

Introduction

Screen Bodies and Eating Disorders

The genesis of this book lies at the intersection of three paths I have traveled in my personal and professional life: the first as a clinical psychologist specializing in the treatment of eating disorders and body image disturbance, the second as a university professor of cultural studies and psychology, and the third as a passionate moviegoer. But it grows even more deeply out of lifetime membership in the diverse community of women who come of age in what I call “the culture of eating disorders”—a world in which food has become more taboo than sex ever was and the bathroom scale more challenging a confrontation than the confessional booth. If fitness is the new religion and slenderness represents spiritual perfection then surely food abstinence is both piety and purity, reviving the asceticism of fasting medieval girl-saints and pioneering health faddists such as Sylvester Graham who exhorted American mothers to protect their families from gluttony, wanton sexuality, and moral depravity by making his legendary bran cracker “the centerpiece of a stark but flavorful life.”¹ Renunciation has replaced indulgence in the sinful pleasure of eating while vigilance is the rule of the table; the dollop of whipped cream on a cup of cappuccino is removed as gingerly as if it were a time bomb, while the bowl of peanuts is pushed to the other side of the table to ensure a safe distance from temptation. The age-old sisterhood of trading recipes and exchanging food traditions and tastes has been replaced by a different bond: what women in a weight-obsessed culture share most of all is a fear of food and its dreaded outcome—fat.

For more than thirty years I have counseled women and girls whose eating and weight problems are the all too vivid manifestations of a diet culture run amok. Many of my most memorable cases have been

dramatic and tragic—from the sixty-five-pound anorexic girl hooked up to naso-gastric feeding tubes who stashed her meal tray in the hospital ceiling tiles over her bed to the 350-pound binge eater driven to demolish her children’s snack packs in the pantry at three in the morning and the fifty-two-year-old life-long bulimic woman who never divulged her shameful secret to her family. Countless others have shared stories less sensational but just as telling. These are the thousands of women, college students, teens, and tweens I have seen in therapy or taught in courses or met with in small groups around the country and overseas who get up each morning touching their abdomens to see if they are sufficiently flat, who quiet growling bellies with *venti* black coffees and endless diet energy drinks while holding out until evening to devour their daily allowance of steamed vegetables and sugar free/ fat free ice cream, who count calories instead of sheep as they drift off to sleep. Such food and body anxieties echo far beyond the eating disorder hospital and the therapist’s office to the gym, the fitting room at the mall, and the office cafeteria where women inhabit a calorie conscious territory bounded by “legal” and “forbidden” rations or worry their way through daily workouts convinced their thighs are jiggling with dreaded cellulite while calculating how much they can go into debt for corrective liposuction surgery. Ashamed and demoralized at gaining weight they skip college reunions and weddings or avoid the beach on the hottest of days, while others just as fiercely maintain dangerously low weights because everyone tells them they “look good.”

While each woman’s story is uniquely her own, it shares one common and implacable theme: a troubled relationship to the body’s “look”—its size and shape, sexual attractiveness, its exposure both dressed and undressed—in a consumer beauty culture where the body has become inextricably linked to personal identity and self-worth. Surface has replaced core; internal character virtues such as integrity and courage are subordinated to external manifestations of bodily control and discipline while self-concept is synonymous with body image.² Today the toned body represents strength of character: it signifies the “will power” to abstain from overeating as well as a praiseworthy dedication to shape the unshapely form through devotion to exercise and investment of personal capital in its physical rehabilitation.

Even more poignantly than their stories of body hatred and shame, what women and girls talk about how is they *want* to look—their fantasies of transformation into their “dream bodies.” The most

powerful visions, which drive them to starve on a raw vegetable diet or save their money for tummy tucks, are found not in the mirror but in the movies. As film scholar Richard Dyer reminds us: “Your ideas about who you are don’t just come from inside you; they come from the culture. And in this culture they come especially from the movies. We learn from the movies what it means to be a man or a woman.” Put still more succinctly by actor Tony Curtis: “The movies is where we learn about life.”³

