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ESSAY

## **Haunted Bodies**

Visual cultures of anorexia and size zero

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*Thin bodies have been the centre of much controversy in recent years. Feminist critiques of popular culture, as well as popular feminist movements, have called attention to the ways in which oppressive ideals of feminine beauty have increasingly become associated with an idealisation of extreme thinness. In particular, the extent to which the prevalence of eating disorders can be linked to media representations of very thin ('size zero') models and celebrities has been the subject of much discussion. This article explores the relationship between bodies, images and cultural representations of thinness across a range of media sites including political campaigns, commercial television, celebrity magazines, catwalk and high street fashion, and digital cultures, exploring how anorexic and size-zero bodies are gendered, racialised and pathologised in contemporary media cultures.*

## **Haunted Images**

In September 2007, just before the Spring-Summer 2008 fashion week shows, two images appeared on a large number of billboards in the centre of Milan, as well as in newspaper advertisements. The images showed a young, naked, and very pale-skinned white woman, posed in a manner typical of contemporary fashion advertising and editorial photography. In one image the model is positioned lying on her side with her legs stretched out, her back arched to display her buttocks, her back to the viewer with neck extended and face turning back to gaze over her shoulder, directly at the viewer. In another, she is shown sitting up, her left leg extended, and her right leg, in the

foreground, slightly raised so that her breasts are exposed but her genitals covered.<sup>1</sup>

What was different about these images, however, was the model's extreme thinness, far in excess even of the increasingly thin bodily norms associated with contemporary fashion cultures. The images clearly show the model's ribs, shoulder blades and hip bones. In the image where the model's back is turned, her coccyx is clearly visible, with what appears to be a skin rash or chafing resulting from irritation of the protruding bone. In the other image, her breasts appear shrunken and wasted. In both images, the bones and tendons of her face and neck appear taut, almost seeming to poke through the skin. In case one was in danger of missing the point, both images featured the word ANOREXIA in a font and size that suggest the logo of some high-fashion brand. From this, the viewer is to infer that she is looking at an image of an anorexic body (rather than, say, one wasted by some other disease). The name of the company that funded the campaign, Nolita, is splashed across the posters in hot pink, along with the words 'No Anorexia', in a font designed to resemble spray-painted graffiti. The woman in the images was later identified as the French actress and model Isabelle Caro, who died three years later, aged 28. Her memorials, online and in the press, focused on her 'inner beauty' and commitment to telling the truth about anorexia, as a post on her YouTube channel by a former sufferer illustrates:

Légère comme la brume, elle s'en est allée rejoindre les étoiles.  
Une belle personne qui menait ce combat contre l'anorexie pour  
elle et pour les autres. Que son histoire ouvre les yeux aux gens.

[Light as mist, she has gone to join the stars. A beautiful person  
who led the fight against anorexia for herself and for others. May  
her story open people's eyes ...] (posted January 2011).

This advertising campaign attracted immediate controversy, appearing as it did at the height of the so-called 'size zero debate' and the resulting popular concern at the increasing thinness of fashion models, and the fashion industry's alleged responsibility in constructing ever more restrictive beauty ideals based on extreme thinness. In November 2006, the Brazilian model Ana Carolina Reston had collapsed and died from 'complications related to anorexia nervosa'. This death, which followed that of the Uruguayan model Luisel Ramos from heart failure, resulted in a global debate about a supposed epidemic of eating disorders among runway models, leading to a number of political interventions including, most famously, the banning from Madrid fashion week of any model with a Body Mass Index of less than 18 (subjects with a BMI of 18.9 or less are generally agreed to be underweight). In the UK, the British Fashion Council had just responded to concerns raised by the mass media, including British Vogue, by funding the Model Health Inquiry 'so that, as an industry, we can ensure that we are behaving responsibly and in the interest of those models who work in this country'. In the months leading up to the 2008 fashion week, then, thinness was very much at

the forefront of public debate around fashion, bodies, and media images. It is not my intention, in this paper, to determine the reality of anorexic experience, or its relation (if any) to media images. Instead, I want to examine the ways in which images and narratives about the thin body circulate in culture: to explore how fashion imagery haunts, and is haunted by, the notion of the starving body.

In the context of a revitalised popular debate about eating disorders and thinness, the Nolita campaign appeared to constitute a 'speaking back' to high fashion by a high street brand. The subsequent media coverage of the poster campaign bears out this reading, as do statements made by and on behalf of its creators. The image was shot by Oliviero Toscani, a photographer already notorious for his work on the controversial series of ads for another Italian label, Benetton, which ran from 1982 to 2000, one of which depicted the death, from AIDS, of the activist David Kirby. According to a statement made by Flash and Partners, the agency who made the ad, Toscani's intention was 'to use that naked body to show everyone the reality of this illness, caused in most cases by the stereotypes imposed by the world of fashion' (Owen 2007).

By making a public incursion into the fashion industry's own territory, then, the Nolita campaign claimed to speak for the public, for the 'real women', models as well as consumers, who are assumed to be particularly affected by popular images of thinness. The message of Nolita's billboards is twofold. Firstly, that anorexia has become the brand. By mimicking the imagery of high fashion advertising, Nolita is suggesting that what is being sold to young women is not the product itself (since most are unable to afford it), but anorexia. By presenting its own logo as a piece of graffiti art, a tag sprayed onto its own glossy 'ad' for eating disorders, the brand takes up the role of activist, recalling the feminists who defaced billboards in the 1970s and 80s as well as a broader tradition of anti-capitalist and socialist activism. By choosing to 'spray' the image in hot pink, the colour associated with girls and feminised consumerism, Nolita positioned itself as a more democratic face of (high street) fashion, speaking for the ordinary consumer against the decadence of the fashion industry. What I am more concerned with here, though, is the implicit claim that the campaign makes about bodies, regimes of spectatorship, and the effects of media images.

