

## Hunger as Ideology

### THE WOMAN WHO DOESN'T EAT MUCH

In a television commercial, two little French girls are shown dressing up in the feathery finery of their mother's clothes. They are exquisite little girls, flawless and innocent, and the scene emphasizes both their youth and the natural sense of style often associated with French women. (The ad is done in French, with subtitles.) One of the girls, spying a picture of the other girl's mother, exclaims breathlessly, "Your mother, she is so slim, so beautiful! Does she eat?" The daughter, giggling, replies: "Silly, just not so much," and displays her mother's helper, a bottle of FibreThin. "Aren't you jealous?" the friend asks. Dimpling, shy yet self-possessed, deeply knowing, the daughter answers, "Not if I know her secrets."

Admittedly, women are continually bombarded with advertisements and commercials for weight-loss products and programs, but this commercial makes many of us particularly angry. On the most obvious level, the commercial affronts with its suggestion that young girls begin early in learning to control their weight, and with its romantic mystification of diet pills as part of the obscure, eternal arsenal of feminine arts to be passed from generation to generation. This romanticization, as often is the case in American commercials, trades on our continuing infatuation with (what we imagine to be) the civility, tradition, and *savoir-faire* of "Europe" (seen as the stylish antithesis to our own American clumsiness, aggressiveness, crudeness). The little girls are fresh and demure, in a way that is undefinably but absolutely recognizably "European"—as defined, that is, within the visual vocabulary of popular American culture. And FibreThin, in this commercial, is nothing so crass and "medical" and pragmatic (read: American) as a diet pill, but a mysterious, prized (and, it is implied) "secret," "known only to those with both history and taste.

But we expect such hype from contemporary advertisements. Far more unnerving is the psychological acuity of the ad's focus, not on the size and shape of bodies, but on a certain *subjectivity*, represented by the absent but central figure of the mother, the woman who eats, only "not so much." We never see her picture; we are left to imagine her ideal beauty and slenderness. But what she looks like is not important, in any case; what is important is the fact that she has achieved what we might call a "cool" (that is, casual) relation to food. She is not starving herself (an obsession, indicating the continuing power of food), but neither is she desperately and shamefully binging in some private corner. Eating has become, for her, no big deal. In its evocation of the lovely French mother who doesn't eat much, the commercial's metaphor of European "difference" reveals itself as a means of representing that enviable and truly foreign "other": the woman for whom food is merely ordinary, who can take it or leave it.

Another version, this time embodied by a sleek, fashionable African American woman, playfully promotes Virginia Slims Menthol (Figure 7). This ad, which appeared in *Essence* magazine, is one of a series specifically targeted at the African American female consumer. In contrast to the Virginia Slims series concurrently appearing in *Cosmo* and *People*, a series which continues to associate the product with historically expanded opportunities for women ("You've come a long way, baby" remains the motif and slogan), Virginia Slims pitches to the *Essence* reader by mocking solemnity and self-importance *after* the realization of those opportunities: "Why climb the ladder if you're not going to enjoy the view?" "Big girls don't cry. They go shopping." And, in the variant depicted in Figure 7: "Decisions are easy. When I get to a fork in the road, I eat."

Arguably, the general subtext meant to be evoked by these ads is the failure of the dominant, white culture (those who *don't* "enjoy the view") to relax and take pleasure in success. The upwardly mobile black consumer, it is suggested, will do it with more panache, with more cool—and of course with a cool, Virginia Slims Menthol in hand. In this particular ad, the speaker scorns obsessiveness, not only over professional or interpersonal decision-making, but over food as well. Implicitly contrasting herself to those who worry and fret, she presents herself as utterly "easy" in her relationship with food. Unlike the FibreThin mother, she eats any-



FIGURE 7

time she wants. But like the FibreThin mother (and this is the key similarity for my purposes), she has achieved a state beyond craving. Undominated by unsatisfied, internal need, she eats not only freely but without deep desire and without apparent consequence. It's "easy," she says. Presumably, without those forks in the road she might forget about food entirely.

The Virginia Slims woman is a fantasy figure, her cool attitude toward food as remote from the lives of most contemporary African American women as from any others. True, if we survey cultural attitudes toward women's appetites and body size, we find great variety—a variety shaped by ethnic, national, historical, class, and other factors. My eighty-year-old father, the child of immigrants, asks at the end of every meal if I "got enough to eat"; he considers me skinny unless I am plump by my own standards. His attitude reflects not only memories of economic struggle and a heritage of Jewish-Russian preference for zaitig women, but the lingering, well into this century, of a once more general Anglo-Saxon cultural appreciation for the buxom woman. In the mid-nineteenth century, hotels and bars were adorned with Bouguereau-inspired paintings of voluptuous female nudes; Lillian Russell, the most photographed woman in America in 1890, was known and admired for her hearty appetite, ample body (over two hundred pounds at the height of her popularity), and "challenging, fleshly arresting" beauty.<sup>1</sup> Even as such fleshly challenges became less widely appreciated in the twentieth century, men of Greek, Italian, Eastern European, and African descent, influenced by their own distinctive cultural heritages, were still likely to find female voluptuousness appealing. And even in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as Twiggy and Jean Shrimpton began to set a new norm for ultra-slenderness, lesbian cultures in the United States continued to be accepting—even celebrating—of fleshy, space-claiming female bodies.

Even more examples could be produced, of course, if we cast our glance more widely over the globe and back through history. Many cultures, clearly, have revered expansiveness in women's bodies and appetites. Some still do. But in the 1980s and 1990s an increasingly universal equation of slenderness with beauty and success has rendered the competing claims of cultural diversity ever feebler. Men who were teenagers from the mid-seventies on, whatever their ethnic roots or economic class, are likely to view long, slim legs, a flat stomach, and a firm rear end as essentials of female beauty.

Unmused heft is no longer as acceptable as it once was in lesbian communities. Even Miss Soviet Union has become lean and tight, and the robust, earthy actresses who used to star in Russian films have been replaced by slender, Westernized types.

Arguably, a case could once be made for a contrast between (middle-class, heterosexual) white women's obsessive relations with food and a more accepting attitude toward women's appetites within African American communities. But in the nineties, features on diet, exercise, and body-image problems have grown increasingly prominent in magazines aimed at African American readers, reflecting the cultural reality that for most women today—whatever their racial or ethnic identity, and increasingly across class and sexual-orientation differences as well—free and easy relations with food are at best a relic of the past. (More frequently in *Essence* than in *Cosmo*, there may be a focus on health problems associated with overweight among African Americans, in addition to the glamorization of slenderness.) Almost all of us who can afford to be eating well are dieting—and hungry—almost all of the time.

It is thus Dextrim, not Virginia Slims, that constructs the more realistic representation of women's subjective relations with food. In Dextrim's commercial that shows a woman, her appetite-suppressant worn off, hurtling across the room, drawn like a living magnet to the breathing, menacing refrigerator, hunger is represented as an insistent, powerful force with a life of its own. This construction reflects the physiological reality of dieting, a state the body is unable to distinguish from starvation.<sup>2</sup> And it reflects its psychological reality as well; for dieters, who live in a state of constant denial, food is a perpetually beckoning presence, its power growing ever greater as the sanctions against gratification become more stringent. A slender body may be attainable through hard work, but a "cool" relation to food, the true "secret" of the beautiful "other" in the FibreThin commercial, is a tantalizing reminder of what lies beyond the reach of the inadequate and hungry self. (Of course, as the ads suggest, a psychocultural transformation remains possible, through FibreThin and Virginia Slims.)

#### PSYCHING OUT THE FEMALE CONSUMER

Sometimes, when I am analyzing and interpreting advertisements and commercials in class, students accuse me of a kind of paranoia

about the significance of these representations as carriers and reproducers of culture. After all, they insist, these are just images, not "real life"; any fool knows that advertisers manipulate reality in the service of selling their products. I agree that on some level we "know" this. However, were it a meaningful or *usable* knowledge, it is unlikely that we would be witnessing the current spread of diet and exercise mania across racial and ethnic groups, or the explosion of technologies aimed at bodily "correction" and "enhancement."