It is in this sense that all visual media productions “teach” viewers about femininity and male desire, power, and love, through their circulation of images that literally *embody* popular cultural meanings and values. But no other medium, even in the face of a vast array of new media technologies, constructs images with such extraordinary immediacy as the cinema—and it is the image of the screen body that most compels our attention. We may soon forget the dialogue we hear in the screenplay of a film but we take away indelible visual memories of how the characters dressed, moved, and revealed their bodies both to the camera and our own gaze. And because of the market realities confronting the corporate entertainment industry today, Hollywood movies rely on visual impact more than ever before. Escalating production costs mean fewer movies are being released; to ensure profits studios demand higher budgets for marketing and “big name” stars to churn out blockbusters targeted for international distribution. To win the broadest audience appeal worldwide, big studio films focus not only on the dazzling technical special effects of spectacular action blockbusters but also on the bodies of those movie stars universally recognized for their stylized beauty and glamour—bodies that are remarkably the same: “As a commercial entertainment that is produced with mass audiences and greatest box office in mind,” notes film scholar Philippa Gates, “Hollywood film presents mainstream rather than radical or controversial attitudes. This uniformity of mores and values in the fictional Hollywood world creates a consistency in representation across the films it produces.”⁴ Not surprisingly, such globally marketed films are designed to emphasize the surface rather than the depth of the images they construct, and Hollywood is loathe to trouble them with either complexity or critique of a contemporary consumer culture that is equally dedicated to the cultivation of the body’s outward appearance.

Hollywood images of bodily perfection and slenderness do not simply *reflect* cultural ideals of femininity and fitness; they can actively

influence the way the female moviegoer engages with her own body image and eating behavior. One reason that cinema can exert this kind of impact is that it has the capacity to elicit processes of screen identification within the spectator that contribute to the body dissatisfaction and appearance anxiety found by clinical research to be a highly potent risk factor for developing eating disorders.⁵ The complex pathway that leads from the construction of the Hollywood movie to the female viewer's personal relationship to food and her body is the subject of this book. In it I will trace how popular movies, movie stars, and celebrity media help propagate the values of an "eating disordered culture" which promotes constant self-scrutiny and body vigilance, denial of appetite, and overcontrol of weight—a culture, in short, that naturalizes and even idealizes pathological behaviors and beliefs in the compulsive pursuit of an eternally elusive body ideal so powerful that many women and girls feed on a collective screen dream instead of the food they crave—but are afraid to eat.

In order to trace exactly how Hollywood productions contribute to those social risk factors that can lead to subclinical and clinical eating problems among vulnerable moviegoers, *Body Shots* reads the texts of recent popular films as visual representations of those social forces discussed in each of the book's chapters. These include the medicalization of consumer beauty practices, the fitness movement's ideologies of discipline, and discourses of celebrity body maintenance. My larger goal is to demonstrate not only how popular film narratives and cinematic conventions reflect contemporary body culture but even more crucially to engage the reader in a media literacy project to critically interrogate both the screen images and the gendered assumptions they perpetuate about women and girls.

Endless pursuit of the perfected screen body can help push the most vulnerable viewers over the razor-thin line that separates what has become the "new normal" of nagging weight worries on the one side from destructive dieting and eating behavior on the other, just as it informs the imagery here of the fifteen-year-old girl I met with on a hospital eating disorder unit. She had recently lost thirty pounds during weeks on a semi-starvation diet. Her hair thinning and falling out, anemic and shivering on a hot summer day, she was nonetheless exultant: "You don't know how hard I've worked to finally get thin. I'm not *ordinary* anymore; everyone says I look just like some hot Hollywood starlet!" But that "look" this young movie fan is desperately trying

to emulate—hipless, belly-less, and above all “thin”—is biologically beyond the reach of 95 percent of American women.⁶ Put in statistical terms, it is the “outliers” who dictate the norm for what women and girls think is acceptable and ideal, in large part because the images of superslender movie stars and celebrities can so dazzle us that we lose sight of the fact that their bodies represent the exception rather than the rule of women’s natural shape and size.⁷ And while their glamorous and seductive images provide immediate visual pleasure for both male and female viewers they can also create a deep frustration in susceptible individuals that inspires them to go to dangerous lengths to squeeze their bodies into sizes they are not naturally designed to be unless overexercised, undernourished, and literally “whipped into shape.”

In this way Hollywood media and beauty culture has become a prominent element of what I call the “Eating Disorder Formula”: the wider the gap between the culturally constructed ideal body a woman internalizes and that of her own biological template, the more driven she is to impose harsh regimens of body discipline and dietary restraint to close that gap. And though today’s moviegoers are certainly savvy about digital morphing, body doubles, and the artifice behind flawless Hollywood movie images, after two hours of gazing at female bodies that are impossibly leggy and lean, toned and ageless, it is not surprising that many viewers suspend their critical faculties and surrender to the feeling that in comparison their own bodies are “ordinary” or terribly wrong—and may be inspired to take drastic steps to make them right.⁸ Hollywood’s fantasies can be so seductive that we may even forget our initial skepticism that these glamorized and sexualized bodies are cast in everyday roles such as a police detective or stay-at-home mom yet somehow mysteriously manage to glide through their “average” workaday lives with the practiced grace of a supermodel. Film scholar Laura Mulvey points to this visual contradiction in her famous essay on cinematic pleasure and female movie stars, who “act out a complex process of likeness and difference [in which] . . . the glamorous impersonates the ordinary.”⁹