The anorexic body traditionally embodies that which cannot be represented in Western culture; it is abjected, pushed to the margins (Ferreday 2003). At the same time, feminist scholars have paid attention to the ways in which the figure of 'the anorexic' is continually re-constituted as a spectacle to be exposed to the public gaze (Saukko 2008; Spitzack 1993; Probyn 1987). What is more, the notion that anorexia is 'caused' by media images, or by fashion, has been widely discredited within feminist cultural theory, not only because it draws on an outdated and oversimplified ideological critique, but also

for its tendency to position female spectators in particular, as 'cultural dopes', to use Stuart Hall's well-known phrase (Hall 1981).

As Paula Saukko notes, the idea that 'anorexics embark on a programme of near lethal self-starvation simply because of media images of thinness is hideously stigmatizing and reductionist', since it positions women as weak-minded and narcissistic (2008, p. 25).

In this article, I analyse the Toscani campaign, and the representation of Isabelle Caro as 'celebrity anorexic', in the context of a wider network of visual representations of thinness: celebrity size zero culture and pro-anorexic websites. It is not my purpose, here, to suggest that any of these representations of the very thin body are more accurate or more representative. Instead, by situating the image of Caro in the context of a wider media culture in which images of the thin body are read as problematic, I want to think through the ways in which a largely discredited 'media effects' model of spectatorship gets reproduced and circulated in popular visual culture as representative of 'feminism', even as it implicitly positions female spectators/consumers as lacking agency. In this paper, then, I am interested in how the problematic realism that underpins the Nolita campaign ('see the ugly reality behind the spectacle') works both to legitimate the abjection of the anorexic body, and to conceal its own constructedness, its own status as media spectacle. In this respect, it is significant that Jacques Ranciere, in *The Emancipated Spectator*, uses the Nolita billboard to pose the question, 'what makes an image intolerable'? What images ought not to be shown? For Ranciere, the conflicting responses to Caro's stripped and suffering image exemplified what is at stake in the public display of 'shocking' visual materials. The image of the starving woman offers 'not only the beautiful but also the abject reality'; yet this 'reality' in turn becomes suspect since 'what it shows is deemed too real, too intolerably real to be offered in the form of an image' (2009, p. 83). By stripping the anorexic body bare, pushing it into public space in a way which is explicitly intended to shock, I argue the Nolita campaign makes implicit claims about the 'truth' of anorexia. It is with this notion of the 'truthfulness' of the thin body, as represented by these images of Isabelle Caro, that I am concerned here. What I want to argue is that images of anorexia involve the viewer in complex relations of haunted spectatorship. The Nolita campaign displays the anorexic body as a haunted body, one that is haunted by its own inevitable death. But this claim to truthfulness is itself haunted by what it conceals about its own assumptions, about the extent to which this 'feminist campaign' is implicated in regimes of gendered and racialised violence. What haunts the Nolita billboard is, first and foremost, its own position as spectacle. As Ranciere has it:

The image is pronounced unsuitable for criticising reality because it pertains to the same regime of visibility as that reality, which by turns displays its aspect of brilliant appearance and its other side of sordid truth, constituting a single spectacle. (2009, p. 84)

In appearing to show the 'reality' 'behind' the fashion spectacle, the campaign claims a genealogy with images of war and violence in which, traditionally, it is considered acceptable to shock the audience in order to spur them to action. For Ranciere, the shock value of the image relies upon the viewers feeling implicated. Action, he writes, is presented as the only way of resolving the spectator's culpability, as 'the only answer to the evil of the image and the guilt of the spectator' (2009, p. 87). That is, the woman in the image is presented as the spectre at the feast, a (future) ghost crying out for justice. But what power relations are concealed in the telling of this story? Who gets to determine what the ghost wants, what this haunting means? And, if we are already doing justice to the ghost, already taking action, why does she refuse to be laid to rest?

For a researcher working on images of thinness, it is impossible to see the image of Isabelle Caro without thinking of a different kind of media spectacle: that is, pro-anorexia websites. In pro-ana, every claim that is made for the intoxicating power of media images to affect female spectators is heightened and exaggerated to the point of parody. Indeed, pro-ana constitutes, in an extreme form, a wider discourse about the particular vulnerability of female bodies to being affected by representations of thinness, which haunts all public debates around representations of the very thin body.

It is impossible to speak about pro-ana without including the disclaimer that anorexia is indeed a very serious condition; that women do in fact die from it. To fail to do so is to make oneself— theorist or journalist—complicit in an assumed violence of representation; whilst we are analysing an image, this discourse suggests, a woman is dying, is starving to death in blind homage to the very image from whose pernicious affective power we ourselves are assumed to be exempt, by virtue of our scholarly privilege. This position is exemplified by one of the first articles to bring pro-ana to public attention, Janelle Brown's 'The Winner Dies'. This piece, published in 2001 by the online magazine Salon, set the tone for virtually all media coverage of pro-ana. Implicit in Brown's argument is the notion that pro-anorexia is a kind of slow suicide, with devotees urging each other on to inevitable death. Indeed, she cites the feminist theorist and authority on eating disorders, Megan Warin, who declined to be interviewed for the article since 'I know people with anorexia who do not know about these sites, but once given the information, they will access them to support and extend an illness that is a sure road to a life of misery and possibly death' (Brown 2001).

Although Brown's article is now ten years old, current media coverage of pro-ana continues to follow the same tropes. Anorexia—almost always discussed solely in relation to younger women, rather than older sufferers or men—is attributed to media causes. A high risk of death is assumed (and the sad, premature death of Caro would appear to support this view). Most importantly, whilst singling out pro-ana as a particularly perverse and toxic site of over-identification, it is

often implied that all media representations of femininity, but especially those associated with the fashion industry, have the capacity to cause anorexia; and young women are particularly vulnerable to the effects of such images. Anorexia is thus imagined as the fatal coming together of an extremely powerful and affective image, and an extremely susceptible spectator.

