ARGUMENTATION &ADVOCACY

THE EATING DISORDERED LIFESTYLE: IMAGETEXTS AND THE PERFORMANCE OF SIMILITUDE

Robin E. Jensen

Discourse in support of the eating disordered "lifestyle" is grounded in the belief that eating disorders are lifestyle choices rather than diseases, a claim that is counter to popular and medical opinion. I analyze how the images and text on two "lifestyle" websites work together as "imagetexts" to make the unreasonable appear reasonable. Lifestyle imagetexts argue for similitude between the lifestyle philosophy and mainstream culture by mimicking culturally accepted symbols and self-consciously drawing attention to this mimicry. In this way, lifestyle imagetexts may be understood as performances of the contradictions in mainstream rhetoric rather than rational arguments about them. **Key words:** visual argument, argumentation, imagetext, gender, eating disorder

Lauren is 16. Her "thinspirations" are Audrey Hepburn, Fiona Apple, and Jennifer Aniston, and her goal is to make other people jealous of her thin body. Molly's goal weight is 84 pounds; she is losing those last, "stubborn" 16 pounds by eating no more than 500 calories per day. Rachel has been hospitalized twice for her anorexia and at 15 has given up hope for recovery. Luckie_gurl dropped 15 pounds in the first eight days of her fast, but she still failed to reach her goal weight by Christmas. Each of these young women posted this harrowing autobiographical information on one of the over 400 "pro-eating disorder" websites that have, over the past 5 or 6 years, found a home on the internet (Carroll, 2004). Their comments are accompanied by pictures of startlingly skeletal young women, sketches of hamburgers and pies with thick, black lines drawn through their juicy centers, and a variety of other images designed to encourage readers to achieve perfection through starvation.

Pro-eating disorder (hereafter: "lifestyle") discourse furthers the belief that people can choose to live with eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and/or bulimia nervosa. Counter to popular and medical opinion, lifestyle adherents hold that those with eating disorders are not ill and, therefore, they need not be cured. The motto of the lifestyle

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movement is: Anorexia is a lifestyle, not a disease. Most discourse in support of the eating disordered lifestyle is featured on websites arguing for and promoting this decidedly controversial position. Many of these sites currently are banned from various internet servers due to the debate surrounding their content. Such divisive communication creates an ideal arena for exploring the relationship between visual images and argumentation. Due to the lifestyle websites' emphasis on body size, visual images on these sites function argumentatively in ways that verbal text alone cannot. Lifestyle websites use a combination of images and text that work together as "imagetexts" to uphold the idea that anorexia nervosa and/or bulimia nervosa are lifestyle choices (Mitchell, 1994). In this essay, I explore how lifestyle imagetexts make the unreasonable appear reasonable by tapping into contradictions in mainstream discourse about eating disorders. Lifestyle imagetexts demonstrate that, although the mainstream position is that eating disorders are diseases to be cured, much mainstream discourse implies the opposite, that eating disorders are not diseases but reasonable choices. By mimicking culturally accepted symbols and self-consciously drawing attention to this mimicry, eating disorder lifestyle advocates establish their claim's supposed reasonability. In this way, lifestyle imagetexts may be understood as performances of the contradictions in mainstream rhetoric, and therefore mainstream rhetoric's similitude to lifestyle rhetoric, rather than rational arguments about those contradictions. I begin the essay by describing the context in which these imagetexts operate and reviewing scholarship on the visual and its relationship to argumentation. Then I describe and examine imagetexts from two lifestyle websites and suggest three sources of appeal from which they build their arguments: mainstream consumer culture, popular health campaigns, and the mythical narrative of Christian theology. I conclude by noting that imagetexts are especially well suited for depicting similarities and differences between argumentative claims.

EATING DISORDERS AND CONTROVERSY

Today, the three most common eating disorders are categorized by voluntary starvation (anorexia nervosa), binging and purging (bulimia nervosa), and binging without purging (compulsive over-eating disorder). The National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders (ANAD) (2005a) reports that 7 million women and a million men currently suffer from one of these disorders. All three conditions involve a preoccupation with food, an inability to cope with stress, and a consistent disregard for bodily needs (Woolsey, 2002, pp. 2–5). Anorexia and bulimia tend to coexist with conditions such as depression, anxiety, hypoglycemia, and anemia (Boskind-White & White, 2000, pp. 203–221). Anorexics lose between 15% and 60% of their original body weight, which can lead to osteoporosis, irregular heartbeat, and, in the most severe cases, death (Whelan, 2001, pp. 19–21). Bulimics often experience extreme tooth decay, bleeding in the esophagus, and unbalanced mineral levels that can lead to death (p. 22). In some cases, people vacillate between starvation and binging and purging, a condition that Boskind-White and White term "bulimarexia," and therefore put themselves at risk for all of the aforementioned conditions (p. 19).

Brumberg (2000) locates the first diagnosed case of anorexia nervosa in the 1870s; however, members of the general public did not begin to learn about what they called the "starving disease" for another century, when eating disorders became more prevalent (p. 11). Bell (1985) dates the origin of anorexia and bulimia much earlier, drawing parallels between the behavior of Roman Catholic female saints during the Middle Ages and modern-day

anorexics and bulimics. Although it is believed that the saints fasted, vomited, and exercised excessively to demonstrate piety rather than to obtain a slim physique, Bell argues that both groups of women thrive on the feeling of starvation and the sense of control that accompanies it, sometimes to the point of death. As different as are their contexts, all of these women attempt to stifle their desires by severely limiting their bodies' access to nutrition.

By the 1970s and 1980s, eating disorders were linked almost exclusively with middle-class, white, adolescent females, and today's lifestyle websites still tend to speak to this group most directly.[1] Yet, according to Brumberg (2000), the incidence of eating disorders has continued to rise into the 21st century to include increasingly younger, more diverse people as well as males (p. xvi; Hesse-Biber, 1996, chap. 8). ANAD's (2005a) website contends that eating disorders are nothing short of an epidemic that currently affects Americans of all age groups, social classes, races, and religions.