This book does not argue that movies *cause* anorexia or bulimia. (And certainly throughout the history of Hollywood millions of moviegoing women and girls have managed to delight in the gorgeous illusions on the screen without harmful side effects!) First of all, it is crucial to note that a host of other factors—biological, familial, psychological—contribute to individual resilience or susceptibility to

developing these illnesses, so many in fact that attributing anorexia or bulimia or binge eating disorder to any single cause has long since proven both inadequate and inaccurate. Both researchers and clinicians have come to understand the impossibility of reducing such complex disorders which involve both psyche and soma—including nutritional status, eating and exercise habits, and cognitions—to one simple etiology. For well over a century, depending on historical, political, scientific, and sociocultural trends, which influenced methodology and diagnosis,¹⁰ the symptoms of eating disorders have been attributed to everything from unresolved sexual conflicts and obsessive personality styles to absentee fathers and dieting mothers and more recently to neurochemical and genetic predispositions.¹¹ And since the diagnoses historically have fallen disproportionately upon among women, feminist researchers have focused on issues of gender and institutional power as key contributing factors.¹²

Secondly, we need to bear in mind that each media consumer brings her or his own unique story—personal history, memories, cultural identities—which affects how media images are interpreted from one viewer to the next. This is why many social scientists and communications theorists are skeptical about the validity of *any* actual effects of media on human behavior.¹³ These critics point out that any individual viewer's behavior is motivated by far too many variables, ranging from biological to sociocultural, to assume a uniform effect of “mass” media on audiences; instead they posit a complex interaction between an actively engaged viewer who interprets media images in an infinite number of ways. Nonetheless, even such a harsh critic as scholar David Gauntlett (who dismissed “media effects” research as “rubbish”) admits that “this is not to say that media does not have an *influence* on the thoughts and perceptions of its viewers, and their attitudes to life, and relationships, and their expectations about the world.”¹⁴ Put another way, while it is simplistic to blame a monolithic big bad Hollywood system for causing the explosion of eating disorders around the world, its active participation in the circulation of ideals, beliefs, and attitudes about the body should not be underestimated. According to the “cultivation theory” formulated by communication scholars, media both reflects and reinforces cultural norms as it constantly interacts with culture to shape our understanding of the world. And when it comes to body image and the body ideal, media psychologists see culture and media as still more inextricably linked: “Indeed,” observes David Giles,

“this is one of the few areas in psychology in which culture and media are treated as synonymous.”¹⁵

Throughout the book I will demonstrate how Hollywood movies are particularly powerful in reinforcing the cultural beliefs echoed in other popular media texts, all the while resonating with cumulative impact as they help construct what we recognize as “mainstream” beauty culture. For example, the “makeover movies” I discuss in the chapter “Body Transformation” reflect current trends in celebrity body culture, social media networking, consumer marketing, and the democratization of aesthetic surgery, as well as the credo of the fitness movement—all of which are reinforced in turn by the circulation in television, film, print, and electronic media of images of perfected and “reformed” bodies. The net result of all these developments is that Hollywood’s screen visions of body transformation resonate with more impact than ever before on the behavior and beliefs of moviegoers who seek to perfect their own bodily imperfections. In this way Hollywood films actively participate in a dynamic threefold process: They initially amplify contemporary body and beauty ideals, which are subsequently reinforced via supportive celebrity media and marketing, thereby gathering increasing resonance and ultimately go on to affect viewers already primed to aspire to those same ideals—the target audience of girls, adolescents, and young women who consume Hollywood movies and their spin-off products and productions.