This discourse can be seen in the statement above by Nolita's publicists. Toscani's claim, that it is his intention 'to use that naked body to show everyone the reality of this illness, caused in most cases by the stereotypes imposed by the world of fashion', explicitly ascribes a causative power to images of thinness. By 'using' (sic) Caro's body in this way (note that she is not named in this statement, that she is described only as 'that naked body'), the male artist claims to disrupt the diseased regime of looking, the over-identification with the image, that is assumed to lead to anorexia. In order for this disruption to be affected, we must be shown 'the reality', the truth behind the image: and this 'truth' is bound up with the notion of an eschatological futurity. The 'reality' assumed by such images is one in which anorexia consists in a gradual dwindling, ending in death. The spectacular anorexic body is a living ghost, haunted by its own inevitable extinction. The Nolita image thus embodies what Abigail Bray terms an 'eschatology of the flesh' (1996, pp. 426-7). I have taken this term, which Bray uses in passing, as the title of this article since it illuminates the implicit connection between images of anorexia and the notion of futurity, the revelation of which is imagined as the illumination of an inherent 'truth' behind feminised and idealised images of thinness. The anorexic body is thus imagined as haunted by her own future ghost, is relegated to the ranks of what Adi Kuntsman has termed the 'dead while alive' and is positioned within narratives of 'ghosting of the present and haunted futurities' (Kuntsman, this volume).

Bray's work brilliantly anatomises the ways in which anorexia nervosa has been imagined as a kind of Rosetta Stone from which an entire language of female subjects' sick relationship to mass media images of femininity (1994, 1996) can be found. Her argument is concerned with the reproduction of monstrous images of anorexia in the mass media, which works to delimit the boundaries of idealised thin femininity (Bray 1994). Following Paula Treichler's work on the body-with-AIDS, she further suggests that the anorexic body is a fetish object which, like other pathological bodies generates an epidemic of signification (1996, pp. 413-14). Primarily, it 'is presented as a synecdoche for the alienated female body [which] is damaged by the consumption of phallogocentric representations'; it is imagined as 'something women catch from television', as Maud Ellmann suggests, 'the disease of the McLuhan age' (cited in Bray 1996, p. 414), spread virally through forms of telecommunication that 'corrupt the tastes and habits of a rising generation' (1996, p. 414) as early moral panics about television had it. Popular narratives of anorexia hinge on a pathologising of women's uncritical 'consumption' of media texts which recalls Victorian discussions of the origins of hysteria, although

today it is the incorporation of 'trash' culture, rather than the imbibing of poisonous intellectual ideas unsuited to the delicate female constitution, that is presented as the root of the problem. In the media age, she suggests, the masses in general, and women in particular are imagined as 'feeding on a habit-forming diet of little nourishment which, rather than satiating, produces greater hunger' (1996, p. 414). Anorexia is not an eating disorder, but a reading disorder. We might expand this model to say that it is further imagined as a disorder of reading in its widest sense: a semiotic disorder, perhaps.

The Nolita campaign thus operates through a logic of revelation, a term I am using in the religious, as well as the mundane sense of the word. It claims to show us something, but what it shows is the eschatological nature of the thin body. This logic of revelation works through the literal revealing of the body itself. The nakedness of the body—in the sense of stripping away the clothes that fashion produces and sells, but also the coverings of dress, makeup, photographic technique and image enhancement technologies—is assumed to guarantee the reality of the body, in opposition to the 'staged' images produced by high fashion. The billboard slogan is implicitly positioned as a counter-hegemonic intervention, which challenges the construction of fashion imagery. The image is hence positioned as shocking and original precisely in contrast to 'stereotypical' fashion images, which, it is implied, are concerned only with the reproduction of what is banal, normative and harmful. This notion of a 'truth behind the images' thus works to elide the body of the model with that of the viewer. It is assumed that Caro's naked body represents a reality about women in fashion (this is what models look like beneath their fine clothes), which is also inherently contagious to the narcissistic and gullible female viewer (this is what female spectators want to look like and some will inevitably come to look like). In presenting itself as a stripping away of the surface, the image at once conceals its own constructedness, and (through the appropriation of feminist and activist discourses) appears to guarantee an intelligible and concrete reality beneath the style-obsessed surfaces that fashion is assumed to create.

The network of images and texts that make up the Nolita campaign can be seen in terms of what Baudrillard terms 'dissimulation', which he describes as 'feigning not to have what one has' (1988, p. 167). In this case, the naked body of a single woman is assumed to stand in for a whole overarching narrative about the causes of eating disorders, which makes implicit truth claims about the relation between bodies, images and spectatorship. This narrative of 'truth-telling' masks both the implicit violence of the image, and its constructedness. The image dissimulates the photographer's privilege, as well as those media feminists and anti-ana campaigners whose authority is guaranteed by the violent spectacle of the naked super-thin body. For Baudrillard, 'feigning or dissimulating leaves the reality principle intact: the difference is always clear, it is only masked' (1988, p. 168). This dissimulation of the desire to make reality claims about a representation and the resulting 'proliferation of myths of

origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity' arises out of a panicked response to simulation culture, characterised by an assumed pre-simulation culture where representations bear some relation to a pre-existing reality which they either transparently reflect, or malignantly conceal (1988, p. 168). In Toscani's images of AIDS and anorexia (as in graphic news coverage, for example), the 'shocking' image is imagined as a transparent reflection of reality, which works to balance mainstream images that either twist and obscure reality, or deny it altogether (as is often assumed to be the case for larger female bodies, as well as anorexic bodies). What this invocation of the reality principle conceals is, firstly, the constructedness of the shocking images themselves. As Megan Warin writes, media coverage of anorexia tends to rely on the 'enticement of spectacle', drawing readers in with lurid and shocking pictures of exposed, emaciated female bodies. Like Kafka's 'hunger artists', anorexic women are offered up for consumption in a way that privileges a prurient, colonising gaze (Warin 2009, pp. 8-9). Maud Ellmann similarly makes the connection between thin bodies in celebrity and fashion, and the hunger artist whose performance (like Hamlet's play within the play) is 'staged to trick the conscience of its viewers, forcing them to recognise that they are implicated in the spectacle they behold' (1993, p. 17). Ellmann argues that such a spectacle is both seductive and repellent precisely because it implies relationality: 'even though the anorectic body seems to represent a radical negation of the other', she argues, it still depends on the other's spectatorship 'in order to be read as representative of anything at all'. Thus, relationality is present even in the apparent violence of spectatorship (1993, p. 17). Warin argues that, like hunger artists, anorexics are routinely positioned as 'objects for others to gaze on', and that this regime of looking produces the anorexic body as abject, denying the experience of individuals with anorexia (2009, p. 185). This spectacle is continually reproduced in the mass media, as exemplified in her account of the male journalist who attempted to solicit an interview with one of her ethnographic subjects. Warin recalls refusing to arrange an interview with a subject on being told that only "a really skinny one" would be of interest (2009, p. 9). As she points out, those dying of cancer are rarely treated in such an intrusive way (although we might add to this that some other diseases are treated in similar ways, but only those that are constructed as both abject and in some sense self-inflicted: as in the case, for example, of the addict's body or the body with AIDS). What Warin's account reveals, however, is that images do not simply reflect or display reality. Caro was presumably chosen for this ad not because she was a particularly recognisable model, or particularly associated with Milan fashion week—she was not—but precisely because she was held most effectively to embody the image of 'the really skinny ones'. The avowed desire to 'strip away the stereotypes' thus conceals the extent to which the campaign itself involves the knowing reproduction of a stereotypical image of the anorexic body. Warin notes that in practice, most people with eating disorders do not gradually become thinner and thinner in a linear, predictable way. The 'anorexic body' of popular myth is often one stage in a continuum. Sufferers' weights are prone



to fluctuate over time (like, in fact, those of non-anorexic subjects); in addition, one may identify as anorexic whilst not being technically underweight at all, meaning that anorexia is not necessarily written intelligibly on the sufferer's body (Warin 2009).

This statement thus constructs the naked, emaciated body of Isabelle Caro as a spectre whose waif-like appearance in the centre of the fashion industry's home territory represents all that is repressed in the spectacular staging of fashion week. It does this by invoking a surface and depth model of representation. In this sense, it invokes a tradition of 'media effects' discourse in which texts are always haunted by the imagined suffering of real bodies. As David Gauntlett notes, this model of spectatorship is widely discredited in academic debates, yet continues to be reproduced in popular debates around 'controversial' images; by the supposition that media texts are contagious in ways that are always harmful, such that it is difficult to dislodge despite the hope that it might be 'laid to rest' (2005, p. 5). Media effects are themselves a spectre that refuses to lie down; further, what the notion of disordered reading suggests is that certain subjects are inherently more open to being affected; that their boundaries are essentially more permeable, more receptive to the leaky toxicity of particular images. The logic of disordered reading is thus an extension of popular narratives of feminine consumption: the voracious female consumer whose desire to devour everything, incorporate everything, becomes particularly virulent when she is let loose in postmodern cultures of simulation. This voracity for the image is inextricably bound up with starvation: 'an excessive consumption of media images is perceived to activate a pathological fear of corporeal consumption: over-reading produces under-eating' (Bray 1996, pp. 414-15). This paradox 'represents the imagined reading practices of female audiences within modernity as quintessentially irrational' (1996, p. 415). Further, I would argue, it constructs female spectatorship as inherently both narcissistic and self-destructive; as producing a state of walking-dead-ness which is the visual symbol of the subject's future immolation on the pyre of media images. The anorexic body is an object of horror because it is imagined as uncanny, as monstrous.

As Avery Gordon reminds us, according to Freud an uncanny effect is produced 'when the distinction between image and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions of the things it symbolises' (cited in Gordon 2008, p. 50). This is what happens when the images that dominate mainstream culture re-emerge online in often new and disturbing forms. What is more, as Gordon notes, the uncanny entails the moment when 'something familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it through the processes of repression', as Freud has it, becomes transmuted into an unsettling spectre (2008, p. 51). The uncanny is thus the haunting of public space, as well as the boringly polarised debate about body image and media effects—by what has been denied. And in this case, what has been denied is precisely that fashion, as I shall discuss below, that appears at times

to be moving from an aesthetics based on flesh, to an aesthetics of bone. In the second half of this paper, I discuss the media figure of the Walking Skeleton whose power to shock lies, I argue, not only in an overt cultural revulsion at the sight of bone pushing through skin, but in the anorexic's desire to see that very thing happen, to see bone liberated from the bounds of the skin. We might say that flesh is haunted by bone. Finally, I argue that both critical and celebratory accounts of the spectacle of thinness ignore the fixation with whiteness that is a universal feature of such images: a fact which speaks not only to the racism of the fashion industry and images of idealised femininity, but to the centrality of whiteness in defining media images of anorexia.

### **An American in Paris**

Given the assumed hunger of female subjects for images of thinness, one might be forgiven for wondering whether the billboard itself might not be capable of 'causing' anorexia. This question was put to Isabelle Caro in a press conference conducted in 2007 and widely reproduced after her death in 2010. Asked if some anorexics might be inspired by the ad, Caro responded:

I hope not. To see my tailbone like an open wound, I show myself as I am. I'm not beautiful, my hair is ruined and I know I will never have long hair again. I've lost several teeth ... My skin is dry. My breasts have fallen. No young girl wants to look like a skeleton.... You couldn't believe anyone would want to look like that. I don't think there's any question about it. (MTV 2010)

The feminist psychologist and activist Susie Orbach similarly brushed aside questions about the possibly infectious qualities of the Nolita images, which she positioned alongside a general call for more representative and truthful images of women's bodies. Expressing her 'surprise' that 'colleagues who work with girls and women' (who are not named) had objected to the images, she writes:

My colleagues are concerned that the Toscani pictures will be aspirational. They are certainly correct that visual culture is reconstructing our relationship to the body. We can't but help look at ourselves from the outside to see whether our bodies sufficiently reflect an acceptable version of the 5,000 digitally enhanced images that are beamed at us per week. This is particularly the case for girls and young women and my colleagues worry that girls, perhaps those who are already hooked into the proAna (sic) sites will chase the elusive dream to fit in through acquiring a diminished body.