Jean Baudrillard offers a more accurate description of our cultural estimation of the relation and relative importance of image and "reality." In *Simulations*, he recalls the Borges fable in which the cartographers of a mighty empire draw up a map so detailed that it ends up exactly covering the territory of the empire, a map which then frays and disintegrates as a symbol of the coming decline of the empire it perfectly represents. Today, Baudrillard suggests, the fable might be inverted: it is no longer the territory that provides the model for the map, but the map that defines the territory; and it is the territory "whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map." Thinking further, however, he declares even the inverted fable to be "useless." For what it still assumes is precisely that which is being lost today—namely, the distinction between the territory and its map, between reality and appearance. Today, all that we experience as meaningful are appearances.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, we all "know" that Cher and virtually every other female star over the age of twenty-five is the plastic product of numerous cosmetic surgeries on face and body. But, in the era of the "hyperreal" (as Baudrillard calls it), such "knowledge" is as faded and frayed as the old map in the Borges tale, unable to cast a shadow of doubt over the dazzling, compelling, authoritative images themselves. Like the knowledge of our own mortality when we are young and healthy, the knowledge that Cher's physical appearance is fabricated is an empty abstraction; it simply does not compute. It is the created image that has the hold on our most vibrant, immediate sense of what *is*, of what matters, of what we must pursue for ourselves.

In *constructing* the images, of course, continual use is made of knowledge (or at least what is imagined to be knowledge) of consumers' lives. Indeed, a careful reading of contemporary advertisements reveals continual and astute manipulation of problems

that psychology and the popular media have targeted as characteristic dilemmas of the "contemporary woman," who is beset by conflicting role demands and pressures on her time. "Control"—a word that rarely used to appear in commercial contexts—has become a common trope in advertisements for products as disparate as mascara ("Perfect Pen Eyeliner. Puts you in control. And isn't that nice for a change?") and cat-box deodorant ("Control. I strive for it. My cat achieves it!"). "Soft felt tip gives you absolute control of your line" (Figure 8). It is virtually impossible to glance casually at this ad without reading "line" as "life"—which is, of course, the subliminal coding such ads intend. "Mastery" also frequently figures in ads for cosmetics and hair products: "Master your curls with new Adaptable Perm." The rhetoric of these ads is interestingly contrasted to the rhetoric of mastery and control directed at male consumers. Here, the message is almost always one of mastery and control over *others* rather than the self: "Now it's easier than ever to achieve a position of power in Manhattan" (an ad for a Manhattan health club), or "Don't just serve. Rule" (an ad for Speedo tennis shoes).

Advertisers are aware, too, of more specific ways in which women's lives are out of control, including our well-documented food disorders; they frequently incorporate the theme of food obsession into their pitch. The Sugar Free Jell-O Pudding campaign exemplifies a typical commercial strategy for exploiting women's eating problems while obscuring their dark realities. (The advertisers themselves would put this differently, of course.) In the "tip of my tongue" ad (Figure 9), the obsessive mental state of the compulsive eater is depicted fairly accurately, guaranteeing recognition from people with that problem: "If I'm not eating dessert, I'm talking about it. If I'm not talking about it, I'm eating it. And I'm always thinking about it. . . . It's just always on my mind."

These thoughts, however, belong to a slender, confident, and—most important—decidedly not depressed individual, whose upbeat, open, and accepting attitude toward her constant hunger is far from that of most women who eat compulsively. "The inside of a binge," Geneen Roth writes, "is deep and dark. At the core . . . is deprivation, scarcity, a feeling that you can never get enough."<sup>4</sup> A student described her hunger as "a black hole that I had to fill up." In the Sugar Free Jell-O ad, by contrast, the mental state depicted is most like that of a growing teenage boy; to be continually hungry



FIGURE 8

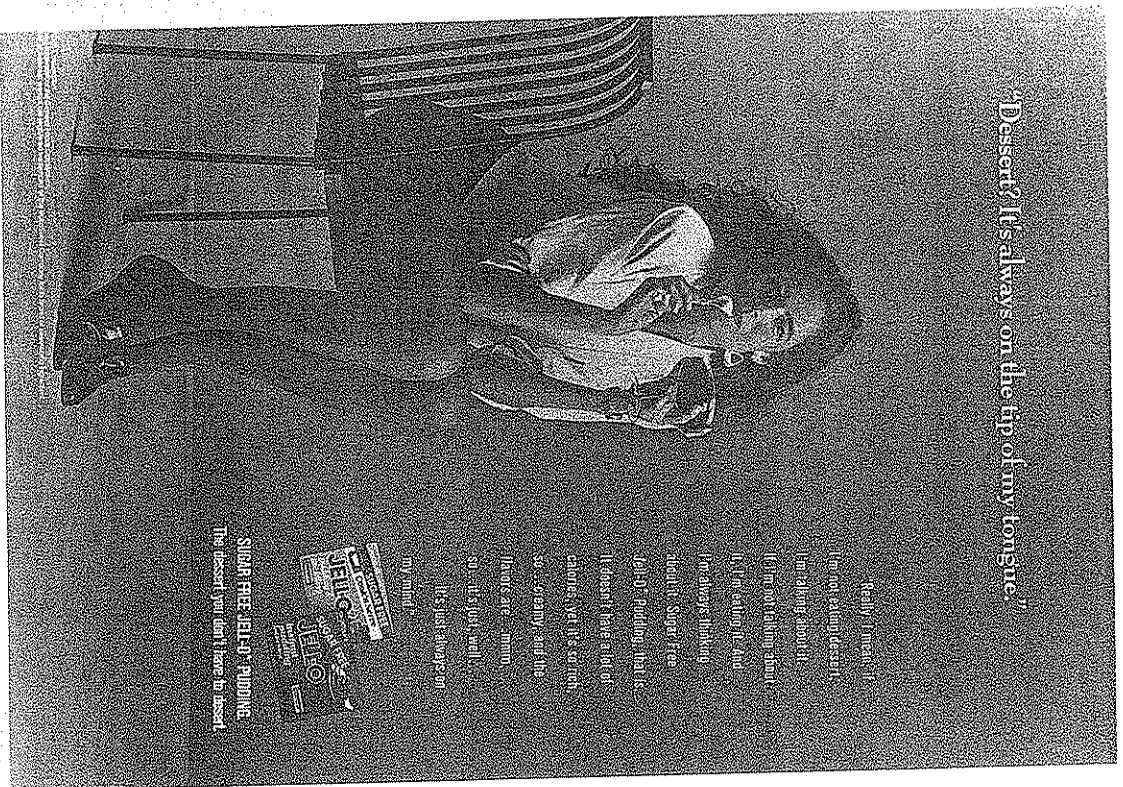
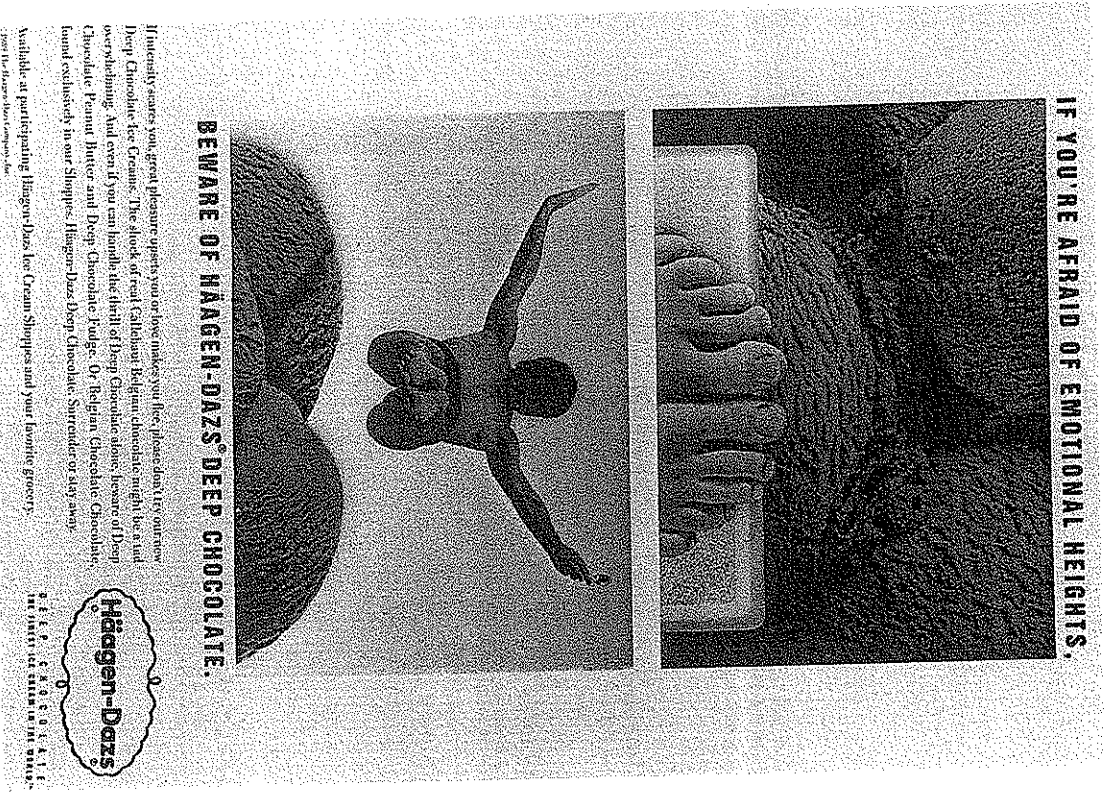


FIGURE 9

is represented as a normal, if somewhat humorous and occasionally annoying, state with no disastrous physical or emotional consequences.

