

Constructing the archetypal
anorectic: trends in media
representations of eating
disordered celebrities

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Study

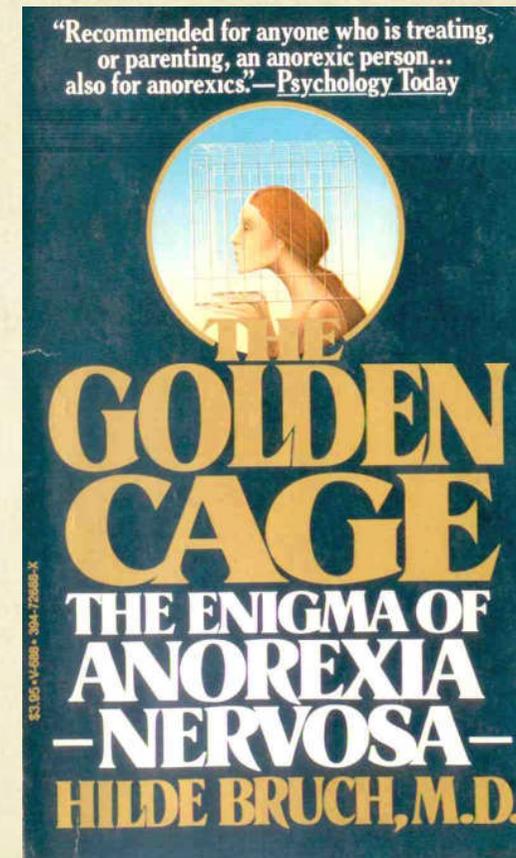
- Pilot on media coverage of eating disorders indicated that celebrities a prominent aspect, in particular:
 - Karen Carpenter
 - Died of complications of anorexia in 1983
 - First time anorexia attracted major media coverage
 - Symbol of the 'goody girl' diagnostic notion
 - Princess Diana
 - Revealed she had bulimia in 1995 Panorama interview
 - Gave bulimia a face the first time
 - Idolised and deplored for her 'feminine' qualities
- Quantitative analysis of UK and US news coverage 1983-2004 and qualitative analysis of 'peaks' in Lexis-Nexis

Carpenter—DSM goody girl

- [Carpenter] suffered from anorexia nervosa, a disease that typically strikes **weight-conscious** teenagers and develops into a potentially **fatal obsession** that starves its victims. ... Most anorexics are teenage girls from **middle- and upper-class** backgrounds. “Most of the people who have the condition are **perfectionists**,” [Dr Marvin] Gillick said [United Press International, 1983].



- Carpenter popularised / became synonymous with DSM definition of anorexia in the media
 - Duped by the media images of thinness (herself a media icon)
 - Irrational sense of being 'fat' (body image disorder)
 - Perfectionism
 - Dominating family (mother and brother)
 - (Upper) middle-class
- Canonised by Hilde Bruch and Carpenter's therapist Steven Levenkron ['Best Little Girl in the World']



Carpenter—political rendition

- After death Carpenter's soft rock and 'wholesome' image eulogised and associated with sickness in media
- Juxtapositions soft VS hard, anti-establishment 1960s VS conservative 1970s, counterculture VS family values
- The Carpenters, whose **bright smiles** and **youthful looks** personified their **fresh sound**, recorded back-to-back hits "Close to You" and "We've Only Just Begun" in 1970. These came at a time when pop music was dominated by **anti-war** and **anti-establishment** themes and **hard rock** sound [Associated Press, 1983]



'Superstar' by Todd Haynes

- The coarse grain of the film and the rigidity of the **Barbies** impugn the **popsicle optimism** of the Carpenters' soundtrack, just as Karen's anorexia nervosa destroyed her image as the girl in **the split-level next door**. And beyond all this, Haynes would show us a pop culture of American Clean that cloaked the corruption of the period. As the Barbie Karen **coos** "We've Only Just Begun," **bombs fall on Cambodia** on the television news, part of a series of montage interspersed into the doll docudrama [Washington Post, 1989]



Carpenter and femininity

- Karen Carpenter became a symbol of 'sick' aspects of femininity in the media
 - Lack of independence (susceptibility to media images, family members' domination etc.)
 - Engulfed by consumption (middle-class 'mass culture,' 'shopping')
 - Proneness to political conservatism
- Draws critical attention to the limiting nature of traditional femininity and neo-liberal politics of the 1970s and 1980s
- But also idealises a rugged, male, autonomous 'self' and disparages feminine qualities of attentiveness to others, 'soft' music, domesticity / private sphere and consumption