If visual culture can invoke a feeling that we need to be thin, perhaps the pictures of Isabelle Caro will become glamorised in such a way that they invite us to mimic her. It's possible but I doubt it. I think we are not yet inured to the horror they portray. We can still see them. It takes more than one or two images to change our visual landscape and I think they will become a rallying point for

campaigners against the body hatred which eats into so many of our children's childhoods, adolescence and young adulthood. (Orbach 2007)

This is odd in view of the fact that a central aspect of pro-ana consists of 'thinspiration': images of emaciated bodies that embody 'ana' identity and are used to encourage the anorexic viewer to 'stay strong' (Ferreday 2003; Dias 2003). Thinspiration galleries may include images of celebrities, models and 'real' women; while some are left un-retouched (or rather, only as retouched as they were in their original form), others are altered to produce an ultra-thin appearance very much like that of Caro in the poster. Caro in these images is almost the embodiment of ana; an imaginary women who, for the pro-ana community, has achieved 'perfection' by reaching the lowest possible weight at which it is possible to survive. As one recovering anorexic blogger, who is generally critical of pro-ana, put it:

Seriously? The guy [Toscani] must be an idiot ... if this guy honestly thinks girls (or boys, or adults even — stereotypes suck) who are eating disordered are going to look at this image and think, "Gee, I'd better stop before I end up looking like that," well, he's a fucking moron ... when I saw this image, my first thought was "Oh my god, I am such a cow." I then launched a series of mental calculations to try to figure out exactly how long it would take on a 300 calorie-a-day diet to get myself looking like the woman in the ad. This is, of course ... not a rational way to respond to such an image. But anorexia and bulimia are in and of themselves quite irrational. An eating disordered individual will not look at an emaciated body and pledge to get healthy. An eating disordered individual will look at such a body and be motivated to out-thin the model. That's simply how it works. (Relying on Intellect 2007)

In fact, the image did appear on pro-ana sites: sometimes as the starting point for debates about eating disorders and their relation to the media, but occasionally as an object of emulation. The blog 2Medusa, which claims to be anti-ana (and contains warnings about 'triggering' images) published a regularly updated page entitled 'Isabelle Caro: Still Stick Thin'. The resulting discussion attracted pro-ana users who claimed to find inspiration in the images included there. As one poster put it:

Is it wrong that I think she is beautiful. Her legs, her ribs, her face, her arms. Look at her calves. I swear I could look at them for hours. Perfect. Beautiful. Am I really that fucked up?

(2Medusa, comment posted 9 November, 2010 11:22 PM).

Despite the reality of 'triggering' images, Orbach and Toscani both seem to assume that these images are speaking not to those who are already anorexics (and therefore assumed to be beyond help, or at least in need of more specialised forms of help), but to young women who have the potential to become anorexic, to become lost, through looking diseased. At the same time, there is an appeal to an imagined

'we', the community of concerned outsiders, who need to be forcibly shown the 'reality' of anorexia, that is, the future haunting of our own daughters, students and friends. For young women, prone to disordered reading, all media images are potentially 'thinspiration'. Caro's naked body thus becomes a symbol of what we can 'still see' despite the proliferation of images hurled at us by postmodern media cultures. Her image is fetishised as that which is somehow inherently different, completely distanced from mainstream fashion imagery which in its very banality has the power to wear us down. Her body becomes a guarantor of truth, but also of nostalgia for a time when images transparently reflected reality, when we could 'still see'.

What is ironic about this is that Caro herself became something of a celebrity, a literal poster girl for anorexia whose continuing visibility in the media relied on her continuing to be 'the really skinny one'. After the appearance of the billboard campaign, she became a popular figure on TV shows and websites about weight, whose avowed aim was to ensure her image became as widely exposed as possible as a warning to others. She wrote a memoir, *The Little Girl Who Didn't Want to Get Fat*, appeared as a spokeswoman on anorexia in the UK TV reality series *Supersize vs. Superskinny*, in documentaries on Italian television, and became the author of the popular blog *l'anorexie ou la faim de vivre, faire le pas vers la guérison [anorexia or hunger for life, take the first step to healing]*. These media appearances became rallying points for popular campaigns aimed at raising awareness of eating disorders, critiquing media images promoting thinness, and demanding the censorship of pro-ana websites. For example, the title of the blog was taken up by a French anti-ana support group on Facebook entitled 'Anorexie-Boulimie: ma Faim et Rage de Vivre!' which also published a memorial video dedicated to Caro shortly after her death. She also appeared in an interview with the pop star and movie actress Jessica Simpson, which appeared as part of her MTV series *Jessica Simpson's The Price of Beauty*, broadcast in March 2010.<sup>2</sup> In this series, Simpson, who has herself been criticised in the media for gaining weight 'travels the World' accompanied by her hairdresser Ken Paves and personal assistant CaCee Cobb, to learn about 'the price of beauty in different cultures', according to MTV's website.<sup>3</sup> The conclusion of the programme is an episode set in LA, in which teenagers with 'self esteem issues' are given coaching and makeovers, with the aim of increasing their confidence. This video, along with the comments it attracted both before and after Caro's death, demonstrates how her body and her image, are used to reproduce a narrative of the anorexic body as eschatological and 'shocking'.