In recent decades researchers and clinicians searching for causes of eating disorders have focused more intently on mass-marketed images of the body in popular media, largely in response to the marked increase of problematic eating and weight control practices in ever wider populations both at home and abroad. While the prevalence of the most devastating eating disorders—*anorexia*, *bulimia*, and *binge eating disorder*—is relatively small and stable with nationwide rates of .05-1 percent for *AN* and 1.5 percent for *bulimia* and 3.5 percent for *binge eating disorder*, the rate of what we call “subclinical eating disorders”—troubled patterns of rigid dieting, binge eating, and excessive exercising that fail to meet the diagnostic criteria for acute psychiatric illness—has continued to show ominous growth across all age groups, ethnicities, and genders.¹⁶ While no stranger to college campuses where body disturbances and abnormal eating behaviors have been rampant for years,¹⁷ problems among high school and middle school students are skyrocketing with reports showing more than 50 percent of adolescent

girls engaging in unhealthy weight control behaviors, including purging and laxative abuse, diet pill dependence, and just about every type of crash diet imaginable.¹⁸ Still more worrisome is the transmission of these problems to even younger American girls, with oft-cited studies finding 81 percent of ten-year-olds to be seasoned dieters¹⁹ and nearly one-quarter of eight-year-olds afraid to eat lest they get fat.²⁰ It is no longer unusual for parents to see their preschoolers frowning at their “fat tummies” in the mirror as increasingly children mimic the fasting and exercise rituals of their mothers and grandmothers in a multigenerational panic at gaining weight. Nor is body obsession strictly gendered; while the ratio of female to male eating disorders is still heavily weighted toward women²¹ as many as one million males suffer from some form of eating disorder, particularly a variant known as muscle dysmorphia—commonly dubbed “reverse anorexia”—where men and boys spend hours bodybuilding in the gym only to see themselves as impossibly scrawny in the distorted mirror of their self-perception.²²

Once considered the exclusive malaise of privileged white females, body image disturbances and disordered eating now affect all ethnic and racial groups, including those that had previously been thought to be protected by communities sharing more diverse or traditional body ideals. Today that cultural protection has eroded, in large part due to the proliferation of mass media images which circulate a uniform “look” that cuts across socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic body diversities. Thus, it is not surprising that in a large study of more than 4,500 Hispanic, Asian American, Caucasian, and African American teens in a Midwestern school system researchers found virtually no difference in the rates of body dissatisfaction and extreme weight control methods among female students; in fact on several measures the Hispanic and Asian American subjects were even more troubled than their white counterparts about their weight.²³

Still more striking is research showing that since the turn of the twenty-first century eating disorders have indeed gone global. Hefty percentages of high school girls in Mexico now use laxatives and diuretics to lose weight,²⁴ a large subset of teen girls in the United Arab Emirates test high on the risk scale for anorexia,²⁵ while an alarming number of young women in Tanzania report binge eating and purging.²⁶ Many researchers have been quick to attribute the recent increases in disturbed eating behavior to the fact that access to Western television and other popular media extends to remote corners of an increasingly “wired”

world. If the adolescent girl in East Africa can now conjure the images of supermodel actresses at the Academy Awards on her cell phone it is no wonder that when she looks in the mirror it is with disapproving eyes at a reflection that tells her she falls short of the feminine body ideal that has become universally coded for success, power, and sexual desirability. In fact, world marketing of Hollywood productions would seem to include at no extra charge a lifetime supply of body anxiety and dissatisfaction. Notes commentator Ellen Goodman: “The biggest success story of the entertainment industry is our ability to export insecurity: We can make any woman anywhere feel perfectly rotten about her shape.”²⁷

In search of the source of this near-universal body discontent a host of social scientists and media psychologists have examined the effects of popular media exposure on girls and women. Among the best-known studies is a cross-cultural research project conducted in the Fiji Islands. Before the advent of television in 1995 Fijian girls believed that “going thin” was a bad sign and that gaining weight was healthy. Three years after their exposure to American television as many as 74 percent of the girls reported feeling “too big,” 62 percent were dieting, and 15 percent were purging. The most avid viewers showed the highest risk for eating disorders; among their favorite were shows like *Melrose Place* and *Beverly Hills 90210* that featured hypersexualized or pencil-thin female actresses.²⁸ More typically, studies have been conducted in an experimental laboratory where subjects are presented with images from print and television media displaying slender bodies and models. Their emotional and cognitive reactions are then compared with those after the same subjects are exposed instead to general news media or “non-body” product advertisements. While these studies report some variability in their outcomes, with some showing stronger exposure effects than others, they trend in the same direction: the more the research subjects were exposed to high fashion magazines, advertisements, music videos, and television shows featuring slender models and performers, the more they were likely to report feeling unhappy with their own bodies and express an increased determination to get thinner. The studies also confirm that after viewing glamorized bodies young adult women and girls were particularly vulnerable to internalizing the “thin ideal” and to valuing slenderness as a primary source of meaning and self-worth.

