

FILM REVIEW

What does it mean to Eat?

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Despite its eight-minute length, there is much to say about *Likeness* (Scott, Hartley, Bosnjak, & Wieringa, 2013), a short film from first-time director and Academy-award nominated cinematographer, Rodrigo Prieto. Funded and produced by Candescent Films—a production company dedicated to “films that have the power to create change”—*Likeness* is a reflection on cultural expectations of beauty and the move toward disordered eating that they enable.

Likeness traces the movements of a teenage girl (played by actress Elle Fanning) as she navigates a party. It opens on a dimly-lit party full of lithe women and men, their long limbs straight from the covers of fashion magazines. We proceed past willowy partygoers, interspersed with the sickly, skeletal images of thinness gone-too-far. A woman stands in a closet like a human clothes hanger, her eyes lifeless, and makeup streaking her cheeks. Another person lays naked across a kitchen table, ribcage threatening to break through the skin. Prieto demonstrates extraordinary cinematographic skill as he further blurs the line between statuesque and macabre with each corner turned.

The climax of the film occurs in its second scene, as the girl enters a washroom and we find ourselves gazing at her reflection. A moment passes, and she frantically touches her face as it transforms into a grotesque mask of cracking, peeling skin. The tension mounts and breaks suddenly as she turns to vomit into the toilet. The scene changes again, and we see the girl re-enter the party—now brightly lit—and the once-sinister vignettes are replaced by cheerful teenagers gossiping and taking sips out of plastic cups.

Likeness does an excellent job of challenging social norms that pair thinness with beauty. As Prieto noted in a 2013 interview with PolicyMic, his objective was to present a fictional account of how a girl with an eating disorder might see the world, taking notes from his own daughter's experience with anorexia. In this he is successful, well-served by the thoughtful shifts in perspective, the well-laid scenes, the simplicity of the narrative, and the length of the film. The film is particularly effective in its attention to detail; for example, the girl puts on mascara before she pulls at her skin in order to change, even slightly, her image in the mirror. Here, Prieto demonstrates at once the control over the body and the loss of control associated with disordered eating—the control paradox (Lawrence, 1979). What emerges is a vivid and carefully drawn short film contrasting the perception and reality of beauty and body image experienced by those who live with disordered eating.

Likeness, however, is not alone in achieving this objective. Depictions of disordered eating on screen such as Jean Kilbourne's *Killing Us Softly* series (Jhally, 1999) and documentary films *Sharing the Secret* (Goldstein, 2000) and *Dying to Dance* (Carelli, 2001) identify how anorexia and bulimia are diseases in which those afflicted are consumed by the need to control what goes into (and what comes out of) their bodies. Furthermore, scholarship abounds identifying the relationship between fashion, mass media, beauty, and disordered eating (i.e. Wolf, 1991). And though *Likeness* is a particularly strong contribution to the body of work identifying the relationship between eating disorders and a culture obsessed with unattainable standards of beauty, it is territory well-trod.

It is not that *Likeness* fails in what it sets out to achieve. Rather, there is a missed opportunity in its portrayal of the experience of disordered eating as an individualized meta-narrative of a culture too obsessed with beauty, and the implications for young women who internalize the desire to look a certain way. Missing too often is the role of food in disordered eating, that is to say, the experience of anorexia and bulimia as a mundane and unceasing struggle against food.

To have an eating disorder is to see food as the ever-present catalyst of your inevitable demise. It means that each meal involves weighing physiological need against psychological desire; you need to balance the potential health risks of not consuming or digesting food against the apparent benefit of losing more weight, hunger be damned (Hornbacher, 2006). Anorexia and bulimia are not simply disorders of body dysmorphia, but as the term “eating disorders” suggests, entail unhealthy relationships with food rarely represented on screen. Occasionally, as in *Center Stage* (Mark, 2000), *Black Swan* (Fischer, 2010) or in the made-for-TV movie *For the Love of Nancy* (Di Bona & Weintaub, 1994), a character gives a sidelong glance at a piece of pizza, cheeseburger or tuna sandwich, but the intensity and severity of having to face the need to eat each day is rarely captured in fictional depictions of anorexia and/or bulimia.

The difficult, ongoing, and daily struggle of living with an eating disorder is particularly important to understand given the long and difficult road to recovery, when recovery occurs at all. Meta-analyses have demonstrated that only one-third of individuals with anorexia recover within four years of the onset of the disease, and though this number rises as time goes on, for 25% of people with anorexia the disorder persists throughout the remainder of their

lives (Berkman, Lohr, & Bulik, 2007; Zerwas et al., 2013). Anorexia has one of the highest mortality rates of any psychiatric disorder (Arcelus et al., 2011; Zerwas et al., 2013). Those with bulimia fare only slightly better, though often these disorders co-occur in complex ways (Keel & Mitchell, 1997). On screen, the knowledge that the struggle continues long after weight is regained is rarely shared. Recovery does not mean that one's concern about their body or eating is erased, but rather a range of behaviours including coming to recognize when the concern is obsessive and when the desire to control food intake becomes acute (Berkman, Lohr, & Bulik, 2007).

There are depictions of eating disorders on screen where food is substantively addressed. Lauren Greenfield's *THIN* (Cutler, 2006), for example, documents the experiences of women recovering from anorexia and bulimia in a residential treatment centre, which shows the struggle that it is for patients to engage in the Sisyphean task of eating several times a day. Greenfield painstakingly shows how the banality of consuming food is bound up with survival, body image, and self-loathing for the women in the film. But for the most part, such truths are absent from television and cinematographic portrayals of eating disorders, and certainly in fictional representations.

There is a moment in *Likeness* where food is acknowledged. At one point, the camera pans past a single, ornate place setting on a dining table absent food and diners, but the shot continues on only to linger on the emaciated women leaning against nearby walls. Prieto knows that food matters, but for him, less so than the perpetuation of distorted images of beauty.

Likeness then, is a remarkable short film that demonstrates the intricate relationship between cultural understandings of beauty and attempts to control how we fit into the ascribed aesthetic that emerges. Disordered eating, however, is not merely about beauty and skewed images of oneself (though it is in part), but it is also a meticulous and calculated attempt to control what goes into one's body, and to develop a regime of near-ascetic self-control. Like other depictions of disordered eating on screen, it fails to consider, quite simply, what it means to eat.

Likeness is widely available online on the Candescent Films website. (www.candescentfilms.com/likeness).

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