In the episode entitled 'Paris', Simpson and her entourage meet Isabelle Caro at an outdoor *café*, a setting presumably intended to embody a touristy sense of 'typical Frenchness'; the camera lingers on shots of cast-iron furniture and the folksy, Gallic-looking cafe sign. The old-world European location is thus fetishised as a site of tourist encounter, and the scene is hence set for the familiar narrative of the well-fed American visitor appalled and also thrilled by the decadence

of the Old Country. Indeed, the vintage trappings, with their air of the mid-twentieth century, recall another encounter between well-fed Americans and starving (and morally undecidable) Frenchwomen, namely the liberation of Paris. Placed alongside the images of starved white bodies, the viewer is inevitably reminded of images of the Holocaust, a connection Ranciere also makes in his discussion of the exhibition 'Memoirs des Camps'. These images of naked women being pushed into a gas oven in Auschwitz, were critiqued in the same way as the Caro images. Firstly, for being intolerable because they were too real, and secondly for being intolerable because they lied in the sense that the full horror of the Shoah exceeds representation. In other words, there is something fundamentally unrepresentable at its heart (Ranciere 2009, pp. 88-9). There is always something distasteful about political arguments, whether of the Left or the Right that claim common ground with the Holocaust as a means of making their point. And in this respect the Nolita images feel particularly uncomfortable, I think, not because they implicate the viewer in the guilt of the Holocaust (if I buy into the fashion industry, I am as bad as the Nazis), but because they so obviously interpellate the spectator, calling her to make this connection and to feel complicit with the fashion industry's assumed genocide-like assault on women's bodies at the same time that she herself is positioned as its potential victim. Yet this resonance with images from an earlier time also forecloses recognition of those others who are doubly invisible, being too abject even to figure in images of abjection. In this case, the image of the starving white body makes invisible not only the non-white body (since a hyper-thin Black body is coded very differently; Caro's body needs to be white in order to be read as starving through choice); but also other women, other bodies. These are usually female labourers from 'somewhere else' who, Katherine Feo Kelly argues, are always an absent presence haunting the fashion industry whose 'shut-eyed approach to production' renders them 'ghosts indeed' (2011, p. 11).

The encounter between Caro and Simpson, then, is an encounter between two very differently located representatives of femininity and whiteness. Caro and her translator are shown exchanging polite greetings with Simpson; the camera zooms in on a close-up of her extremely gaunt, heavily made-up face before cutting to a studio interview with Simpson who, speaking straight to camera, says 'when we walked in, we were all shocked; we didn't expect her to be so skinny. You could see her bones'. We return to the location shoot, lingering on the dark spots on her cheeks and the chapped and peeling skin on her emaciated arms. In voiceover, Simpson speaks of the 'pressure' for actresses and models to be thin saying 'That can affect you ... it affected me ... the way it affected her scares me'. Caro is seen showing Simpson copies of her poster for Nolita; we see that to be suitable for broadcast on US television, the breasts in the image have been pixellated out, presumably as inappropriate for the eyes of the young, female (and non-European?) audience. It is the curvy working-class Simpson (who incidentally has been widely ridiculed for gaining weight and for being 'white trash') and not a slender Jennifer

Aniston or Angelina Jolie, who is presented as the avatar of the concerned American subject. By positing an American visitor, Simpson, as a concerned outsider looking in at Caro, the video foregrounds the spectacular celebration of extreme thinness as a particularly European problem. High fashion, particularly haute couture, is to blame both for hiring thinner and thinner models, and for celebrating thinness as transgressive; a narrative that conveniently directs attention from, say, the role played by US celebrity culture in globally disseminating idealised images of thinness.

Simpson concludes the interview by assuring Caro that 'what you are doing right now makes you one of the most beautiful people we have ever seen'. As she speaks, the hairdresser, Paves nods solemnly in silent assent. The video then cuts to Caro taking Simpson's hand in apparent gratitude, then to a recorded talking head shot of Simpson repeating the sentiment that 'the more skinny you are, doesn't make you more beautiful' before returning to the videotaped interview for Caro and Simpson's goodbye, the camera focusing on Caro's emaciated face and hands as she clutches Simpson in a final, apparently ecstatic hug.

The video of Simpson's interview with Isabelle Caro was widely circulated online, gaining over half a million hits on YouTube at the time of writing. Wherever it is reproduced, the video continues to attract hundreds of comments, many of them critical of its tone, content, and overt claims about the responsibility of the fashion industry for promoting anorexia:

as a model and ex sufferer it's much more to it than that, unfortunately that's why it's so complex, my agencies were all worried about my weight (yet I do think it was ultimately to sell clothes better & skeletons don't do well in commercial work), was losing jobs for being too thin, was told by Valentino to 'please eat a cheeseburger' for my eerily gaunt stature, but besides the beauty aspect, it's also to feel pure again, clean, in control, of our very biology which we feel is so tainted. (posted 9 January 2011)

Many commentators also pointed out the gap between the film's subtitles, and the actual words spoken by Caro. As many observed, these had been edited, apparently to produce a stronger narrative about the culpability of the fashion industry:

Jessica Simpson: "Do you mind telling us about your experience as a model?"

Isabelle Caro: «Bah, en fait, moi, c'est pas le monde de la mode qui m'a conduit là » ("Well, in fact, It is NOT because of the fashion world that I am anorexic") And they "translate": "So, she started to model when she was in the last year of the high school and that was the moment when she decided that she... that was going to be her career". (posted January 2011)

Commentators also focused on the question of whether Caro had really contracted anorexia after becoming a model. A number of websites purported to 'prove' this by showing Caro 'before anorexia' despite her having said repeatedly that she became anorexic at the age of twelve or thirteen. In some of these images, Caro's body shape is the same as in the Nolita image, but beautifully dressed, posed and lit. One widely circulated image, though, claims to be of Caro, but is in fact the Ukrainian model Nataliya Gotsiy, taken from the Laroche spring/summer 2007 show, a notorious spectacle which became central to the debates over size zero and over the exploitation of models from Eastern Europe. This raises the question: how do bodies encounter one another, affect one another, become interchangeable? Who is allowed to speak? What is this ghostly and seemingly ubiquitous woman trying to tell us, and what is lost in translation?