Impressive validation of these findings comes from a “meta-analysis” of seventy-seven experimental media exposure studies conducted between

1975–2007 which analyzed data from standardized psychological tests measuring body esteem, figure rating, body attitudes, and body satisfaction, as well as a variety of diagnostic scales for disordered eating cognitions. It concluded: “These findings suggest that, overall, thin-ideal media exposure is related to higher levels of body dissatisfaction, stronger internalization of the thin ideal, and more frequent bulimic and anorexic attitudes and behaviors.” Still more striking in terms of the general proliferation of body disturbances worldwide was the finding that internalization of the thin ideal appeared stronger since the turn of the twenty-first century, suggesting that the more women were saturated with slender body images the more profound the impact. But perhaps most troubling of all was the finding that repeated exposure persuaded these media consumers to endorse behaviors such as severe food restriction and purging as normal and acceptable methods necessary to embody the media ideals they so deeply admired.²⁹

At the same time it is important to qualify such compelling research data with questions about methodology and research design. We might ask, for example, exactly how long do these media effects last? Are they transient or really enduring? Were the research studies experimental or correlational? Each has their methodological drawbacks: experimental studies are conducted in the laboratory under tightly controlled research conditions but only capture short term effects, while correlational studies, which can follow viewers’ exposure over time, are dependent on individual self-reporting; such subjective findings are harder to quantify. We might also question if these studies were sensitive to ethnic and cultural differences among research subjects.³⁰ And in view of new and constantly changing viewing habits of media consumers we must wonder exactly *how* the material is being watched: On a smartphone while dashing to work? On a television monitor buzzing in the background of an airport terminal? Or in a quick mashup on You Tube or music video on Hulu? In an environment in which we are increasingly media “multitasking ” it might be a combination of all of the above!³¹

Most importantly we must ask exactly *who* are the subjects of these media exposure studies? The majority have tested adolescent and college age females, the age group most susceptible to peer influence and role modeling at that fragile developmental stage where it has been said “our sense of self is balanced precariously on the threshold of adulthood.”³² Moreover, since within this demographic there is a subgroup who respond far more dramatically than their peers to the

media images they were exposed to in the studies, we are left with yet another question: Are women and girls who already suffer from troubled body images more likely to be drawn to television shows and fashion magazines that feature their slender ideal, catching us in a chicken-and-egg dilemma? Both clinical and media researchers often point to the fact that eating-disordered individuals who have a distorted body image and thus may be more profoundly impacted by images of superslender celebrity bodies also tend to negatively compare themselves to others, whether it is the girl in the next gym locker or the model in a fashion magazine. In a strangely vicious cycle, then, it is these very individuals who suffer the most insidious effects of exposure to media yet are its most frequent consumers!³³

Despite these and other questions that emerge from the difficulty of proving a direct cause and effect mechanism, taken collectively over so many studies and years the data is sufficiently compelling to point to media exposure as a potent influence on the eating behavior and body image of susceptible viewers. Most media exposure research, however, has focused on the effects of television, magazines, and advertisements, leaving the impact of popular film largely unexamined. And while from the perspective of cultivation theory we cannot separate out the influence of movies from the surrounding cultural matrix, more than any of the other forms of popular media previously studied Hollywood films are constructed to maximize their potential to affect moviegoers' beliefs about the body as a source of desire, love, success, and power.

Movies, known from their earliest days as the products of Hollywood's "dream factory," exert a particularly strong influence because they work upon both unconscious as well as conscious processes of seeing. Film scholars long ago noted the similarities between the cinema and the dream state: we sit quiet and motionless in the dark theatre, suspending our own consciousness as we enter an illusory world created by the succession of fleeting images projected on the blank screen. For two hours we enjoy a kind of "out of body experience," uninterrupted by intrusions from the outside "real" world or television commercials, enveloped by larger than life figures and the magical weave of motion, color, sound, and light, which combine to create the spectacle of the cinema. Other film theorists who went on to apply psychoanalytic models to cinema spectatorship were quick to identify in the cinema such unconscious dream processes as wish fulfillment and displacement, leading critic Parker Tyler to conclude: "The movie theater

is the psychoanalytic clinic of the average worker's daylight dream."³⁴ As a famous movie star, actress Susan Sarandon understands only too well the awesome power of Hollywood dreams on the moviegoer: "Movies are important and they're dangerous because we're the keeper of the dreams. You go into a little dark room and become incredibly vulnerable. . . . It can encourage you to be the protagonists in your own life. On the other hand it can completely misshape you."³⁵