The turn of the 21st century saw the emergence of discourse in support of the eating disordered lifestyle. An article in the August, 2000 issue of *Self* magazine was one of the first to discuss and critique lifestyle websites, followed by articles in *Time, USA Today, The Seattle Times, The New Yorker,* and other major media sources (Goldman, 2002). Soon after these articles began appearing, statements against lifestyle sites were posted on the internet by groups such as Support Concern and Resources for Eating Disorders, ANAD, Dads and Daughters, and the Massachusetts Eating Disorder Association, Inc. ANAD (2005b) set up a Media and Internet Guardian program in which individuals can volunteer to report lifestyle websites to internet servers. On August 3, 2001, the internet server Yahoo! responded to these efforts and began to block lifestyle sites (Hill, 2001, p. 10; Nagourney, 2005, p. 6; Pollack, 2003, p. 247). Other servers such as ivillage, AOL, MSN, and Homestead Technologies soon followed suit.

The removal of lifestyle sites resulted in an onslaught of media coverage that culminated in October, 2001 on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (Hudson, 2001). On this show, the Director of Programs at the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) told parents to watch their daughters and make sure that they were not visiting lifestyle websites, which, she argued, "are normalizing and glamorizing these very dangerous, self-destructive behaviors" (p. 3). Although the NEDA homepage claims, "Eating disorders are illnesses, not choices" (2005), the Director of Programs' comments suggest otherwise:

It's not only eating disorder sufferers who are picking up tips, maybe replacing things that they've stopped doing with new tips on the site, but also girls who are signing on out of curiosity and who aren't able to maybe carefully consider the consequences of these different behaviors and that they can quickly spiral out of control and lead to an eating disorder. (p. 3)

This suggests that although lifestyle websites speak to "real" eating disorder sufferers with diagnosed illnesses, the sites also target healthy young girls who can be persuaded to take up the eating disordered lifestyle. Around the same time that *The Oprah Winfrey Show* aired, websites opposing the lifestyle philosophy, such as No-To-Pro, appeared on the internet with similar allegations about the harmful effects of lifestyle sites. It is not difficult to understand

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[1] Nonetheless, my research on lifestyle message boards revealed a few comments from people identifying themselves as older women, minorities, pre-teenage girls, and teenage boys. I even discovered one popular but now-defunct website, Ana-By-Choice (at www.ana-by-choice.com), that was authored by an anorexic man with a wife and children, and two others dedicated to minority women with eating disorders, at www.coloursofana.com (now defunct) and www.youngblackandana.8k.com. The implications of unanticipated lifestyle advocates are beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, future research should focus on these characteristically nontraditional lifestyle website supporters and users.

what might drive people to want to remove these sites given their shocking messages condoning eating disorders. Indeed, lifestyle websites suggest a frightening and seemingly unreasonable set of beliefs. After encountering the critical media coverage on lifestyle websites, many parents worried, and continue to worry, that their daughters would discover the sites and "quite literally, join the anorexic club" (Pollack, 2003, p. 247).

Yet critical coverage by the mainstream media produced a backlash from the lifestyle community. Several lifestyle supporters created an online petition "to support the free rights of anorexics to express their views on their illness/lifestyle on the internet" ("Allow," n.d.). As of September 21, 2005, 11,190 signatures had been collected that will be sent to the internet servers Yahoo!, MSN, and Lycos. Today, of the lifestyle sites that have managed to avoid being blocked by internet servers, most explicitly respond to their censors by featuring arguments supporting the right to freedom of speech. More subtly, lifestyle websites also respond to their critics by arguing that anorexia and bulimia are lifestyle choices rather than deadly diseases, and therefore practitioners should be respected and left alone. The latter argument is the focus of this analysis because it is more likely to combine textual and visual formats, and this complexity is both compelling and potentially theoretically rewarding.

ARGUMENTATION AND IMAGETEXTS

Scholars of rhetoric have long been invested in the analysis of visual communication in general (Foss, 1986, 1994; Medhurst & DeSousa, 1981; Olson, 1983; Scott, 1977; Sloan et al., 1971) and, especially over the past few decades, the study of visual argumentation specifically. In 1996, the argumentation community focused its attention on the topic of visual argument in a two-volume special issue of *Argumentation and Advocacy*. Although several scholars published here and elsewhere dispute that images can communicate arguments (Fleming, 1996; Leff, 1987; Perelman & Olbrects-Tyteca, 1969), today most researchers agree that some images have an argumentative component (Birdsell & Groarke, 1996; Blair, 1996; Finnegan, 2001, 2003, 2005; Lake & Pickering, 1998; LaWare, 1998; Palczewski, 2002; Shelley, 1996). But images, like linguistic texts, do not argue in isolation. Like Barthes (1977), Mitchell (1994) claims that the existence of pure images or pure text is a fiction because all media communicate messages heterogeneously (p. 5). Visual images often are "read" using text, text is usually accompanied by associative images, and, more often than not, text and images are presented together. What exists thus is the "imagetext," which is constituted by "complex intersections of representation and discourse" (p. 327; see also Goggin, 2004). Therefore, Mitchell claims, the scholar's task is "to ask what the function of specific forms of heterogeneity might be" (p. 100). In the present case, I explore how the images and text featured on lifestyle websites work together as heterogeneous imagetexts to argue in favor of the eating disordered "lifestyle."

These two ideas, that images can argue and that they do not do so in isolation, are especially important in the context of hypertext on the internet. For the critic, Warnick (1998) explains, "Mere attention to the words on a web page will not suffice, since the images are so important to textual meaning. Even in texts without images, the way that the text is displayed on the screen has rhetorical impact" (p. 76). Therefore, it is important that an analysis of websites takes into account the significance of visual elements as they operate together with text to create hypertextual arguments (p. 82). Similarly, Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) describe websites as "integrated texts" in which diverse semiotic formats coexist and force analysts to "break down the disciplinary boundaries between the study of

language and the study of images" (p. 183). Because it is literally impossible to isolate hypertextual images from text, and vice versa, we can understand hypertextual arguments only if we recognize that images, like text, require interpretation, interact with text, and are inherently neither too simplistic nor too complex for rhetorical analysis (Wysocki, 2003, pp. 44, 56; see also Birdsell & Groarke, 1996).