The use of a male figure is one strategy, in contemporary ads, for representing compulsive eating as "natural" and even lovable. Men are *supposed* to have hearty, even voracious, appetites. It is a mark of the manly to eat spontaneously and expansively, and manliness is a frequent commercial code for amply portioned products: "Manwich," "Hungry Man Dinners," "Manhandlers." Even when men advertise diet products (as they more frequently do, now that physical perfection is increasingly being demanded of men as well as women), they brag about their appetites, as in the Tommy Lasorda commercials for Slim-Fast, which feature three burly football players (their masculinity beyond reproach) declaring that if Slim-Fast can satisfy *their* appetites, it can satisfy anyone's. The displacement of the female by a male figure (displacement when the targeted consumer is in fact a woman) thus dispels thoughts of addiction, danger, unhappiness, and replaces them with a construction of compulsive eating (or thinking about food) as benign indulgence of a "natural" inclination. Consider the ad shown in Figure 10, depicting a male figure diving with abandon into the "tempered-to-full-flavor-consistency" joys of Häagen-Dazs deep chocolate.

Emotional heights, intensity, love, and thrills: it is women who habitually seek such experiences from food and who are most likely to be overwhelmed by their relationship to food, to find it dangerous and frightening (especially rich, fattening, soothing food like ice cream). The marketers of Häagen-Dazs know this; they are aware of the well-publicized prevalence of compulsive eating and binge behaviors among women. Indeed, this ad exploits, with artful precision, exactly the sorts of associations that are likely to resonate with a person for whom eating is invested with deep emotional meaning. Why, then, a male diver? In part, as I have been arguing, the displacement is necessary to insure that the grim actualities of women's eating problems remain obscured; the point, after all, is to sell ice cream, not to remind people of how dangerous food actually is for women. Too, the advertisers may reckon that women might enjoy seeing a man depicted in swooning surrender to ice cream,



**IF YOU'RE AFRAID OF EMOTIONAL HEIGHTS,**

**BEWARE OF HÄAGEN-DAZS® DEEP CHOCOLATE.**

**Häagen-Dazs**

Available at participating Häagen-Dazs Ice Cream Shoppes and your favorite grocery store. © 1997 Häagen-Dazs, Inc.

If intensely sweet, you get great pleasure & energy, you are, like, making your face, please don't cry, otherwise Deep Chocolate Ice Creams. The shock of real Calabrian hotspur chocolate might be a bit overwhelming. And even if you can handle the thrill of Deep Chocolate above, beware of Deep Chocolate Peanut Butter and Deep Chocolate Fudge. Or Belgian Chocolate Chocolate, found exclusively in our Shoppes. Häagen-Dazs Deep Chocolate. Surrender to deep and

FIGURE 10

as a metaphor for the emotional surrender that so many women crave from their husbands and lovers.

#### FOOD, SEXUALITY, AND DESIRE

I would argue, however, that more than a purely profit-maximizing, ideologically neutral, Madison Avenue mentality is at work in these ads. They must also be considered as gender ideology—that is, as specifically (consciously or unconsciously) servicing the cultural reproduction of gender difference and gender inequality, quite independent of (although at times coinciding with) marketing concerns. As gender ideology, the ads I have been discussing are not distinctively contemporary but continue a well-worn representational tradition, arguably inaugurated in the Victorian era, in which the depiction of women eating, particularly in sensuous surrender to rich, exciting food, is taboo.<sup>5</sup>

In exploring this dimension, we might begin by attempting to imagine an advertisement depicting a young, attractive woman indulging as freely, as salaciously as the man in the Post cereal ad shown in Figure 11. Such an image would violate deeply sedimented expectations, would be experienced by many as disgusting and transgressive. When women are positively depicted as sensuously voracious about food (almost never in commercials, and only very rarely in movies and novels), their hunger for food is employed solely as a metaphor for their sexual appetite. In the eating scenes in *Tom Jones* and *Flashdance*, for example, the heroines' unrestrained delight in eating operates as sexual foreplay, a way of prefiguring the abandon that will shortly be expressed in bed. Women are permitted to lust for food itself only when they are pregnant or when it is clear they have been near starvation—as, for example, in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, in the scene in which Mrs. Miller, played by Julie Christie, wolfs down half a dozen eggs and a bowl of beef stew before the amazed eyes of McCabe. Significantly, the scene serves to establish Mrs. Miller's "marliness"; a woman who eats like this is to be taken seriously, is not to be trifled with, the movie suggests.

The metaphorical situation is virtually inverted in the representation of male eaters. Although voracious eating may occasionally code male sexual appetite (as in *Tom Jones*), we frequently also find

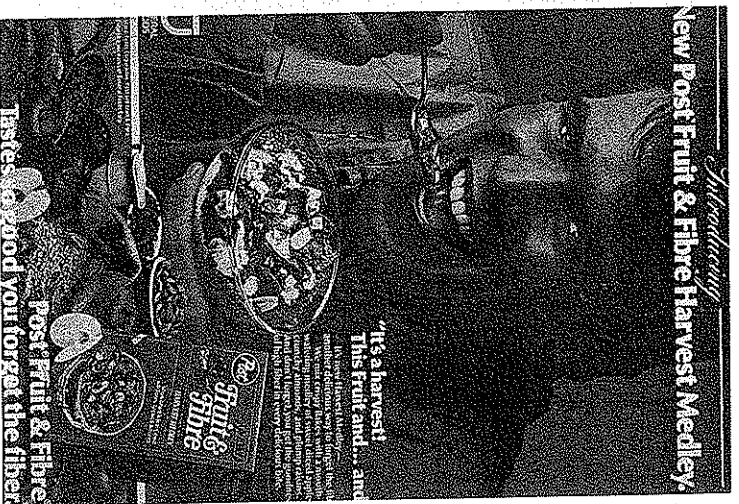


FIGURE 11

sexual appetite operating as a metaphor for eating pleasure. In commercials that feature male eaters, the men are shown in a state of wild, sensual transport over heavily frosted, rich, gooey desserts. Their total lack of control is portrayed as appropriate, even adorable; the language of the background jingle is unashamedly aroused, sexual and desiring:

I'm thinking about you the whole day through [crooned to a Pillsbury cake]. I've got a passion for you.

You're my one and only, my creamy deluxe [Betty Crocker frosting].

You butter me up, I can't resist, you leave me breathless [Betty Crocker frosting].

Your brownies give me fever. Your cake gives me chills [assorted Betty Crocker mixes].

I'm a fool for your chocolate. I'm wild, crazy, out of control [assorted Betty Crocker mixes].

I've got it bad, and I should know, 'cause I crave it from my head right down to my potato [for Pillsbury Potatoes Au Gratin].

Can't help myself. It's Duncan Hines [assorted cake mixes] and nobody else.

In these commercials food is constructed as a sexual object of desire, and eating is legitimated as much more than a purely nutritive activity. Rather, food is *supposed* to supply sensual delight and succor—not as metaphorically standing for something else, but as an erotic experience in itself. Women are permitted such gratification from food only in measured doses. In another ad from the Diet Jell-O series, eating is metaphorically sexualized: “I’m a girl who just can’t say no. I insist on dessert,” admits the innocently dressed but flirtatiously posed model (Figure 12). But at the same time that eating is mildly sexualized in this ad, it is also contained. She is permitted to “feel good about saying ‘Yes’”—but ever so demurely, and to a harmless low-calorie product. Transgression beyond such limits is floridly sexualized, as an act of “cheating” (Figure 13). Women may be encouraged (like the man on the Häagen-Dazs high board) to “dive in”—not, however, into a dangerous pool of Häagen-Dazs Deep Chocolate, but for a “refreshing dip” into Weight Watchers linguini (Figure 14). Targeted at the working woman (“Just what you need to revive yourself from the workday routine”), this ad also exploits the aquatic metaphor to conjure up images of female independence and liberation (“Isn’t it just like us to make waves?”).