At the same time that movies may evoke our own personal "daylight dream" they also visualize a collective dream that we share with the rest of the spectators in the theater audience. That is because Hollywood movies are quick to absorb the cultural *Zeitgeist*—our generational anxieties, traumas, and deeply held beliefs, our unspoken fears and desires—and reflect them back as screen visions of a social dream or nightmare. In a post 9/11 world for example, global fears of terrorism become visually embedded in a superhero blockbuster such as *Dark Knight* (2008) with its explosive images of a crime-ridden metropolis in a chaotic society symbolized by the irrational malevolence of the "mad" Joker. Equally resonant with current conflicts from identity politics to climate change and world destabilization is James Cameron's 2009 futuristic mega-hit *Avatar*. In a less apocalyptic but equally potent way Hollywood mythologizes contemporary body and beauty conventions in the narratives and characters that construct romantic comedies, superwomen action films, and the popular movie genres colloquially known as "chick flick" and "teenpics" aimed at female audiences. These kinds of films reflect collective body anxieties and aspirations which then resonate to each viewer's personal experiences, memories, and private dreams, creating a constant circulation of meaning and image between screen and spectator.

To better understand how popular movies specifically impact both the body images and eating and exercise behaviors of female spectators, chapter 1 of *Body Shots* examines how the psychological effects identified by media exposure research such as body dissatisfaction and internalization of the thin body ideal interact with established theories about the processes of screen identification and idealization originally posited by film scholars such as Jackie Stacey and Laura Mulvey. Their pioneering psychoanalytic, cultural, and feminist approaches to film analysis can still guide us today in navigating the relationship between the meanings encoded in images of screen bodies and how moviegoers then decode those messages as they construct their own body images.

While Mulvey's theory of cinema spectatorship was premised on the view of Hollywood as a patriarchal system that produced images of the woman's body for the voyeuristic pleasure of a male audience, here I am interested in how theories of cinematic identification help explain the impact of screen bodies on the formation of the *female* moviegoer's body image and consequent eating behavior. In much the same way, the motif of the Lacanian mirror, which figures prominently in psychoanalytic film theories about cinematic idealization, can be re-framed to explain how vulnerable female viewers may get demoralized at the "lack" in their own bodies of movie star slenderness and perfection, seeing in their mirrored reflections a distorted image that engenders body dissatisfaction and shame. Since both processes of screen identification and idealization are centered on the visual power of the movie star image, the chapter also describes the construction of both the all-important screen body as well as of the Hollywood star image, and demonstrates how the themes and structures of star identification are played out in the 1997 film *L.A. Confidential*.

Chapter 2 goes on to trace the heightened influence of the movie star's body in today's celebrity culture where it becomes a kind of "cross-mediated currency" between Hollywood movies and other popular media that propagate the many cultural meanings embedded in her image.³⁶ The chapter connects the spread of eating-disordered behaviors in recent years to an ever-widening dissemination of media images of celebrity bodies, focusing on how the "body narratives" of such Hollywood celebrities as Lindsay Lohan, Gwyneth Paltrow, and Oprah Winfrey serve as public enactments of the same eating and weight struggles their fans and audiences endure. Celebrity battles with bulimia, post-maternal weight gain, and yo-yo dieting thus become not simply a potent source of popular identification with disordered eating practices but a glamorized validation of the body dissatisfaction, hypervigilance, and self-scrutiny that characterize eating-disordered culture. Finally, this chapter explores how body preoccupation is intensified with the advent of electronic media such as You Tube and social networking sites, as well as digital devices such as "smart" phones and software-laden cameras, which have given rise to a new media environment in which consumers can now construct and circulate their own celebrity images.

The following four chapters of the book then examine how specific popular film genres both reflect and influence different aspects of eating, dieting, and exercise behaviors in female movie viewers. Each chapter

includes a close reading of representative films in order to see how their narrative structure, cinematography, soundtracks, and casting construct both implicit and explicit messages not only about contemporary attitudes and beliefs regarding food and weight but notions of femininity and male desire as well. Chapter 3 considers how the “woman warrior” of action blockbusters embodies those ideologies of fitness and body discipline that are implicated in the compulsive regimens and overcontrol of the body that can presage such disorders as exercise bulimia and “gymorexia.” Analysis of the figures of the superwomen assassins of *Kill Bill 1* and 2, for example, reveals that rather than representing genuine images of female strength and empowerment their hypersexualized and stylized bodies in fact perpetuate the cultural dream of desirability and superslenderness that drives obsessive exercising and fitness regimens in women and girls.