Images of gendered bodies can play a central role in how people shape, control, and use their own bodies. Berger (1973) notes that images of all kinds tend to illustrate how "*men act* and *women appear*" (p. 47). Males often are depicted as they engage in activities, while women are more likely to be depicted as they pose for the gaze of onlookers. To engage these images is therefore to come into contact with guidelines concerning what gendered bodies should look like and what those bodies are capable of doing. Bordo (1993) claims that in postmodernity we rarely encounter verbal descriptions of what a woman should embody; instead, "we learn the rules directly through bodily discourse: through images that tell us what clothes, body shape, facial expression, movements, and behavior are required" (p. 170). Because people are apt to encounter many mediated images of women with excessively thin bodies, light skin, long, shiny hair, and fashionable clothes, they are more likely to equate femininity with these qualities. Similarly, because people see few images of women acting, they are likely to develop a limited sense of women's capabilities. When exploring websites that are devoted primarily to the creation of thin female bodies, such as lifestyle websites, we must recognize that images play an important role in the creation of messages about the body. At the same time, however, it is important to appreciate the multimodal nature of the web and the ways that images and texts come together as imagetexts to communicate to readers, argumentatively and otherwise.

ANOREXIC BEAUTY AND PROANA4LIFE

Two lifestyle websites, Anorexic Beauty and Proana4life, serve as the focus of this analysis.[2] These sites were selected for several reasons. First, unlike the majority of lifestyle websites, both of these sites managed to avoid being removed or blocked from their locations for several months. Other sites, such as Ana's Underground Grotto, Rexia World, Ana Goddess, and Starving for Perfection, to name just a few, were more difficult to follow due to increased censorship efforts from various internet servers. Second, both sites include graphics, links, artwork, text, and topics that are typical of lifestyle websites generally. For instance, like the majority of lifestyle websites, they feature only photographs of white women. No men or people of color are displayed on either site. Finally, these two sites were among the easiest lifestyle websites for web browsers to locate because their web addresses include the sites' names, and they were linked to many other lifestyle sites.

The Anorexic Beauty homepage consists of a textual introduction from a self-identified female author. She explains, "I created this website to raise the level of awareness of anorexia and pro-anorexic thinking," and then argues that "[a]norexia is a lifestyle" as opposed to a diet or a disease. The homepage also displays four small photographs of thin models and actresses posing for the camera. At least one of these photographs has been digitally altered to make the woman appear excessively thin. A caption beneath these photographs declares, "Thin is Beautiful." This page contains links to a message board, several polls inquiring about the viewer's weight, hometown, and length of eating disordered experience, an excerpt from

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[2] As of January 26, 2003, both Anorexic Beauty and Proana4life had been blocked from the internet.

the author's journal, and an "image gallery." Each page begins with a colorful header containing the website's title and a drawing of several butterflies sweeping through a blue sky. The image gallery displays over 50 photographs, drawings, magazine and book covers, and advertisements, almost all of which feature very thin females, or parts of female bodies, with especially pronounced bones. None of these images is captioned, but over several images text is superimposed, such as "A Skinny New You."

Proana4life is a more extensive website than Anorexic Beauty. Its homepage features a woman standing on a scale; "This site is Pro-ED, enter at your own risk and responsibil[i]ty to yourself" is centered at the bottom of the screen. The homepage links to more than 20 other pages, most of which contain at least one or two visual images. Like Anorexic Beauty, on one page Proana4life features an excerpt from the anonymous author's journal. Other pages include song lyrics, "tips and tricks" for losing weight, a list of low calorie, fat-free "safe foods," quotations about losing weight, and several pages of "thinspirations," or photographs of scantily clad, thin women. Thinspirations are a mainstay of most lifestyle websites, used to inspire readers to keep their weights at levels as low or lower than the celebrities, models, and anonymous women who are pictured. Proana4life also includes several pages containing lists of maxims for readers to repeat and memorize. The "Ana Creed" consists of short declarations that begin "I believe," such as: "I believe in salvation through trying just a bit harder than I did yesterday." A second group of adages, entitled the "Thin Commandments," includes directives like "Thou shall not eat without feeling guilty." A final page lists female celebrities who unknowingly have been appointed lifestyle "role models" because they maintain particularly small physiques.

Anorexic Beauty and Proana4life imagetexts draw upon three sources for their persuasive force: mainstream consumer culture, popular health campaigns, and mythical narratives of Christian theology. Imagetexts drawing upon these sources make the unreasonable appear reasonable by "proving" how mainstream eating disorders really are. They extend the logic of familiar, mainstream assumptions to extreme ends and, by doing so, draw attention to how slight is the difference between the lifestyle philosophy and mainstream culture. In this way, lifestyle imagetexts work by emphasizing that what they advocate differs in degree rather than in kind from mainstream body image discourses.

Mainstream Consumer Culture

Anorexic Beauty and Proana4life argue for the legitimacy of the lifestyle philosophy by constructing imagetexts that allude to mainstream consumer culture. For instance, the Anorexic Beauty image gallery features photographs of popular female celebrities, including singer Victoria Beckham (a.k.a., Posh Spice), model Kate Moss, and actress Calista Flockhart. Their pictures have been placed amid photographs of medically diagnosed anorexics and bulimics who have been featured in articles about eating disorders in the popular press, such as *People* and *Cosmopolitan*. The images of famous women were moved from mainstream media to a "thinspiration" gallery for several reasons. First, and most obviously, these photographs are reappropriated because they embody the ideals of the lifestyle philosophy: self-discipline, willpower, and restraint. Women who create and visit lifestyle websites are using images of thin celebrities to inspire their own development of these characteristics and therefore instigate their own weight loss.

Second, relocating these photographs highlights how closely the featured celebrities resemble individuals with eating disorders. Lake and Pickering (1998) claim that images can

undergo a transformation when "the visual frame within which those images are interpreted" is altered, so that an image's polarity is reversed in a way that "refutes" its earlier meaning (p. 87). In this case, the transformed imagetexts do not so much refute the proposition that eating disorders are diseases as demonstrate that, no matter how eating disorders are defined, the eating disordered lifestyle is almost as prominent in mainstream culture as it is on lifestyle websites. Placing the images in a new visual frame allows readers to see that tell-tale signs of malnutrition are equally evident among those diagnosed as eating disordered *and* admired celebrities: collarbones burst from tight flesh, pallid hands clasp together at the end of stick-like arms, and backbones poke out between protruding ribs. Such images support the lifestyle philosophy by illustrating that lifestyle tenets are repeatedly exemplified in mainstream consumer culture. Although this argument could be communicated discursively, imagetexts have more argumentative force than do texts alone because readers see the evidence for similitude before they have a chance to doubt that it exists. By shifting images of female celebrities from mainstream consumer culture onto a lifestyle image gallery, lifestyle advocates attempt to show that mainstream critiques of the lifestyle philosophy are hypocritical. If celebrity women are glorified for being excessively thin in mainstream consumer culture, then other women also should be respected for aspiring to attain equally thin physiques.