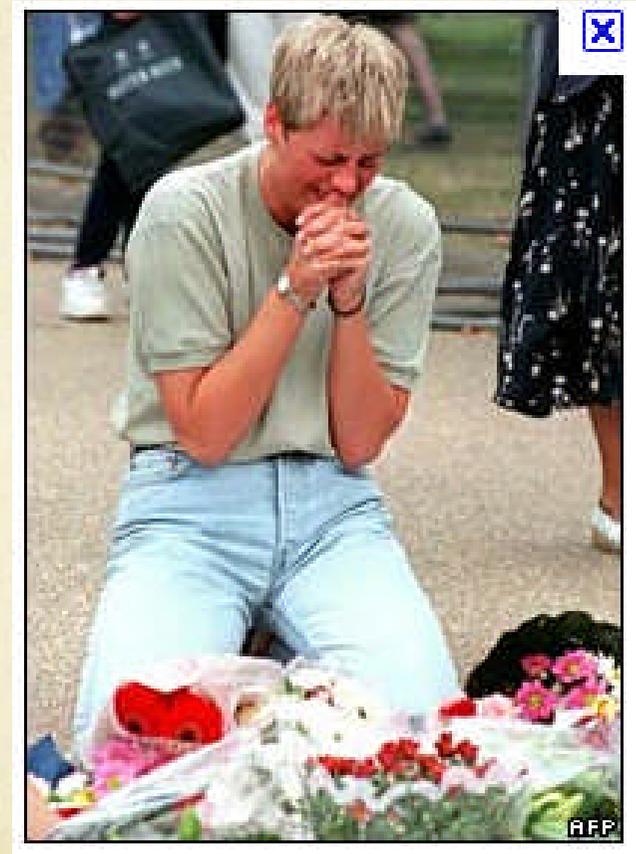
Diana—the survivor

- Her description of bulimia as a survival mechanism was arresting. It became her only means of protest – a survival strategy to which the Palace reacted not with care but with contempt. ... The Establishment saw it as an attack on the Establishment. They were right. To tell your story is the most dangerous thing to do. Modern movements of survivors, from Siberia to Sloane Square, have redeemed their pain from the psychiatric wards, via the fridge and the phone, the samizdat and the secret services, and transformed it into public, political discourse [Guardian 1995].



Diana—the hysteric

- It has been suggested that Diana suffers from a syndrome known as **Borderline Personality Disorder**. ... The International Classification of Diseases devised by the World Health Organization declares that for someone to have this problem they must demonstrate difficulty getting on with others, **impulsive behaviour**, and at least two of the following—profound uncertainty of life goals; **liability to become involved in intense but unstable relationships**, producing **regular emotional crises**; excessive efforts to avoid abandonment; recurrent **threats or acts of self-harm**; and chronic feelings of emptiness (Daily Mail, 1995).



Diana—'caring'

- Princess Diana has been secretly slipping out of Kensington Palace to late-night **mercy missions** to **comfort sick and dying** hospital patients. ... “Some will live and some won’t,” the Princess says. “But they **all need to be loved** while they are here” [Sunday Mirror, 1995]



Diana—the flexible woman

- The world had watched her blossom from a demure, shy 19-year-old into an icon to women everywhere. Diana transformed herself into the most modern, popular and dynamic royal ever. She developed fantastic style, and split her time between the young sons she idolized and the charities and humanitarian issues she dedicated her life to [Sunday Mail 1997].



Diana and femininity

- Diana adored and deplored as a symbol of femininity
 - 'Revealing' bulimia and private problems
 - Hysterical (emotional instability etc.)
 - Opening up towards /caring for Others
 - Flexible (changing life, new missions and partners)
- Challenges the traditional stable, autonomous male self (or affirms it in the case of hysteria-coverage)—near diametric opposite to Carpenter coverage at times
- Buttresses a new post-industrial 'flexible,' emotionally intelligent and interactive DIY self

Conclusion

- Media coverage of celebrities' eating disorders mobilise the conditions to delineate 'ideal selves'
- The ideal selves change historically from post-war autonomous (male) self to the new flexible (female) self
- Politically and psychologically progressive or empowering as well as disempowering features
- Problem: eating disorders used to delineate strictly normative selves, as eating disorders already articulate a desire to attain a normative self/body
- Advocate narrow normativity rather than reflexivity about the contradictory and ambiguous nature of social ideals

○ Thank you for listening!