All of this may seem peculiarly contemporary, revolving as it does around the mass marketing of diet products. But in fact the same metaphorical universe, as well as the same practical prohibitions against female indulgence (for, of course, these ads are not only selling products but teaching appropriate behavior) were characteristic of Victorian gender ideology. Victorians did not have *Cosmo* and television, of course. But they did have conduct manuals, which warned elite women of the dangers of indulgent and overstimulating eating and advised how to consume in a feminine way (as little as possible and with the utmost precaution against unseemly show of desire). *Goddy’s Lady’s Book* warned that it was vulgar for women to load their plates; young girls were admonished

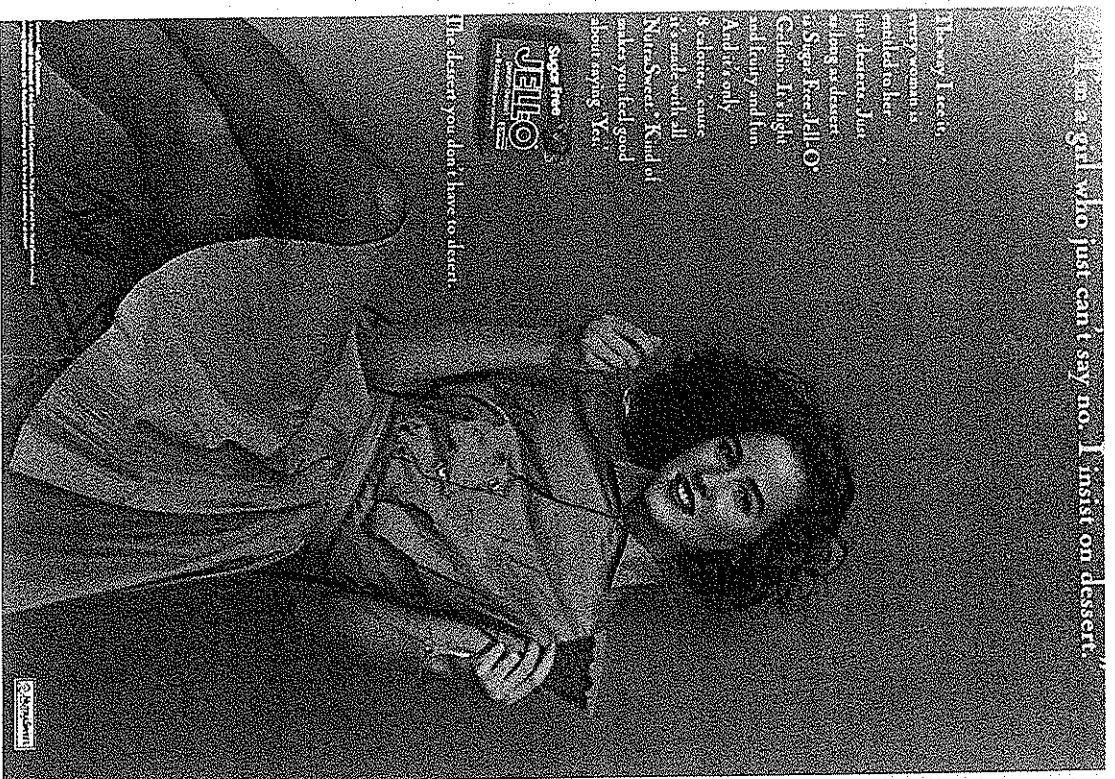


FIGURE 12





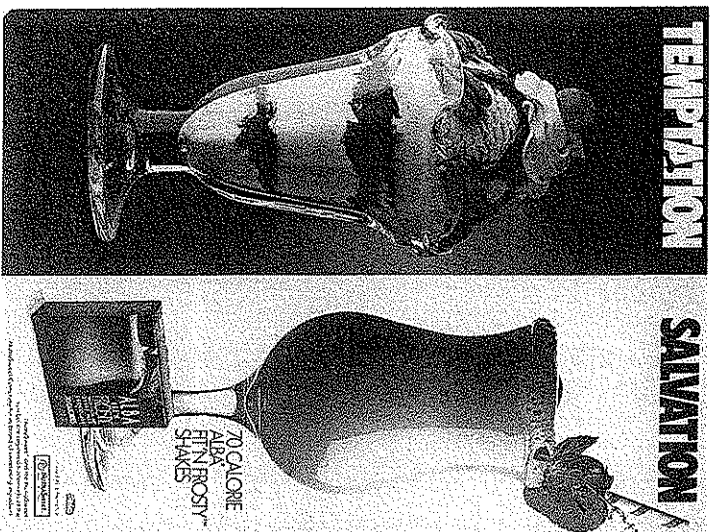


FIGURE 15

has interpreted as a nineteenth-century “cultural ideological counter-offensive” against the “new woman” and her challenge to prevailing gender arrangements and their constraints on women.<sup>10</sup> Mythological, artistic, polemical, and scientific discourses from many cultures and eras certainly suggest the symbolic potency of female hunger as a cultural metaphor for unleashed female power and desire, from the blood-craving Kali (who in one representation is shown eating her own entrails) to the *Malleus Malficarium* (“For the sake of fulfilling the mouth of the womb, [witches] consort even with the devil”) to Hall and Oates’s contemporary rock lyrics: “Oh, oh, here she comes, watch out boys, she’ll chew you up.”<sup>11</sup>

In *Tom Jones* and *Flashdance*, the trope of female hunger as female sexuality is embodied in attractive female characters; more frequently, however, female hunger as sexuality is represented by Western culture in misogynist images permeated with terror and

loathing rather than affection or admiration. In the figure of the man-eater the metaphor of the devouring woman reveals its deep psychological underpinnings. Eating is not really a metaphor for the sexual act; rather, the sexual act, when initiated and desired by a woman, is imagined as itself an act of eating, of incorporation and destruction of the object of desire. Thus, women’s sexual appetites must be curtailed and controlled, because they threaten to deplete and consume the body and soul of the male. Such imagery, as Dijkstra has demonstrated, flourishes in the West in the art of the late nineteenth century. Arguably, the same cultural backlash (if not in the same form) operates today—for example, in the ascendancy of popular films that punish female sexuality and independence by rape and dismemberment (as in numerous slasher films), loss of family and children (*The Good Mother*), madness and death (*Fatal Attraction*, *Presumed Innocent*), and public humiliation and disgrace (*Dangerous Liaisons*).

Of course, Victorian prohibitions against women eating were not only about the ideology of gender. Or, perhaps better put, the ideology of gender contained other dimensions as well. The construction of “femininity” had not only a significant moral and sexual aspect (femininity as sexual passivity, timidity, purity, innocence) but a class dimension. In the reigning body symbolism of the day, a frail frame and lack of appetite signified not only spiritual transcendence of the desires of the flesh but social transcendence of the laboring, striving “economic” body. Then, as today, to be aristocratically cool and unconcerned with the mere facts of material survival was highly fashionable. The hungering bourgeois wished to appear, like the aristocrat, above the material desires that in fact ruled his life. The closest he could come was to possess a wife whose ethereal body became a sort of fashion statement of his aristocratic tastes. If he could not be or marry an aristocrat, he could have a wife who looked like one, a wife whose non-robust beauty and delicate appetite signified her lack of participation in the taxing “public sphere.”<sup>12</sup>

#### MEN EAT AND WOMEN PREPARE

The metaphorical dualities at work here, whatever their class meanings, presuppose an idealized (and rarely actualized) gendered division of labor in which men strive, compete, and exert themselves

in the public sphere while women are cocooned in the domestic arena (which is romanticized and mystified as a place of peace and leisure, and hence connotes transcendence of the laboring, bourgeois body). In the necessity to make such a division of labor appear natural we find another powerful ideological underpinning (perhaps the most important in the context of industrialized society) for the cultural containment of female appetite: the notion that women are most gratified by feeding and nourishing *others*, not themselves. As a literal activity, of course, women fed others long before the "home" came to be identified as women's special place; Caroline Bynum argues that there is reason to believe that food preparation was already a stereotypically female activity in the European Middle Ages.<sup>13</sup> But it was in the industrial era, with its idealization of the domestic arena as a place of nurture and comfort for men and children, that feeding others acquired the extended emotional meaning it has today.