The text accompanying these reappropriated images makes claims about hypocrisy even more evident. Some images of diagnosed anorexics and bulimics appear as originally presented in popular magazines, accompanied by ominous editorial phrases such as "Anorexics Sentenced to Death." By contrast, the celebrities hardly appear "sentenced to death," situated amid the names of products that they endorse and accompanied by upbeat phrases like "A Skinny New You." The websites' unstated premise is that slender lifestyle advocates are no closer to death than are excessively thin celebrities and therefore should not be singled out for criticism. Similarly, Anorexic Beauty displays a clothing advertisement for Request Jeans featuring a skeletal woman. This ad has been labeled "Ana Rexic" in order to point out the irony of celebrating stick-thin models in the fashion world while condemning the lifestyle movement.

This imagetext, as well as those featuring thin celebrities, creates what Walton (1998) calls a circumstantial ad hominem argument, in which the credibility of an argument is questioned because the speaker's actions are inconsistent with the values that she communicates to others (p. 6). In this case, lifestyle imagetexts do not refute mainstream claims in the traditional sense but rather demonstrate similitude and therefore potentially call into question the opposition's case. Critics of the lifestyle philosophy claim that eating disorders are diseases that need to be cured. However, lifestyle websites point out that these same people continue to venerate thin women by taking part in a culture that consistently glorifies these women in magazines, television shows, and other media outlets. In light of their own actions, critics' demands that the lifestyle philosophy be publicly repudiated or censored from the public sphere make little sense. In fact, the argument for censorship is evidence of underlying mainstream fears that eating disorders are not diseases but choices, a stance that reinforces the lifestyle philosophy. Rather than directly refuting the argument that starving and/or purging is harmful to women, these lifestyle imagetexts bring the credibility of the critics themselves into question and, in doing so, destabilize the arguments against the lifestyle philosophy.

In several cases, lifestyle imagetexts borrow a tactic directly from mainstream consumer culture to convince readers of the lifestyle philosophy's legitimacy. A few of the photographs

on Anorexic Beauty and Proana4life have been doctored using computer technology to make already thin women, usually models and celebrities, exceptionally thin. As shocking as the resulting images might seem, Mitchell (1992) reminds us that the female subject has a history of digital manipulation in mainstream consumer culture. In 1989, for instance, *TV Guide*'s cover featured Oprah Winfrey's head on Ann-Margret's slender body to make the talk show host look conventionally attractive (p. 208). More recently, the cover of *Newsweek* featured a "photo illustration" of domestic diva and ex-convict Martha Stewart's head on a model's thin body to prove that Stewart was looking better than ever after serving time in jail (Memmott, 2005). Publicity photographs of female stars are regularly airbrushed to portray these women as excessively slender, toned, and wrinkle-free. According to Bordo (1993), many images of women in popular culture are designed to give female readers the impression that their own bodies are inadequate (p. 166). Today's digitally manipulated images take this technique a step further, offering a fantasy figure that readers never will be able to match.

Mainstream acceptance of a certain amount of digital manipulation in consumer media represents an "image vernacular," an "enthymematic [mode] of reasoning employed by audiences in the context of specific practices of reading and viewing in visual cultures" (Finnegan, 2005, p. 34). In this image vernacular, "everyone knows" and accepts that images of women in the media are manipulated to create a fantasy ideal. By placing digitally manipulated images of women on their websites, lifestyle advocates ironically take this image vernacular beyond the point of mainstream acceptability. For example, in one Anorexic Beauty photograph of a runway model, the woman's torso has been narrowed drastically, and the outline of her ribs has been altered and emphasized to balance the distortions in body size (see Figure 1). Close analysis reveals that the model's dress hangs from a body almost twice the size of the body that viewers see. In other photographs, ribs, cheekbones, and taut muscles are drawn in, height is extended, and stomachs are erased to look concave. Although consumers of mainstream culture allow the media to smooth away actresses' wrinkles, whiten their teeth, and erase their perspiration stains for the covers of *Vogue* or *Elle,* they find themselves outraged at the digitally manipulated images on lifestyle websites. Indeed, these imagetexts are humanly impossible to obtain, especially given that the models' hair remains thick and healthy, their eyes sparkle, and their skin is shiny and clear. In reality, people with excessively low levels of body fat will usually have thin, stringy hair, dull eyes, and a "fine downy growth of fetal-like hair (lanugo) over the cheeks, neck, forearms and thighs" (Cassell & Gleaves, 2000, p. 17). Yet the visual culture of body representation that condones and even encourages a certain amount of airbrushing also generates unrealistic depictions of what a woman should and can look like. By featuring obviously doctored images of women on their websites, lifestyle advocates demonstrate their fluency in the image vernacular of digitally manipulated photographs and, more importantly, suggest that what makes the lifestyle philosophy so offensive is simply an extension of mainstream consumer culture's norms.