Chapter 4 describes how “makeover movies” such as *Maid in Manhattan*, *Miss Congeniality*, and *The Devil Wears Prada* use the motif of body transformation to visualize socioeconomic narratives of class and mobility as well as traditional constructs of gender. But their intertextual resonance with television “reality shows” of the past decade such as *The Swan*, *Biggest Loser*, and *Extreme Makeover* also serves to circulate the notion of the woman’s body as a reclamation project. Working in conjunction with new cosmetic surgery technologies and the promises of “plastic” reconfigurations these mediated makeover images fuel the drive for radical reshaping of the less-than-perfect body. In so doing they also reinforce the chronic body dissatisfaction that is an established risk factor for body image disturbances like body dysmorphic disorder and obsessive body preoccupation.

Chapter 5 considers Hollywood’s representations of the outsize woman in the romantic comedy *Shallow Hal*, the animated *Shrek* series, and the horror movie *Misery*. For the most part, popular movies construct the fat female body as either monstrous, ridiculous, or asexual—in other words as a cultural “other.” The chapter pays particular attention to narratives about the “consuming” body—women with seemingly insatiable appetites who threaten to destroy men or refuse to contain their abundant flesh within the narrow confines of today’s tight and toned body ideal. Finally, it argues that these film narratives play a significant role in the social stigmatization of the outsize woman, which not only drives contemporary obsessive dieting and weight loss practices but also engenders the body shame and social isolation in

overweight women that contribute to the development of binge eating and emotional eating disorders.

Focusing on such coming-of-age films as *Mean Girls*, *Clueless*, and *American Pie*, chapter 6 investigates how “teenpics” released in the past decade promote eating-disordered behaviors in the most vulnerable populations. Hollywood images of contemporary girlhood migrate to the lucrative teen and tween consumer beauty market where they contribute to a growing trend toward premature sophistication and sexualization of the body known as KGOY—“Kids Getting Older Younger.” Cinematic representations of the girl’s body encourage adolescents and even younger girls to display their bodies in ways that signal sexual availability long before they have the emotional or cognitive maturity to comfortably manage sexual relationships. Too often the unintended consequences of such early experiences include the confusion, conflict, and trauma associated with development of eating disorders in puberty.

The book concludes with a brief look at how independent films, especially those made by female directors, such as *Real Women Have Curves* and *Lovely and Amazing*, may provide alternative body narratives of adolescent girls and women that challenge the dominant imagery of Hollywood movies and help develop an “oppositional gaze” for new audiences in a multicultural and globalized media world.

Particular attention is paid throughout the book to the way Hollywood movies circulate the complex and troubled relationship contemporary woman have with food. More than a half-century after the memorable opening scene of *Gone with the Wind* when Mammy tightens Scarlett O’Hara’s corset and makes her eat *before* the barbeque (lest she be tempted to indulge an unladylike appetite in front of the gentlemen guests), cinematic heroines are rarely allowed to eat at all—unless they are nourishing their unborn babies like the teen mother-to-be in *Juno* or Marge, the very pregnant food-loving police officer in *Fargo*.³⁷ Films that focus on the sensuality of food such as *Chocolat*, *Like Water for Chocolate*, and *Volter* are almost exclusively foreign productions—and even they tend to depict women *preparing* rather than actually savoring their delicious creations. (A recent and welcome exception to this phenomenon is the American film *Julie and Julia* [2009], which celebrates not only the culinary expertise of Julia Child but the sheer pleasure of eating permitted both its female protagonists.) More typically, as we will see in romantic comedies like *Miss Congeniality* and *The Mirror Has Two Faces*, Hollywood heroines must learn to renounce food in order to restore

their insufficient femininity; while in teen films such as *Jawbreakers* food is depicted as the “gross” enemy which must be avoided at all costs to prevent getting fat—always the fate worse than death. Images of women eating are reserved for films featuring plus-size characters who are constructed as either devouring monsters with destructive appetites for power and possession of men—or pathologically repressed and desperately lonely spinsters.

Throughout *Body Shots* we hear the voices of my patients and students—women and girls across the life cycle who share their reactions to the Hollywood films that have shaped their own body narratives. All too often their personal stories reveal how the drive for slenderness inspired by these films triggered the imposition of severe diet regimens and food abstinence, behaviors found in my own laboratory and clinical research to result in eventual “explosions” of binge eating and bulimic episodes.³⁸ The book omits other important voices, however—in part because of Hollywood’s failure to provide screen images that would facilitate identification with more diverse body representations. Conspicuously absent from popular movies are films focused on the bodies of aging women; with few exceptions, such as the box-office hits by director Nancy Myers, *Something’s Gotta Give* (2003) and *It’s Complicated* (2009) about the sexual adventures of their midlife heroines, Hollywood either writes older women out of the script entirely or sidelines them to peripheral stock roles as asexual mothers-in-law and over the hill seductresses. And beyond such celebrity “crossover” stars from the music industry as Jennifer Lopez, Queen Latifah, and Beyonce, Hollywood more often than not continues to imagine a world populated by willowy blonde Caucasian women and girls, troubling the possibilities of screen identification for a vast ethnically diverse audience at home and abroad. Moreover, while men are surely not exempt from either eating disorders or the media effects on the construction of their body image,³⁹ an analysis of Hollywood’s images of masculinity is beyond my focus here.⁴⁰ As noted earlier, while men are increasingly subject to body disturbances in recent years, the incidence of problematic behaviors and concerns is many times higher in women, and the target audiences of the popular film genres I discuss are equally overrepresented by women. At the same time, I do not intend this gender imbalance as a commentary on women’s heightened susceptibility to media manipulation due to an intrinsic passivity or naïveté;⁴¹ to the contrary, I assume a female spectator who has the capacity to actively engage in a challenging response to