In "An Ode to Mothers" columnist Bud Polouquin defines *Moms* as "those folks who, upon seeing there are only four pieces of pie for five people, promptly announce they never did care for the stuff."<sup>14</sup> Denial of self and the feeding of others are hopelessly enmeshed in this construction of the ideal mother, as they are in the nineteenth-century version of the ideal wife as "she who stands . . . famished before her husband, while he devours, stretched at ease, the produce of her exertions; waits his tardy permission without a word or a look of impatience, and feeds, with the humblest gratitude, and the shortest intermission of labor, on the scraps and offals which he disdains."<sup>15</sup> None of this self-sacrifice, however, is felt as such by the "paragon of womanhood" (as Charles Butler calls her), for it is here, in the care and feeding of others, that woman experiences the one form of desire that is appropriately hers: as Elias Canetti so succinctly puts it, "Her passion is to give food."<sup>16</sup>

Over a decade ago, John Berger trenchantly encapsulated the standard formula he saw as regulating the representation of gender difference, both throughout the history of art and in contemporary advertising: "Men act, and women appear."<sup>17</sup> Today, that opposition no longer seems to hold quite as rigidly as it once did (women are indeed objectified more than ever, but, in this image-dominated culture, men increasingly are too). But if this duality no longer strictly applies, the resilience of others is all the more instructive. Let

me replace Berger's formulation with another, apparently more enduring one: "Men eat and women prepare." At least in the sphere of popular representations, this division of labor is as prescriptive in 1991 as in 1891. Despite the increasing participation of women of all ages and classes in the "public" sphere, her "private" role of nurturer remains ideologically intact.

To be sure, we have inherited some of these representations from a former era—for example, the plump, generous Mammys and Grandmas who symbolically have prepared so many products: Aunt Jemima, Mrs. Smith, Mrs. Paul, Grandma Brown. But our cultural penchant for nostalgia does not get us off the hook here. At the start of the 1990s (and this seems to be even more striking now than five years ago), popular representations almost never depict a man *preparing* food as an everyday activity, routinely performed in the unpaid service of others. Occasionally, men *are* shown serving food—in the role of butler or waiter. They may be depicted roasting various items around a campfire, barbecuing meat, preparing a salad for a special company dinner, or making *instant* coffee (usually in a getaway cabin or vacation boat). But all of these are nonroutine, and their exceptional nature is frequently underscored in the ad. In one commercial, a man fixes instant coffee to serve to his wife in bed on her birthday. "How tough can it be?" he asks. "She makes breakfast every morning." In another ad, a man is shown preparing pancakes for his son's breakfast (Figure 16). "My pancakes deserve the rich maple flavor of Log Cabin Syrup," reads the bold type, suggesting ("my pancakes") male proprietorship and ease in the kitchen. The visual image of the father lovingly serving the son undoubtedly destabilizes cultural stereotypes (racial as well as gendered). But in the smaller print below the image we are told that this is a "special moment" with his son. Immediately the destabilizing image reconfigures into a familiar one: like Dad's secret recipe for barbecue sauce, this father's pancakes make their appearance only on special occasions. Or perhaps it is the very fact that Dad is doing the cooking that *makes* this a significant, intimate occasion for sharing. (Imagine a woman instead of a man in the ad; would "special moment" not then seem odd?)

Continually, in representations that depict men preparing food, there will be a conspicuously absent wife or mother (for instance, in the hospital having a baby) who, it is implied, is *normally* re-

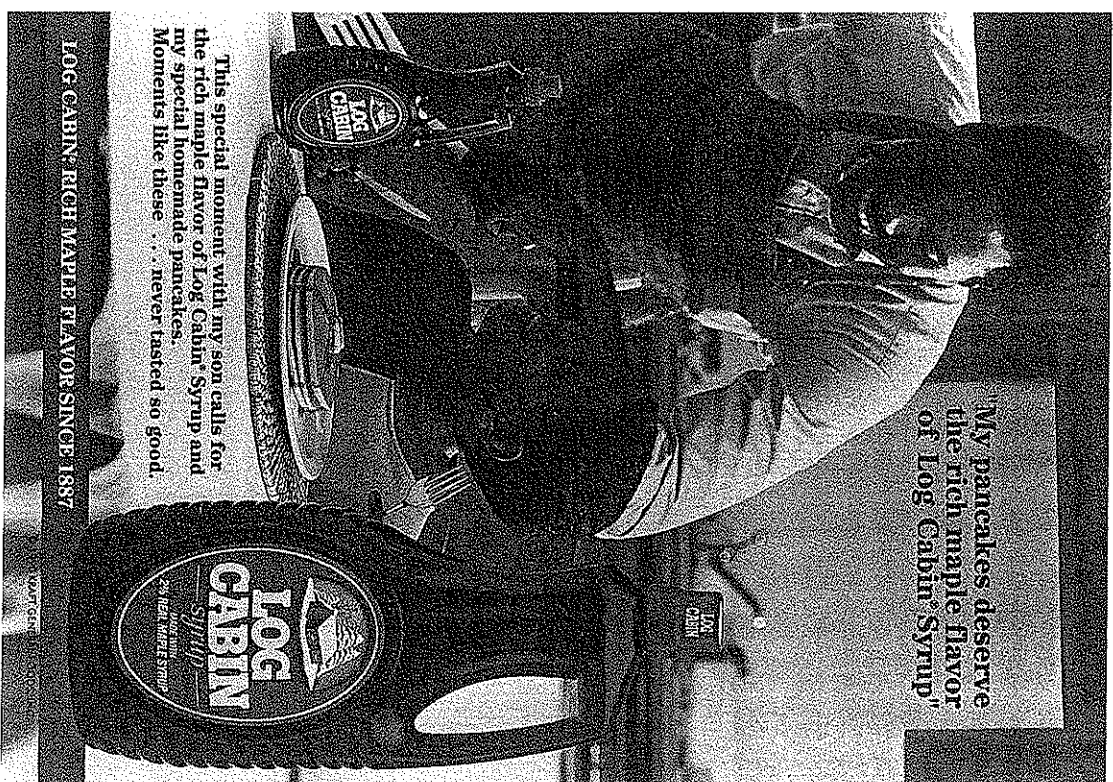


FIGURE 16

responsible for the daily labor of food preparation and service. Even when men or boys are used to advertise convenience foods, the product has usually been left for them with expert instructions added by Mom. In the Jell-O Heritage ad (Figure 17), this absent maternal figure (whether mother or grandmother is not clear) appears in the small insert to the upper right of the larger image, which depicts a young man away at college, well supplied with Jell-O pudding snacks. Significantly (although somewhat absurdly), she is associated with the provision of a "strong foundation" by virtue of the fact that *she* prepares instant pudding from a mix rather than merely opening up an already prepared pudding snack. Jell-O, of course, could not present nostalgic images of Grandma preparing *real* "scratch" pudding, since it does not want to evoke longing for a time when women did not depend on its products. But in terms of the oppositions exploited in this ad, instant pudding works just as well, compared to flipping the lid off a pudding snack, preparing instant pudding *is* a laborious task. It thus belongs to women's world. Men are almost *never* shown lavishing time on cooking. *Real* coffee is always prepared by women, as are all the cakes and casseroles that require more than a moment to put together. When men *are* shown cooking an elaborate meal, it is always *with* one or two other yuppie men, converting the activity from an act of everyday service into a festive, "Big Chill" occasion. But even these representations are rare. In all the many dinner parties that Hope and Michael hosted on "Thirty-something," no man has ever appeared in the kitchen except to sneak a bit of the meal being prepared by Hope, Nancy, and Melissa.