### **Walking Skeletons**

No woman, Caro says, wants to look like a skeleton. This is repeated over and over in discussions of pro-ana, size zero, anorexia and in the elisions between them. To be a walking skeleton is to become monstrous, the embodiment of one's own as well as the onlooker's inevitable death. This is an extraordinary claim, since the very existence of such campaigns (not to mention the way in which writers like Orbach conflate fashion imagery with pro-ana) suggests that on the contrary, every woman has the capacity to want to be a skeleton, that this death drive is so central to the female psyche that it might be triggered at any time. Feminine desire is imagined to be identical with a morbid over-identification with idealised images of thinness. So, it is not stretching the point to suggest that extreme thinness might provoke extreme identification. One might even imagine such an outcome as the symptom of 'disordered' reading of media images. The existence of pro-ana, and the repetitive and cyclical reproduction of shocked reactions to it, suggest a further, haunting possibility: that there are women who do, indeed, desire skeleton-hood; and that perhaps this desire is neither as marginal nor as extreme as anti-ana commentators would have us believe. Indeed, a central image of idealised femininity, in contemporary capitalist cultures, may precisely be that of the woman who achieves and sustains a state of skeletal beauty. Here, I want to turn to the figure of the 'walking skeleton' in order to examine the queer ways in which fashion and celebrity culture have responded to the furore over media images of 'size zero' and anorexic bodies. Moreover, I wish to ask what is concealed and silenced in the celebration of thinness as queer spectacle, in particular its fetishising of whiteness. After all, to become a skeleton is to become white, and whiteness is imagined as the epitome of beauty and privilege.

While it is widely used in media discussions of thinness and eating disorders, I am taking the term 'Walking Skeleton' from a 2007 cover story in the British celebrity magazine *Heat*. This story turns on an image of the actress Cate Blanchett, a star famous for her pale white

skin who, caught in an off-guard pose during her extreme weight loss to play Bob Dylan in the movie *I'm Not There*, and dressed in a rather baroque gold brocade gown, is presented in a way that goes beyond the familiar visual imagery of skinniness to become otherworldly. Again, this is an image that can easily be imagined as thinspiration. The visible veins showing through her very pale white skin are reminiscent of Elizabethan gentlewomen who would paint blue veins on their skin as a means of suggesting youthful transparency and otherworldly sensitivity. Against this pallid surface, Blanchett's makeup stands out in a rather sickly way, giving a bruised appearance; the shimmering highlighting cream on her forehead catches the light in a way that resembles a film of sweat. This, accompanied by visible blotches or bruises on her chest and upper arms, adds up to a rather macabre image which differs significantly from Blanchett's more familiar representation as a great beauty and fashion icon. But it is, as the headline suggests, Blanchett's thinness, her visible bones, that most capture the reader's attention: or rather, the skin and bones, the relationship between the two. The bones of the face and upper body are endlessly enumerated, identified, discussed; ribs and vertebrae are counted; the ball and socket joints of the shoulder swivel in their sockets; the tibia slides over the fibula; cheekbones threaten to pierce through taut facial skin; all are visible to the naked eye. The (female) reader must be steered towards the correct, un-disordered reading. Just as women's magazines proliferate eroticised images of women yet produce narratives of heterosexuality, so the reader's potential desire for thinness must be contained and policed. One can want to look at these (often half-naked) bodies, but one must not want these bodies, in either sense of the word. The editorial content works to delimit the boundaries between reader and image through a language that is at once emotional and detached, critical. The article says of the actress Keira Knightley, 'Keira ... [maintains] that she is naturally skinny. But this picture of her bony chest does little to silence her critics' (*Heat* 2007). The reader is positioned as an objective critic, but one who is concerned for the celebrity's health, lovingly sceptical about her claims that her body is 'natural' and not the result of starvation.

Whilst the *Heat* commentary follows the trajectory of reality claims similar to that of the No Anorexia campaign, high fashion's response to the notion of skeletal femininity has been radically different; parodic and even celebratory. In 2006-2008, at the time of the outcry over size zero models, much commentary in the fashion press focused not just on the thinness of the models, but what appears to be a change in cutting to deliberately emphasise the models' visible bones. Above, I identified an image from Guy Laroche's 2007 ready to wear show, which was widely and inaccurately circulated as an image of Isabelle Caro. In it, Nataliya Gotsiy's dress follows a draped Grecian style, but with a difference. The bodice of the dress is cut away to follow the shape of the rib cage, as though ribs, not the curves of breasts or waist, constituted a fetishised erogenous zone. This theme was noticed by the fashion writer Jean-Paul Cauvin, who wrote a piece for the blog Fashion Windows about the 'walking skeletons' in that year's



shows. He noted that the draping of chains across the back of one dress followed the curve of the ribs so that the model looked, as he put it, 'more like a mummy or a skeleton than a live woman' (cited in Fashion Windows 2006).

Another writer who has identified this shift is Jess Cartner-Morley at the *Guardian*, who picked up on it at the haute couture shows this week. Haute couture week is, says, Cartner-Morley, at once above the concerns of ready to wear, everyday fashion, and haunted by them; so it is not as strange as it seems that, in the midst of so much debate about the weight of women in the public eye, the models that year were some of the thinnest ever seen on the international catwalk, with as she says

Prominent clavicles I have long become inured to, but some of the bodies on display last week—every movement of the ball joint visible in the arm socket, the line from shoulder to neck a row of knobby bones, like a joint of meat stripped savagely bare—were shocking even to me. What is more, some dresses featured a back view cut away in an angel-wing shape, the better to showcase the deep jut of the shoulder blades in a fleshless back. Bones are now being fetishised in the way that flesh once was. Frankly, it is enough to make you nostalgic for the good-old-days of pneumatic supermodel perfection and the Wonderbra. (Cartner-Morley 2007, emphasis added)

This fetishisation of bone, and of deathly images more generally, has been taken up in fashion since 2006 to an extraordinary degree. Throughout this period, images of skulls, spectres, and bones appeared on clothing, jewellery and accessories. The label Alexander McQueen, in particular, embraced this gothic aesthetic, which is perhaps taken to its logical extreme in a set of suitcases produced in 2007 that resemble disembodied skeleton torsos or have bone-like decorative motifs, as well as by a set of key chains, attached to a luxe handbag, that resembled human finger bones. The notion of skinniness (and whiteness) thus becomes decoupled from model bodies; the skeleton becomes both a symbol of transgression and a fetishistic object of desire in its own right.