Popular Health Campaigns

Lifestyle imagetexts also draw upon popular health campaigns for their appeal. Two examples of this strategy constitute what Groarke (1996) calls "anti-advertisements," which are social messages designed to use the framework of certain companies' and institutions' advertisements to mock them and reveal their often deceitful allegiances (p. 113). Originally, these images were produced and publicized for a health campaign by Adbusters (2005a) to
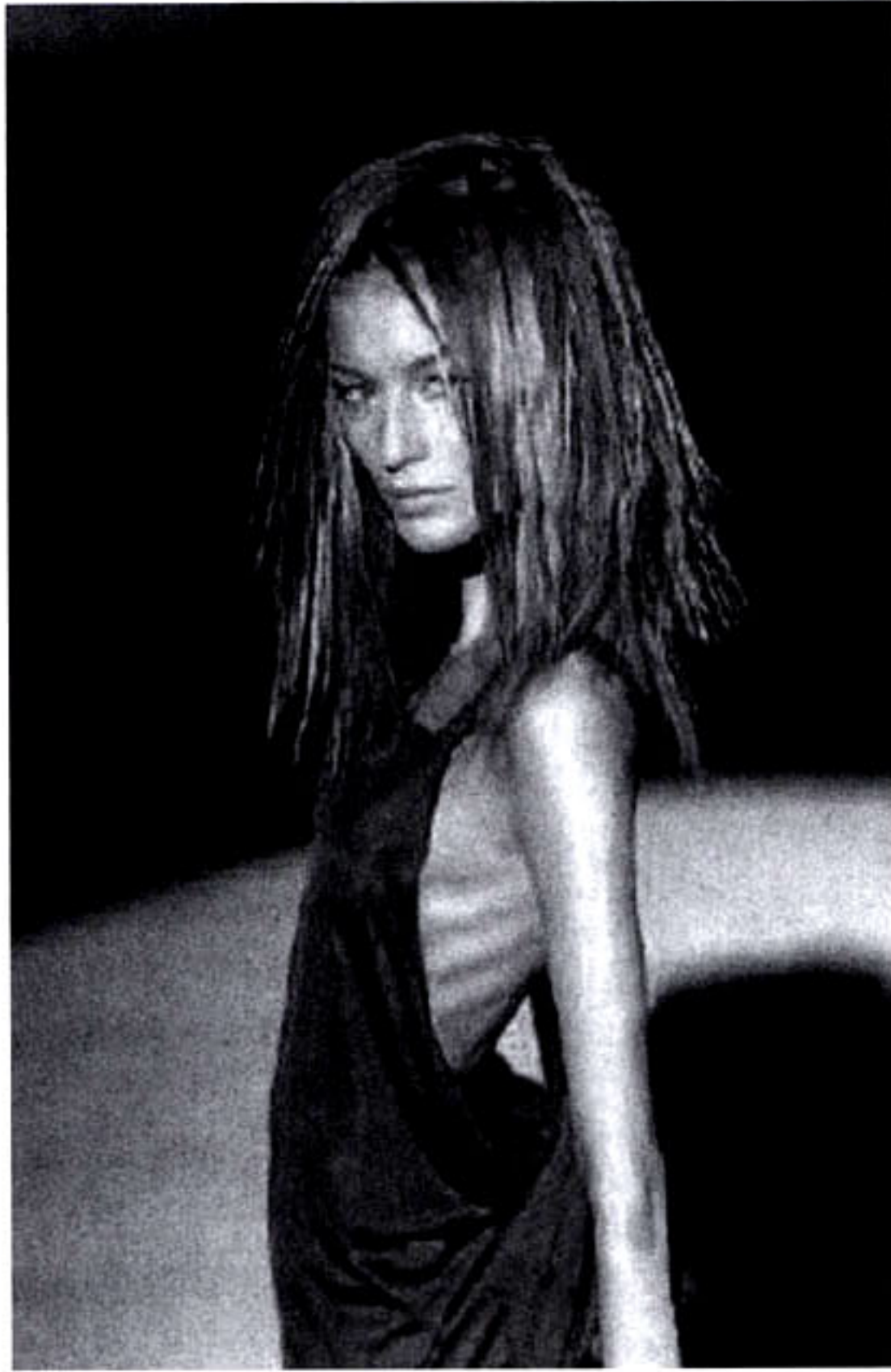
Figure 1: Digital manipulation makes the woman in this photograph look thinner than is humanly possible (Anorexic Beauty).

expose the harmful health consequences of the excessively thin models notoriously featured in Calvin Klein (CK) clothing advertisements. They include a picture (entitled "Obsession, for women") of a naked woman vomiting into a toilet bowl (see Figure 2) and a picture of a thin woman lying weakly on the ground, entitled "Anorexia: Calvin Klein disorder." Adbusters' (2005b) mission is to reveal the ugly, hidden realities of the modern world in order to "forge a major shift in the way we will live in the 21st century" (para. 1). These anti-advertisements seek to communicate to readers that what many fashion advertisements portray as beautiful and desirable, i.e., extremely thin, pale, seemingly apathetic female bodies, are the products of unhealthy, unattractive behaviors. In this way, Adbusters' anti-advertisements demystify the CK "look" by emphasizing CK models' lack of health and encouraging readers to foster healthy and therefore beautiful behaviors.