#### FOOD AND LOVE

At the beginning of the 1992 U.S. presidential campaign, Hillary Clinton, badgered by reporters' endless questions concerning her pursuit of a professional career, shot back defensively and sarcastically: "Well, I suppose I could have stayed home and baked cookies and had teas . . ." Media audiences never got to hear the end of her remark (or the questioning that preceded it); the "cookies and teas" sound-bite became *the* gender-transgression of the campaign, replayed over and over, and presented by opponents as evidence of Hillary's rabid feminism and disdain for traditional maternal



FIGURE 17

values. Rightly protesting this interpretation, Hillary Clinton tried to prove her true womanhood by producing her favorite recipe for oatmeal chocolate chip cookies. Barbara Bush, apparently feeling that a gauntlet had been thrown down, responded in kind with a richer, less fibre-conscious recipe of her own. Newspapers across the country asked readers to prepare both and vote on which First Lady had the better cookie.

That the cookie itself should have become the symbol and center of the national debate about Hillary Clinton's adequacy as wife and mother is not surprising. Food is equated with maternal and widely love throughout our culture. In nearly all commercials that feature men eating—such as the cake commercials whose sexualized rhetoric was quoted earlier—there is a woman in the background (either visible or implied) who has *prepared* the food. (The “Betty Crocker, You Sweet Talker” series has two women: the possessor of the clearly feminine hands offering the cakes, and Betty Crocker herself, to

whom all the passionate croonings—“I’m a fool for your chocolate. I’m wild, crazy, out of control”—are addressed.) Most significantly, *always*, the woman in the background speaks the language of love and care through the offering of food: “Nothin’ says lovin’ like something from the oven,” “Give me that great taste of love,” “Nothin’ says ‘Cookie, I love you’ like Nestle’s Toll House Cookies Do.” In these commercials, male eating is inextricably tied to female offerings of love. This is not represented, however, as female self-abnegation. Rather, it is suggested that women receive *their* gratification through nourishing others, either in the old-fashioned way (taste and emotional pleasure) or in the health-conscious mode:

*Her voice, heard off:* He’s like a little boy—normally serious, then he eats English muffins with butter [shot of man’s face transported with childlike delight] and I get to enjoy watching him. A little butter brings a lot of joy.

He: What are you doing?

She: I’m listening to your heart.

He: What does it say?

*She:* It says that it’s glad that you’ve started jogging, and that you’re eating healthier. It’s happy that I’m giving us new Promise margarine. Eating foods low in cholesterol is good for you and your heart.

He: Know what else is good for me?

She: What?

He: You.

*She beams, smuggling deeper into man’s chest.*

My analysis, I want to emphasize, is not meant to disparage caring for the physical and emotional well-being of others, “maternal” work that has been scandalously socially undervalued even as it has been idealized and sanctified. Nor am I counterposing to the argument of these ads the construction that women are simply oppressed by such roles. This would be untrue to the personal experiences of many women, including myself. I remember the pride and pleasure that radiated from my mother, who was anxious and unhappy in most other areas of her life, when her famous stuffed cabbage was devoured enthusiastically and in voluminous quantities by my father, my sisters, and me. As a little girl, I loved watching her roll each piece, enclosing just the right amount of filling, skillfully avoiding tearing the tender cabbage leaves as she folded them around the meat. I never felt so safe and secure as at

those moments. She was visibly pleased when I asked her to teach me exactly how to make the dish and thrilled when I even went so far as to write the quantities and instructions down as she tried to formulate them into an official recipe (until then, it had been passed through demonstration from mother to daughter, and my mother considered that in writing it down I was conferring a higher status on it). Those periods in my life when I have found myself too busy writing, teaching, and traveling to find the time and energy to prepare special meals for people that I love have been periods when a deep aspect of my self has felt deprived, depressed.

Nor would I want my critique to be interpreted as effacing the collective, historical experiences of those groups, forced into servitude for the families of others, who have been systematically deprived of the freedom to care for their own families. Bell hooks points out, for example, that black women's creation of "home-place," of fragile and hard-won "spaces of care and nurturance" for the healing of deep wounds made by racism, sexism, and poverty, was less a matter of obedience to a tyrannical gender-norm than the construction of a "site of cultural resistance."<sup>18</sup> With this in mind, it is clear that the Jell-O Heritage ad discussed earlier is more complex than my interpretation has thus far allowed. Part of an extensive General Foods series aimed at the African American consumer and promoting America's historically black colleges, the ad's association of the maternal figure with "strong foundations" runs far deeper than a nostalgic evocation of Mom's traditional cooking. In this ad, the maternal figure is linked with a black "heritage," with the preservation and communication of culture.

However, at the same time that hooks urges that contemporary black culture should honor the black woman's history of service to her family and her community, she also cautions against the ideological construction of such service as woman's natural role. (Despite the pleasure I take in cooking, in relationships where it has been expected of me I have resented it deeply.) It is this construction that is reinforced in the representations I have been examining, through their failure to depict males as "naturally" fulfilling that role, and—more perniciously—through their failure to depict females as appropriate recipients of such care. Only occasionally are little girls represented as being fed; more often, they (but never little boys) are shown learning how to feed others (Figure 18). In this

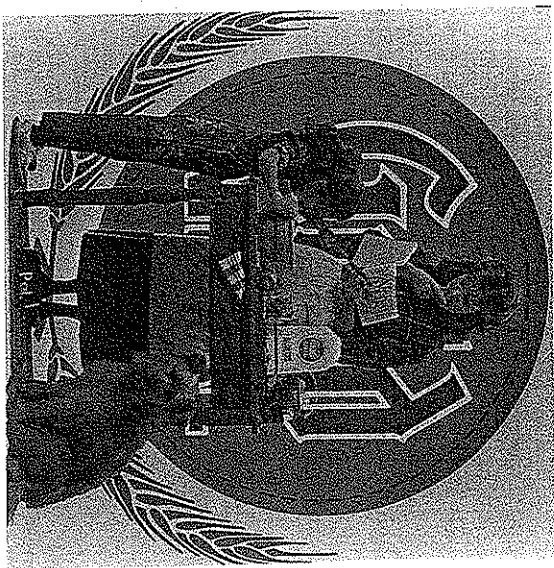


FIGURE 18

way, caring is representationally "reproduced" as a quintessentially and exclusively female activity. It is significant and disquieting that the General Foods series does not include any ads that portray female students discovering their black heritage (or learning how to rely on convenience foods) at college. It is possible that the ad series is very deliberate here, exploiting contemporary notions that the "crisis in black manhood" is the fault of black women and identifying its products with an imagined world in which opportunities for black men go hand in hand with "natural," prefeminist gender relations. Black men will find their way to college, it is suggested, so long as women remain in the background, encouraging and supporting rather than competing and undermining.

The ubiquitous configuration of woman-food-man, with food expressing the woman's love for the man and at the same time satisfying woman's desire to bestow love, establishes male hunger as thoroughly socially integrated into the network of heterosexual family and love relations. Men can eat *and* be loved; indeed, a central mode by which they receive love is through food from women. For women, by contrast (who are almost never shown being fed by

others), eating—in the form of private, self-feeding—is represented as a *substitute* for human love. Weight Watchers transparently offers itself as such in its “Who says you can’t live on love?” ad (Figure 19). In other ads, it offers its low-cal spaghetti sauce as “A Friend.” Diet Coke, emphasizing the sexual, insists that “sometimes the best relationships are purely fizzical.” Miracle Whip Light offers itself as “a light that turns you on.”

Notice that in these ads there is no partner, visible or implied, offering the food and thus operating as the true bestower of “love.” In many ads—virtually a genre, in fact—the absence of the partner is explicitly thematized, a central aspect of the narrative of the ad. One commercial features a woman in bed, on the phone, refusing date after date in favor of an evening alone with her ice-cream bonbons: “Your Highness? Not tonight!” “The inauguration? Another year!” In another, a woman admits to spending a lot of time alone with her “latest obsession,” a chocolate drink, because it gives her “the same feeling as being in love” and “satisfies her innermost cravings anytime [she] wants.” She pleads with us, the viewers, not to tell Michael, her boyfriend.