conventional movie images and body myths. The purpose of the book, then, is to provide girls and women (as well as men!) with the critical distance to both resist and “diagnose” those problematic attitudes and values about body presentation in popular film that contribute to the “eating-disordered culture” of my title.

Several other limitations in the scope of this book should be noted. The films selected for analysis here are limited for the most part to movies produced after the late 1990s in order to more accurately assess their impact on contemporary body culture and the most recent manifestations of eating disorders as they interact with new media and the global transmission of visual images. And while Hollywood may still be considered the most dominant and widely distributed movie producer, other world cinemas (such as India’s Bollywood and Asian film industries as well as the establishment of Nollywood in Nigeria and Riverwood in Kenya) are rapidly rising competitors. Nor is *Body Shots* designed to serve as a text either on the psychopathology of eating disorders (it does however provide a glossary of relevant clinical terms) or feminist film theory. Rather, it seeks to bridge the disciplines of psychology, cinema studies, and cultural studies to provide ways to read between the lines of popular movie texts and deconstruct those visual messages and narratives which may affect the moviegoer’s relationship to food and her own body image.

This is particularly important because today’s movies are filled with double messages that can confuse and seduce the unwary viewer. Hollywood can’t resist the impulse to tell us a socially redemptive thing or two. After dazzling with luxurious visions of a teen fantasy world in *Chueless*, for example, the film is careful to chastise its valley girl heroine for her mega materialism and teach her the error of her selfish ways. But while a gentle didactic message may render mainstream movies politically correct, their visual conventions far more potently glamorize the same culture they claim to critique. And it is through the “shooting” of the woman’s body—the framing, lighting, camera angle, costuming, and placement of her image on the screen—that Hollywood movies most powerfully confirm and valorize the contemporary female ideal of a perfectly contained and restrained body.

Thus, while *Shallow Hal* preaches that a woman’s “inner beauty” surpasses superficial sexiness, its heavy-handed message is undermined by visual fat jokes at the expense of Hal’s obese girlfriend Rosemary whose bloated fat-suited body is juxtaposed with his fantasized images of the

superslender Gwyneth Paltrow. The heroines of makeover movies are reassured that they are loved “just the way [they] are” but hotel maid Marisa of *Maid in Manhattan* doesn’t find her prince until she dresses up in a designer suit while tomboy Gracie Hart can’t get the guy until she’s transformed into *Miss Congeniality*’s beauty queen. Ultimately the moralizing messages fail to provide any meaningful challenge to the established “rules” about femininity and beauty that these films visualize: Women should aspire to be slender and toned. They should control and deny their appetites to avoid deadly flab or fat. Body hatred and shame is a necessary prerequisite for the transformation and reform of the imperfect body.

As a result, viewers are left with a series of contradictory messages embedded in the film narratives. As each chapter here will demonstrate, movie makeovers and cosmetic surgery masquerade as self-confidence and self-esteem; body sexualization and a nose job represent female empowerment; uniformity is announced as self-actualization. These representations account for what Tasker and Negra have characterized as the “hollow quality” typical of postfeminist media: “Although a variety of films and genres of the late 1990s and early 2000s hype empowerment, these texts do not sustain any easy or straightforward relationship to women’s experiences and social health.”⁴² Hollywood’s refusal to seriously challenge today’s eating-disordered culture makes it all the more crucial that we develop the distance and perspective needed to question the cultural assumptions and mythologies embedded in screen images of the woman’s body and to identify the stereotypes, contradictions, prejudices, and agendas—both ideological and commercial—they represent. In contributing to such a deconstruction process, this book aims to provide the moviegoer with the critical tools necessary for healthier and more empowering visions of the body and its diverse beauties.