When lifestyle websites position Adbusters' anti-advertisements next to the original CK advertisements, as well as other images of thin, seemingly happy and fulfilled women, they continue to suggest that models and celebrities purge and starve in order to maintain their physiques and social status. Rather than condemning these practices as shameful or unhealthy, however, the reappropriated anti-advertisements promote acceptance. Transforming these imagetexts onto a new visual frame turns the initial argument back onto itself and
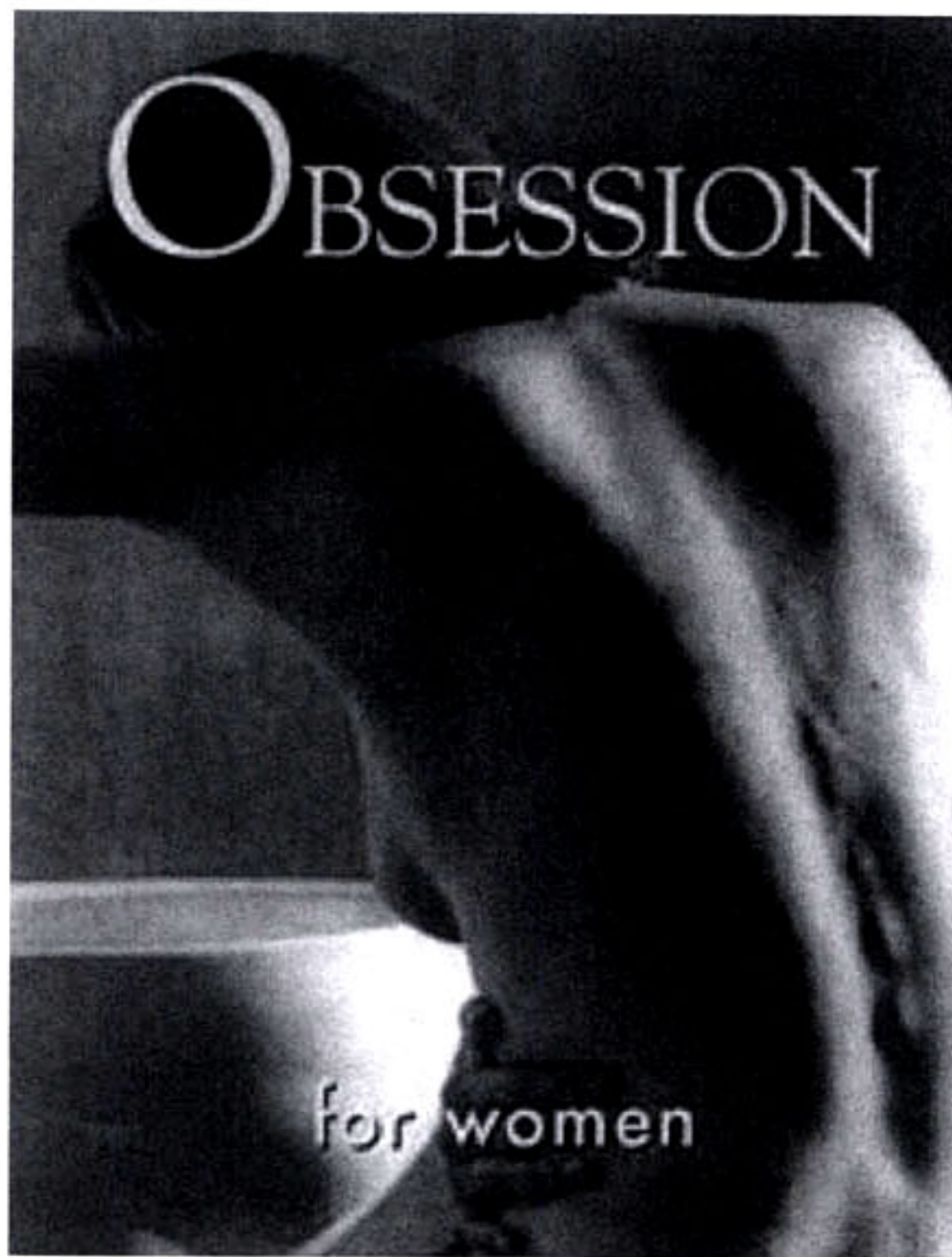
Figure 2: Originally produced by Adbusters to deglamorize eating disorders, this "Obsession" advertisement makes eating disorders seem widespread and acceptable (Proana4life; Anorexic Beauty). Reprinted with permission from Adbusters.

makes the unreasonable appear reasonable. Both appropriations acknowledge that eating disordered behaviors are at least partially responsible for the CK look. While Adbusters' campaign deglamorizes mediated bodies by linking them to disordered eating behaviors, the lifestyle movement uses these imagetexts to normalize and even celebrate disordered eating. Purging and starving are framed as legitimate techniques by which females may gain acceptance and power in mainstream culture rather than as ugly behaviors of which people should be ashamed. Chernin (1994) argues that in a "culture busily spinning out images and warnings intended to keep women from developing their bodies, their appetites, and their powers," slenderness itself becomes a statement of power (pp. 96, 48). The last "Thin Commandment" on Proana4life explains that "[b]eing thin and not eating are signs of true will power and success." Reappropriation of Adbusters' CK anti-advertisements by lifestyle websites demonstrates how many women obtain access to the power of slenderness and grants legitimacy to their actions.

Producers of lifestyle websites also defend and promote their philosophy by appealing to a second kind of popular health campaign, which uses distinctively colored ribbons as symbols of support for those struggling to overcome serious diseases. Supporters of various ribbon campaigns often are encouraged to display the ribbon on their clothing, car windows, and web pages, and to purchase products from companies that provide financial support to the cause. In this way, the ribbon grants individuals a sense of identity and solidarity with

Figure 3: The ribbon is associated with support for numerous health issues (Proana4life).

others who also display the ribbon in order to publicize their allegiance to the cause. Both Anorexic Beauty and Proana4life feature the image of a white ribbon surrounded by a red background, with the phrase, "Anorexia is a lifestyle, not a disease," at the bottom of the frame (see Figure 3). They also link to other lifestyle websites featuring the ribbon.

The ribbon's lack of color visually demonstrates the lifestyle goal of reduction and, ultimately, invisibility. Its hue also is reminiscent of the "white-ribbon women" of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, who wore white ribbons in the late 19th century to symbolize the purity that results from self-denial (Engs, 2003, p. 363). Its omnipresence on lifestyle websites suggests that, although acceptance of the lifestyle philosophy can differentiate an individual from others and grant her a unique sense of identity, acceptance of the eating disordered lifestyle makes her part of a larger community. The ribbon symbolizes the lifestyle movement's potential to integrate two of young people's most universal desires: to be an individual and yet to feel in solidarity with others as a member of a community.

Beyond signaling the potential for identity formation and community membership, the lifestyle ribbon is familiar to most people because it resembles others, such as the red HIV/AIDS awareness ribbon, the pink breast cancer awareness ribbon, and the multi-

colored Multiple Sclerosis Ribbon of Hope. These ribbons generally symbolize tolerance for and acceptance of those struggling with specific illnesses. For instance, "the Red Ribbon has grown . . . into an international symbol of solidarity on AIDS . . . instantly communicating empathy" (Fleury, 1992, p. 14). The red ribbon also communicates tolerance for those with HIV/AIDS who, early on, were stigmatized by the disease's identification with socially marginalized gay men and intravenous drug users. In this way, brightly colored ribbons function as Burkean condensation symbols (Burke, 1966, p. 61) of support in the face of stigma. Given that eating disordered individuals sometimes are stigmatized because, for example, they "refuse" to recover or allegedly are in denial about the serious consequences of eating disorders (Nagourney, 2005, p. 6), the lifestyle movement's reappropriation of the iconic ribbon is a symbolic attempt to help both the eating disordered and the non-eating disordered look beyond the stigma and see anorexia and bulimia in a more positive light.