These commercials hit a painful nerve for women. The bon bon commercial may seem merely silly, but the chocolate drink ad begins to evoke, darkly and disturbingly, the psychological and material realities of women’s food problems. The talk of “obsession” and “innermost cravings,” the furtiveness, the secrecy, the use of food to satisfy emotional needs, all suggest central elements of binge behavior. Frusen Glädjé supplies another piece and gives an important lie to the other, more upbeat commercials (Figure 20): “He never called. So, Ben and I went out for a walk to pick up a pint of Frusen Glädjé. Ben’s better looking anyway.” Frusen Glädjé: “It feels so good.” Here, as in the Häagan-Dazs ad discussed earlier, the sensuousness of the ice-cream experience is emphasized; unlike the Häagan-Dazs ad, however, Frusen Glädjé offers solace from emotional depths rather than the thrill of emotional heights. This is, indeed, the prevailing gender reality. For women, the emotional comfort of self-feeding is rarely turned to in a state of pleasure and independence, but in despair, emptiness, loneliness, and desperation. Food is, as one woman put it, “the only thing that will take care of me.”<sup>19</sup>

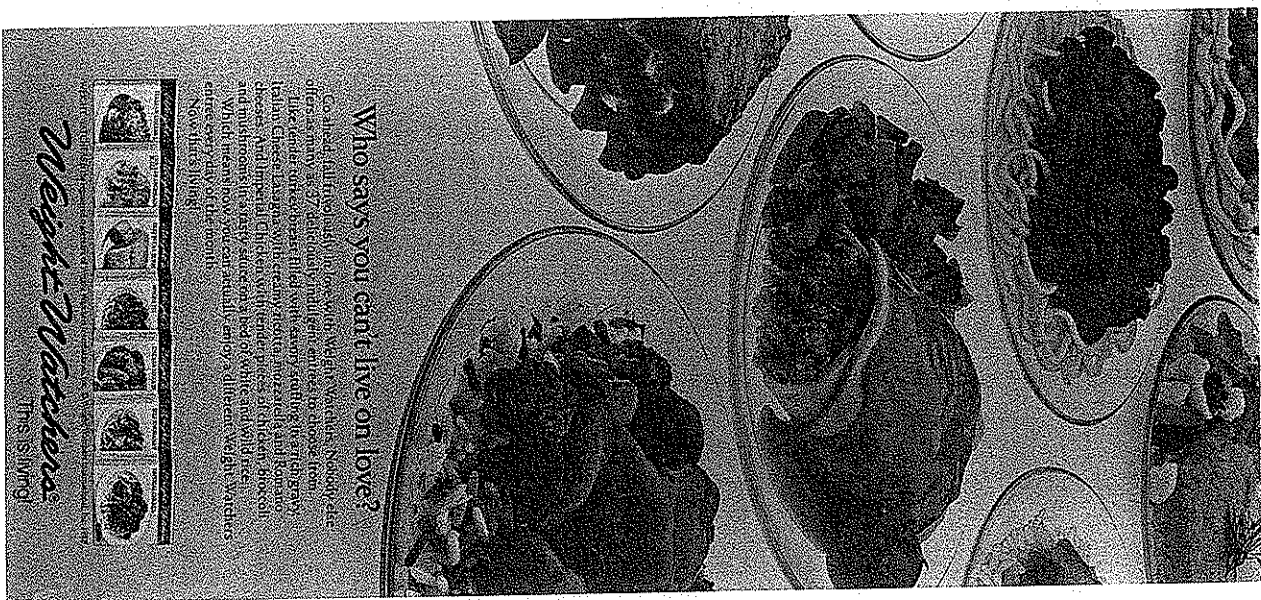


FIGURE 19

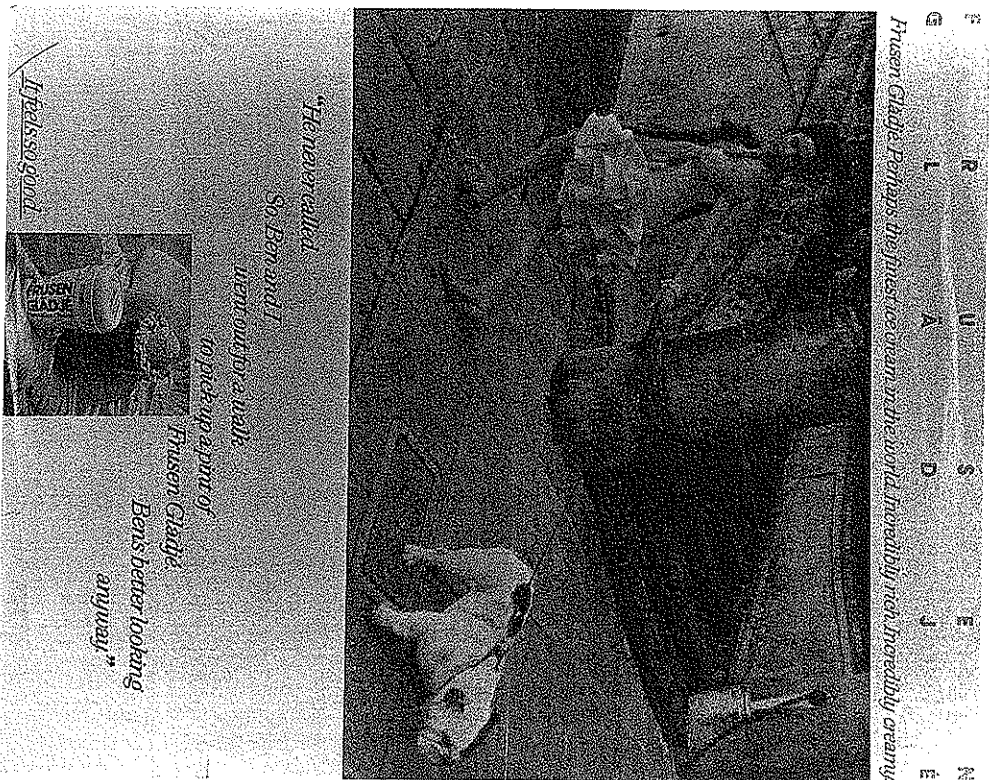


FIGURE 20

## FOOD AS TRANSGRESSION

An extremely interesting fact about male bulimics: they rarely binge alone. They tend to binge at mealtime and in public places, whereas women almost always eat minimally at meals and gorge later, in private.<sup>20</sup> Even in our disorders (or perhaps especially in our disorders) we follow the gender rules. In the commercials I have been

discussing, female eating is virtually always represented as private, secretive, illicit. The woman has stolen away from the world of husband, family, friends to a secret corner where she and the food can be alone. A “Do Not Disturb” sign hangs on the door to the room where the woman sits munching on her “purple passion,” New York Deli Potato Chips. A husband returns home to discover that in his absence his wife, sitting on the floor, has eaten all the Frusen Glädje; her voice is mildly defiant, although soft—“I ate all the Frusen Glädje”—but her face is sheepish and her glance averted. Men sing openly of their wild cravings for Betty Crocker cakes; women’s cravings are a dirty, shameful secret, to be indulged in only when no one is looking.

More often than not, however, women are not even permitted, even in private, indulgences so extravagant in scope as the full satisfaction of their hungers. Most commonly, women are used to advertise, *not* ice cream and potato chips (foods whose intake is very difficult to contain and control), but individually wrapped pieces of tiny, bite-size candies: Andes candies, Hershey’s kisses, Mon Cheri bon bons. Instead of the mounds of cake and oozing frosting typical of commercials featuring male eaters, women are confined to a “tiny scoop” of flavor, a “tiny piece” of chocolate. As in the Weight Watchers linguini advertisement (“Dive in”), the rhetoric of indulgence is invoked, only to be contained by the product itself: “Indulge a little,” urges Andes Candies. “Satisfy your urge to splurge in five delicious bite-size ways.” The littleness of the candy and the amount of taste that is packed within its tiny boundaries are frequently emphasized: “Each bite-size piece packs a wallop of milk chocolate crunch.” Instead of the emphasis on undifferentiated feelings of sensuous delight that we see in commercials showing men, the pitch aimed at women stresses the exquisite pleasure to be had from a sensually focused and limited experience. The message to women is explicit: “Indulge a little.” (And only out of sight; even these minuscule bon bons are eaten privately, in isolation, behind closed doors.)

If one genre of commercials hints at the dark secrets of binge behavior—the refusal of female desire to remain circumscribed and repressed; the frustrations of “feeding” others and never being fed yourself—the “bite-size” candy genre represents female hunger as successfully contained within the bounds of appropriate feminine behavior. It is significant, surely, that in all these commercials the



woman is found "indulging" only after a day spent serving others. In these commercials, it is permissible for women to feed the self (if such dainty nibbling merits this description) only after first feeding others:

For my angel, I sewed for days. Now I deserve a little praise. I thank me very much with Andes Candies.

