do. What I do to get people to like me and hate me. The more I do it, I lose touch of myself. I turn my existence for others. I fake it and I lose it. I think I'm winning but I'm only playing a suicide game. There's no 'me' by the end of it.¹⁷

Like the locked child, the anorexic-narcissus aspires not only to be in control of her own corporal material, but also naively believes that her ability to control herself has a kind of magical power. Unfortunately, her magical thought is holographic, a false illusion of the real and a wall against the other. Though she is not the kind of narcissist to resort to hedonistic pleasures, she boasts a sense of moral superiority in her loneliness and isolation. Her suffering gains value

¹⁵ Zizek, Slavoj. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. Verso Books, 2009.

Slavoj Zizek mentions in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, "Cynical distance is just one way—one of many ways—to blind ourselves to the structuring power of ideological fantasy: even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, we are still doing them."

¹⁶ Ibid.

"It is freedom itself that is reconceptualized by the psychoanalytic concept of will: the subject's only freedom consists precisely in its ability to disregard all circumstances, causes, conditions, all promises of reward or punishment for its actions."

¹⁷ Personal journal. 8 Aug., 2021. 12:03pm

by means of secrecy, as opposed to sharing her pain with others.¹⁸ This inner child of the anorexic stays bored, appearing totally unstimulated and unaffected by worldly pleasures.

She inhabits a perpetual realm of boredom in the lack of external stimulation.

지루하다[jiruhada], the Korean word for ‘bored’ or ‘boring’, comes from an archaic word 지리하다[jirihada].¹⁹ And 지리[jiri] originates from old Chinese, 支離[zhili]. Zhuangzi, an ancient Chinese philosopher, introduces a figure named 支離疏[zhilishu], also known as *Crippled Su*.²⁰ The character 支[zhi] is described as a division of the body and 離[li], its dispersal. In his account, Su is a hunchback with physical deformities, such as his “face hidden below in his navel” and “shoulders higher than his head”.²¹ This ailment exempts him from military conscription and arduous public labor. He even receives a generous amount of governmental aid, namely “three big measures of grain and ten bundles of firewood”.²²

그 몸을 지리支離하게 한 사람도 충분히 자기 몸을 잘 기르고 천수天壽를 마치는데, 또 하물며 그 덕을 지리支離하게 한 사람이겠는가!²³

Behold, he who is physically deformed can still manage to make his living and live out his life, let alone the one who is spiritually deformed!²⁴

The disintegrated body of Su departs from the standard, and is thus deemed useless to be a mechanical component for society. Yet his uselessness is not a *lack*, as his body contains all the necessary organs for survival—they are simply misplaced. Rather, his body rejects public utility, and as a result, gains a peculiar form of sovereignty against national duties and virtues. The Korean 지리[jiri], which comes from 支離[zhili], similarly describes an incoherent state of division and dispersal.²⁵ Thus, boredom and fragmentation seems to share a common origin in the Korean language. There is an excruciating sense of time-passing and aimlessness felt through boredom.

¹⁸ Lasch, Christopher. *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*.

As Lasch describes, “Beneath the concern for performance lies a deeper determination to manipulate the feelings of others to your own advantage.”

¹⁹ 민송기. “[민송기의 우리말 이야기] 지리멸렬〈支離滅裂〉,” Maeil Business News (2014):

<http://news.imaail.com/page/view/2014122207045578450>

²⁰ Zi, Zhuang. *The Wisdom of Zhuang Zi on Daoism*, translated with annotations and commentaries by Chung Wu. 2008. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ 민송기. “[민송기의 우리말 이야기] 지리멸렬〈支離滅裂〉.”

²⁴ Zi, Zhuang. *The Wisdom of Zhuang Zi on Daoism*.

²⁵ Ibid.

We find modern boredom to be especially harrowing because life is no longer about getting by and living out, but instead we are to actively find and fulfill our subjective virtues. Such a fragmented state of boredom signifies a loss of all meaning, like the anorexic's wavering mouth that chews on nothing.

The anorexic is a narcissist against the culture of narcissism. She demonstrates a sort of resistance—not so easily submitting herself—to a cycle of endless gratification, to the economy of production and consumption. To submit herself to this splitting sense of boredom and starvation reveals a pessimistic indignation at the excess of modern culture. She torments and fragments herself in this nothingness, because it is the only way she knows how to protect herself from a world she does not understand. She stays bored, and the anorexic body becomes the other to the self. Only her shrinking body, the cutting edges of the anorexic figure can speak for her suffering inner narcissist. She cannot love anyone, let alone eat. *Hunger hurts but it works when it costs too much to love.*²⁶

²⁶ Fiona Apple, "Paper Bag," Track 5 on *When the Pawn...*, Epic Records, 1999.