Beyond their associations with tolerance and awareness, iconic ribbons also are associated with developing cures. This could present a contradiction for lifestyle advocates, who see no need to overcome eating disordered behaviors. These advocates attempt to avoid this contradiction by using the ribbon less in the tradition of symbolizing support for a "cure" and more as a statement of tolerance and freedom of expression. Ribbons often stand for issues that are not related directly to health. For instance, the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) employs a blue ribbon to symbolize support for freedom of speech and expression on the internet (Kirby, 2001, p. 3). The white lifestyle ribbon echoes EFF's campaign, symbolically refuting advocates of lifestyle censorship and encouraging tolerance of, or even support for, the lifestyle philosophy. Similarly, the yellow "Support Our Troops" ribbon connotes that those in harm's way deserve support even if one disagrees with the forces and policies that put them in harm's way. Although lifestyle advocates argue that they are not, in fact, putting themselves in harm's way by living with an eating disorder, the white ribbon communicates that believers in the dangers of eating disorders should support lifestyle advocates while hoping for their eventual safe return from battle with anorexia and/or bulimia.

Narrative of Christian Theology

Lifestyle imagetexts' final source of appeal is the mythical narrative of Christian theology. According to Jasinski (2001), "Myths, in short, are narratives that report the struggles and heroic exploits from a community's past" (p. 383). Although myths are not propositional, many scholars agree that myths communicate a sort of argumentative logic (Lévi-Strauss, 1972, p. 194; Osborn, 1986; Solomon, 1979, p. 274). A familiar and therefore seemingly rational narrative can lend credibility to otherwise unfamiliar claims. Anorexic Beauty and Proana4life employ a myth of original human sin, penance, and redemption that is grounded in what Burke (1970) labels the rhetoric of Western theology:

Here one can start with the creation of a natural order (though conceiving it as infused with a verbal principle); one can next proceed to an idea of innocence untroubled by thou-shalt-not's; one can next introduce a thou-shalt-not; one can next depict the thou-shalt-not as violated; one can next depict a new Covenant propounded on the basis of this violation, and with capital punishment; one can later introduce the principle of sacrifice . . . Then gradually thereafter, more and more clearly, comes the emergence of the turn from mere sacrifice to the idea of outright redemption by victimage. (p. 216)

Burke thus succinctly maps out the narrative of Christianity, whose plot involves recognition of original sin, penance, and salvation (p. 216). This pattern is held together by a "god-term"

Figure 4: This image alludes to Eve's transgression in the Garden of Eden, depicting Ana's apple with one bite missing (Proana4life).

that "sums up a manifold of particulars under a single head" and stands for the goal community members struggle to achieve (p. 2).

Numerous imagetexts on Anorexic Beauty and Proana4life allude to this well-known mythical narrative but alter it slightly to support the lifestyle philosophy. These imagetexts make the unreasonable appear reasonable by drawing from a source with which many people are familiar—Christian theology—and whose symbols they recognize. By repeatedly utilizing imagetexts with clearly identifiable religious origins, lifestyle advocates connect their philosophy to what many consider to be sacred and therefore acquire a sense of authority and credibility that they otherwise would not have. They also capitalize on and speak to the sense of shame that typically accompanies the eating disordered experience (Boskind-White & White, 2000, p. 32; Woolsey, 2002, p. 224). For example, both sites illustrate the rejection of the human condition via a red "Ana's apple," which recalls Eve's infamous bite into forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden (see Figure 4). This imagetext reminds readers of the narrative in which "sin is unleashed into the world by the act of a woman eating" (Lelwica, 1999, p. 125). Readers are encouraged to connect their own sense of inadequacy, symbolized by the bite taken out of the otherwise perfect apple, with a seemingly credible Biblical allusion and therefore to view their bodily dissatisfaction as legitimate.

References to Eve's lack of restraint when confronting temptation in Eden invite readers to view all women as naturally lacking in willpower and therefore defective. According to Chernin (1994), females constantly receive messages about the dangers of failing to monitor their bodies (p. 23). Mainstream advertisements imply that if women fail to count calories, use make-up, and spend hours each day exercising, they naturally will become obese, unattractive, and slothful. Similarly, lifestyle imagetexts argue that women who literally bite into their desires will experience their ample bodies as a source of shame and a marker of original sin.

The appeal to Christian theology and Eve's transgression is strengthened by coupling the image of "Ana's apple" with lists of the "Thin Commandments" and the "Ana Creed." These

obviously allude, respectively, to the Ten Commandments, a list of the moral and religious laws handed down by God to Moses, and the Apostle's Creed, the standard profession of faith in some Christian churches. Like the Ten Commandments, the Thin Commandments decree what believers "shall not" do: lifestyle advocates shall not "eat without feeling guilty" nor "eat fattening food without punishing oneself afterwards." While the Apostle's Creed invites Christians to profess their faith in God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, the Ana Creed invites readers to profess: "I believe that i am the most vile, worthless and useless person ever to have existed on the planet," and, "I believe in Control, the only force mighty enough to bring order to the chaos that is my world." Because these familiar texts are invoked in order to frame controversial claims in a less alarming fashion, these lists are the verbal parallel of the visual argument for similitude. Just as imagetexts appealing to consumer culture or health campaigns depict the lifestyle philosophy's similarity to mainstream culture, the Thin Commandments and the Ana Creed assert that the tenets of the eating disordered lifestyle mirror Christianity and, therefore, are worthy of consideration no matter how preposterous they may seem initially.

Lifestyle imagetexts encourage readers to enact various forms of penance for the female body's supposed inadequacies. In this way, they trade on longstanding tropes of asceticism and denial. Bell (1985) maintains that, for Roman Catholic saints such as Catherine of Siena, Agnes of Assisi, and Mary Magdalen de' Pazzi, the "suppression of physical urges and basic feelings–fatigue, sexual drive, hunger, pain–frees the body to achieve heroic feats and the soul to commune with God" (p. 13). Self-denial separated these saints from other women who, by responding to their bodily needs, repeated Eve's transgression. By rejecting their bodies, they believed they could transcend original sin and reach a state of perfection and purity. Bell's theory about "holy anorexia's" connection to contemporary eating disorders even may be partially responsible for lifestyle advocates' many allusions to religious mythology: a picture of his book is featured on Anorexic Beauty's image gallery. At minimum, Bell's theory allows lifestyle followers to legitimate their claims in religious mythology and argue that their philosophy is sacred.