For Cartner-Morley, all this represented a return of the repressed, a monstrous haunting that is the logical result of fashion's failure to face up to its responsibilities. Couture, she argues, 'is not so much fashion's think tank as its subconscious', a liminal piece of high theatre in which the 'dark' images that are being edged out of the industry's more mainstream wing can be vented and purged. Extreme skinniness is one such theme, but so are androgyny and homoeroticism; Jean Paul Gaultier's show, for example, which featured the emaciated models, finished with the traditional staging of a white wedding, but with a stubble-bearded male bride resplendent with full lace train and carrying an orchid (Cartner-Morley 2007). Interestingly, then, Morley sees the increasing thinness in terms of a dual trajectory; not simply in terms of a linear progression of thinness,

but also away from traditional, 'healthier' notions of feminine beauty which are assumed to appeal to (straight) men. Morley suggests that the future of skeletal bodies lies, not in increased and fatal thinness, but in a kind of exaggerated androgyny. The skeletal female body may hold a fatal attraction for female spectators, but it is imagined as a queer object of desire for (gay) male designers: 'there is an age-old theory', she says, 'that male fashion designers design clothes for ultra-skinny women because they are secretly thinking about men' (Cartner-Morley 2007). Indeed, Abigail Bray identifies this idea of anorexia as 'a mental illness created by gay fashion designers who want women to look like young boys' as one of multiple narratives through which the anorexic body has been 'inscribed, diagnosed and translated' to become a fetish object (1996, p. 414).

This brings me to a final point about the ways in which transgression is mobilised to conceal other, more problematic forms of erasure. If couture is fashion's unconscious, it follows that what is worked out in the spectacle of couture cannot, by definition, be what the creators of that spectacle intended. The problem with claiming that designers are 'secretly thinking about men' (apart from its assumption that to not desire women sexually is to hate them, and that it is gay men who are primarily responsible for violence against women) is that the gay identity of male designers is not so secret. In fact historically, fashion was one of the few professions in which this was the case. Fashion is, and has always been, a co-production involving women and gay men. In this sense, there is nothing particularly new or contemporary about the inclusion of queer imagery in a couture show, or about fashion's drawing on ideas of transgression and shock art.

In fact, what is most striking about these images on second glance is not masculinity or queerness or androgyny, but whiteness. If images of walking skeletons represent fashion's unconscious, it is surely significant that all the images I have discussed fetishise whiteness to the extreme, whether it is in the paleness of the Laroche models, or their pure white, draped silk gowns or McQueen's gleaming patent-leather skulls and bones, or the white male model in his white wedding dress. The 'anorexic model as concentration camp victim' is a very white ghost indeed; one that reduces disputed ideals of feminine beauty to the universal signifiers of skulls and bones. Flesh itself disappears in the figuring of material embodiment as a state in which we are all, ultimately, refined into perfect, fleshless whiteness. The idea of the thin body as queer/transgressive both normalises and conceals the extent to which non-white bodies are ghosted, made to disappear, in fashion and queer cultures.

### **Conclusion: Skeletal Subjects**

Like the Nolita billboards, then, *Heat* magazine claims to be 'speaking back' to such a hegemonic celebrity and fashion culture which is imagined as trying to get one over on the reader; a deception which is embodied in the undecideability, the queerness, of the 'too-skinny'

body. Such a speaking back, however, is limited since its trajectory is always to restore order by reading the body in question 'as' anorexic. In this model of intervention, it is unimaginable for the anorexic herself to speak; since to occupy an undecidable identity position is, by its very nature, to lack the integrity necessary for authoritative speech. One could not ask for a more perfect performance of the relations of attraction and disgust that uncanny bodies elicit. The figure of the walking skeleton, animate and yet marked by the visible signs of death, negotiates the boundaries between life and death, human and non-human, just as the pro-ana subjects unsettle because they are assumed to celebrate the line between life and death, between the surface of the screen and the horror of what might be 'out there'. But fashion imagery shares with pro-ana a fantasy of liberation that involves getting beyond the limits of flesh; of soaring beyond the vulgar exhortations of the body with its constant demands, the tactility of curves inviting touch, the violence and tension inherent in the old defence that 'men want something to grab hold of'. But both fashion and pro-ana imagery also reconfigure that very simple model, in that the body is not absent. It, or rather its bones, are continually on display, they are the object of the gaze but also simultaneously a challenge, since they excite revulsion as well as desire. Bones exist in an otherworld, beyond the screen; spikily they refuse to be grabbed. Bones are imagined as pure and privileged, representing abjection but also whiteness, as that which cannot be touched. The Walking Skeleton is an uncanny figure because she alone among contemporary icons of femininity transcends the teleological binary formation of life/death, life moving through starvation towards death, to become something at once utterly Other, abject, and yet utterly desirable—a fantasy that refuses to die. A ghost from an eschatological future in which the West's absurd obsession with whiteness and thinness has become resolved in the most absurdist of ways; with the assurance that we all become white, we all lose our flesh in the end. Whatever the intentions that informed the No Anorexia campaign, the need to create an anorexic celebrity, to 'prove' the eschatological nature of thin bodies (and thus disrupt young women's inherently disordered reading) becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Such a reading thus conceals its own disorderedness; which is nothing more or less than that of all late capitalist culture. Deprived of comforting certainties, longing for the days when one could 'really see', we are haunted by our own complicity, our own violence, in a world where a woman's starving body is appropriated in the name of 'controversy' and 'compassionate capitalism'. The walking skeleton is a spectre who haunts our culturally shared assumptions about embodiment and femininity.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The author sought permission to include the billboard image in this article, but it was not granted, and the image has been removed from the 'Press' section of the company's website. However the image is widely available online – see for example <http://style.popcrunch.com/italian-designer-nolita-no-anorexia-ad/> (viewed 20 October 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Clip from MTV Television (2010) 'Jessica Simpson: The Price of Beauty: Paris' posted by annawillpower on 6 April 2010, viewed 30 June 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfHlgGftVGY>.

<sup>3</sup> Text from MTV (2010) 'Jessica Simpson: The Price of Beauty' viewed 20 December 2010, <http://www.mtv.co.uk/shows/jessica-simpson-price-of-beauty>. The text of the website has been amended, so these quotes are no longer available online.

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