The idea that fasting and other forms of self-denial can help women to transcend original sin permeates today's mainstream culture as well as the culture of eating disordered lifestyles. Lelwica (1999) contends "that the symbols, rituals, and beliefs through which girls and women strive to reduce their appetites and bodies constitute a 'secular' plan of salvation and that this plan draws on the patriarchal legacy of traditional Christianity" (p. 96). Similarly, Chernin (1994) contends that, in the quest to overcome our physical, intellectual, and social imperfections, "we create a hell for the body" by taking on "the same sufferings our mythology reserves for sinners in the underworld. Thus, the female body is starved, emaciated, bound, driven, tortured with cold, shaken by rubber belts, forced to run on rubber treadmills going nowhere in their eternal pointlessness" (p. 153). Anorexic Beauty and Proana4life afford women numerous ways of torturing themselves in an attempt to control their supposedly inadequate female bodies. If only they would drink diet sodas to keep their empty stomachs from growling, consume "meals" consisting solely of lettuce, and exercise when overwhelmed with the desire to eat, they might finally absolve themselves of their sins.

Successful penance leads to salvation, which lies not in God but in anorexia personified, or "Ana." Proana4life features a photograph of a thin woman who epitomizes "Ana," wearing a short white dress and wings that symbolize the angelic purity of starvation (see Figure 5). The shot is taken from below; the angel stares down upon viewers, who must

Figure 5: "Ana" is personified by a winged, thin, and therefore pure young woman riding the subway (Proana4life).

interact with her "as an inferior relates to a superior" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 123). (In contrast, most women in lifestyle images look to the side, away from the viewer, and thereby "offer" themselves up for the viewer's gaze; p. 125.) She embodies everything for which the lifestyle movement stands: thinness, purity, and self-control. That she rides on a subway updates the allusion to historical, religious images of angels, and suggests this angel's significance to modern audiences. Her underground travel symbolizes the lifestyle movement's underground existence on the internet, as well as the hellish experience of living with an eating disorder. In many ways, this fallen angel beckons readers toward a pseudo-heaven on a subway that, once boarded, turns out to be a hell from which it is all but impossible to disembark. Viewers are told that their "only hope is Ana," much as some Christians assert that the only hope for salvation lies in one's ability to imitate the lives of the saints and, by doing so, grow closer to God. In this sense, any suffering that they might encounter en route to salvation is justified by their final reward.

Proana4life offers a page of celebrity "role models" as exemplars of the path to salvation. Waifish actress Calista Flockhart is given top honors and deemed a "goddess" for developing an emaciated body shape, which signals her success in following the subway angel to salvation. Although none of the women in these photographs appears happy, the camera's focus on their lean bodies implies that they are important in a way that other, larger people are not. Their pictures promise lifestyle supporters a saintly existence in return for the self-hatred and physical suffering that they endure daily. In this way, Anorexic Beauty and Proana4life frame the eating disordered lifestyle as an enlightened existence that offers a special deliverance. By repeatedly using the symbols and framework of Christian theology to present their philosophy, lifestyle imagetexts argue that their unreasonable tenets are potentially reasonable because they resemble what is, for many, sacred.

CONCLUSION

Lifestyle imagetexts appeal to three familiar sources. Appeals to mainstream consumer culture observe that many revered celebrities resemble women with diagnosed eating disorders, while digitally altered photographs function in the tradition of mainstream air-brushing and retouching, which produce fantasy images to which readers can aspire. Appeals to popular health campaigns reappropriate anti-advertisements in order to normalize eating disordered behavior, and employ a well-known symbol, the ribbon, in order to fashion a sense of identity and solidarity within a community. Appeals to the familiar narrative of Christian theology invoke a tradition of asceticism, self-denial, penance, and salvation in order to generate a seemingly sacred and therefore credible shared history.

These appeals assist lifestyle advocates to overcome the shame associated with eating disorders by emphasizing the similitude between the lifestyle philosophy and mainstream values, thereby normalizing the eating disordered experience while shifting any blame to the mainstream. If, as lifestyle imagetexts imply, a large segment of society lives with eating disorders, then lifestyle websites are simply a symptom rather than the root of the larger problem. Essentially, this shift in blame enables lifestyle imagetexts to communicate to two different audiences simultaneously. Until general societal values connecting female thinness with success and beauty are eradicated, lifestyle advocates argue, opponents have no right to criticize or censor lifestyle websites; doing so relies on the rhetoric of hypocrisy. At the same time, advocates continue, young women who may be attracted to this lifestyle are justified in choosing it, despite what their families or doctors might tell them, because it merely reflects the values of mainstream society. Thus, eating disorders become a source of pride, not shame.

Lifestyle imagetexts are theoretically interesting in the way that they argue by similitude, blurring boundaries between the "radical" lifestyle philosophy and mainstream culture. These imagetexts take mainstream virtues, such as female thinness and self-denial, to the extreme; unreasonable claims seem less so when shown to be extensions of mainstream culture. In fact, lifestyle imagetexts not only mimic culturally accepted symbols but also self-consciously draw attention to this mimicry as further proof of their claim's reasonability. Ultimately, this strategy exposes and exploits mainstream anxieties about the lifestyle philosophy. Although the mainstream contends that eating disorders are diseases, this view is belied by a nearly frantic anxiety about lifestyle websites, which presupposes the power of symbols to win over new eating disorder recruits. By reappropriating mainstream symbols and self-consciously erasing differences between the two viewpoints, lifestyle advocates

expose this tension in the mainstream view, exploit critics' deepest fears that lifestyle imagetexts will "convert" the healthy, and thereby "prove" that eating disorders are a lifestyle after all.

Imagetexts are an ideal form (in this case perhaps dangerously ideal) from which to argue for similitude, especially when they can be deliberately appropriated, compared, and even altered so as to emphasize likeness rather than difference. The lifestyle imagetexts' logic of depiction reveals how small is the gap between the lifestyle philosophy and familiar mainstream values that are so ingrained as to seem reasonable even when they are not. In this way, lifestyle imagetexts may be understood as performances of the contradictions in mainstream rhetoric rather than rational arguments about them. Lifestyle imagetexts "refute" mainstream rhetoric about eating disorders by "proving" how mainstream eating disorders really are. Although previous scholarship shows how visual images can satisfy the requirements of propositional argumentation (Birdsell & Groarke, 1996; Blair, 1996; Shelley, 1996), such images may be most convincingly argumentative when they perform similarity and difference. Lifestyle imagetexts enable advocates to create a space for themselves in the public sphere of rational ideas without a convincing propositional argument. The imagetext's ability to depict similitude can expose contradictions in discourse and highlight connections between argumentative claims that are easier to see than they are to read or hear.   ·

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