Chances are you spent the day doing things for others. Don't you deserve something for yourself? Try a Mon Cheri. [The woman is in the bathtub, in the background, dimly heard are the voices of the day gone by: "Honey, did you pick up my dry cleaning?" "Mrs. Jones, will you type this letter?" "Mommy, we want to go to the park!" She sinks down into the tub, unwrapping the candy, in exquisite anticipation.]

These commercials, no less than the Victorian conduct manuals, offer a virtual blueprint for disordered relations to food and hunger. The representation of unrestrained appetite as inappropriate for women, the depiction of female eating as a private, transgressive act, make restriction and denial of hunger central features of the construction of femininity and set up the compensatory binge as a virtual inevitability. Such restrictions on appetite, moreover, are not merely about food intake. Rather, the social control of female hunger operates as a practical "discipline" (to use Foucault's term) that trains female bodies in the knowledge of their limits and possibilities. Denying oneself food becomes the central micro-practice in the education of feminine self-restraint and containment of impulse.

Victorian women were told that it was vulgar to load their plates; in 1990, women students of mine complain of the tortures of the cafeteria—the embarrassment of eating ice cream in front of the male students, the pressure to take just a salad or, better yet, refuse food altogether. Later at night, when they are alone, they confront the deprived and empty feeling left in the wake of such a regimen. As in the commercials, the self-reward and solace is food. The problem, however, after a day of restraint is the requirement for any further containment of the now ravenous self. Unlike the women in the Andes candy commercials, few women who have spent the day submerging their desires, either for the sake of their families or to project the appropriately attractive lack of appetite to a cafeteria full of adolescent boys, really feel rewarded by a bite-size piece of

candy, no matter how much chocolate "wallop" it packs. In private, shamefully and furtively, we binge.

#### DESTABILIZING IMAGES?

When, in my classes, we discuss contemporary representations, I encourage my students to bring in examples that appear to violate traditional gender-dualities and the ideological messages contained in them. Frequently, my students view our examination of these "subversive" representations as an investigation and determination of whether or not "progress" has been made. My students want very much to believe that progress is being made, and so do I. But "progress" is not an adequate description of the cultural status of the counter-examples they bring me. Rather, they almost always display a complicated and bewitching tangle of new possibilities and old patterns of representation. They reflect the instabilities that trouble the continued reproduction of the old dualities and ideologies, but they do not show clearly just where we are going.

A television commercial for Hormel microwaveable Kid's Kitchen Meals, for example, opens with two young girls trying to fix a bicycle. A little boy, watching them, offers to help, claiming that "I can fix anything. My dad lets me fix his car. My mom lets me fix dinner." When the girls are skeptical ("Yeah? Well, prove it!"), he fixes a Hormel's Kid's Kitchen Meal for them. Utterly impressed with his culinary skill and on the basis of this ready-to-trust his mechanical aptitude, they ask, "You know how to fix a bike?" "What? Yeah, I do!" he eagerly replies. Now, is this ad "progressive" or "regressive"? The little girls cannot fix their own bike, a highly traditional, "feminine" limitation. Yet they do not behave in helpless or coquettish ways in the commercial. Far from it. They speak in rough voices and challenging words to the boy, who is physically smaller (and, it appears, younger) than they: "Give me a break!" they mutter scornfully when he claims he can "fix anything." Despite their mechanical inability, they do not act deferential, and in a curious way this neutralizes the gendered meanings of the activities depicted. Not being able to fix a bike is something that could happen to anyone, they seem to believe. And so we may begin to see it this way too.

Then, too, there is the unusual representation of the male cooking for and serving the females. True, it only required a touch of the

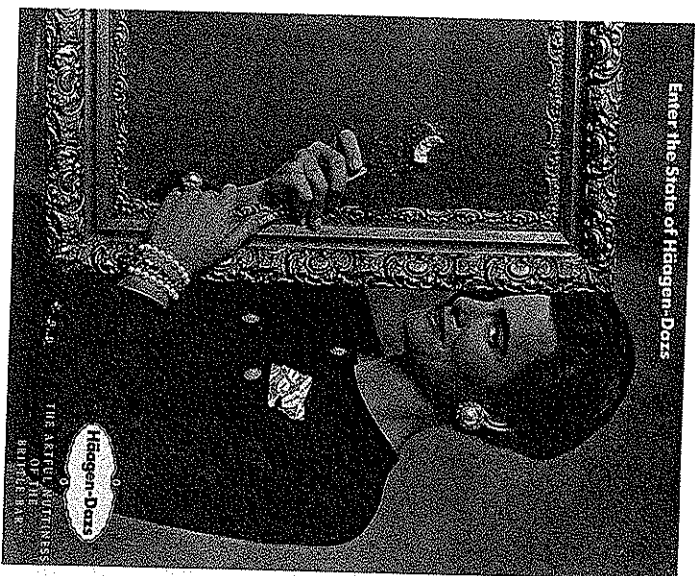


FIGURE 21

microwave panel. But this is, after all, only a little boy. One message this commercial may be delivering is that males can engage in traditionally "feminine" activities without threat to their manhood. Cooking for a woman does not mean that she won't respect you in the morning. She will still recognize your authority to fix her bike (indeed, she may become further convinced of it precisely by your mastery of "her" domain). The expansion of possibilities for boys thus extracts from girls the price of continued ineptitude in certain areas (or at least the show of it) and dependence on males. Yet, in an era in which most working women find themselves with two full-time jobs—their second shift beginning at five o'clock, when they return from work to meet their husband's expectations of dinner, a clean and comfortable home, a sympathetic ear—the message that cooking and serving others is not "sissy," though it may be problematic and nonprogressive in many ways, is perhaps the single most *practically* beneficial (to women) message we can convey to little boys.

In its provision of ambiguous and destabilizing imagery, the in-



FIGURE 22

flux of women into the professional arena has had a significant effect on the representation of gender. Seeking to appeal to a population that wishes to be regarded (at least while on the job) as equal in power and ability to the men with whom they work, advertisers have tried to establish gender symmetry in those representations that depict or evoke the lives of professional couples. Minute Rice thus has two versions of its "I wonder what 'Minute' is cookin' up for dinner tonight?" commercial. In one, father and children come home from work and school to find mother "cookin' up" an elaborate chicken stir-fry to serve over Minute Rice. In the other, a working woman returns to find her male partner "cookin' up" the dinner. The con-figuration is indeed destabilizing, if only because it makes us aware of how very rare it is to see. But, significantly, there are no children in this commercial, as there are in the more traditional version; the absence of children codes the fact that this is a yuppie couple, the group to which this version is designed to appeal.

And now Häagen-Dazs, the original yuppie ice cream, has designed an ad series for this market (Figures 21 and 22). These ads

perfectly illustrate the unstable location of contemporary gender advertisements: they attempt to satisfy representational conventions that still have a deep psychic grip on Western culture, while at the same time registering every new rhythm of the social heartbeat. "Enter the State of Häagen-Dazs"—a clear invocation of the public world rather than the domestic domain. The man and woman are dressed virtually identically (making small allowances for gender-tailoring) in equally no-nonsense, dark business suits, styled for power. Their hair-styles are equivalent, brushed back from the face, clipped short but not punky. They have similar expressions: slightly playful, caught in the act but certainly not feeling guilty. They appear to be indulging in their ice-cream break in the middle of a workday; this sets up both the fetching representational incongruity of the ad and its realism. Ice cream has always been represented as relaxation food, to be *indulged* in; it belongs to a different universe than the work ethic, performance principle, or spirit of competition. To eat it in a business suit is like having "quicke" sex in the office, irregular and naughty. Yet everyone knows that people *do* eat ice cream on their breaks and during their lunch hours. The ad thus appears both realistic and *representationally* odd; we realize that we are seeing images we have not seen before *except* in real life. And, of course, in real life, women *do* eat Häagen-Dazs, as much as, if not more than, men.

And yet, intruding into this world of gender equality and eating realism that is designed to appeal to the sensibilities of "progressive" young men and women is the inescapable disparity in how much and how the man and woman are eating. He: an entire pint of vanilla fudge, with sufficient abandon to topple the carton, and greedy enough to suck the spoon. She: a restrained Eye-bite (already taken; no licks or sucks in process here), out of a single brittle bar (aesthetized as "artfully" nutty, in contrast to his bold, unaccessorized "Vanilla Fudge." Whether unconsciously reproduced or deliberately crafted to appeal to the psychic contradictions and ambivalence of its intended audience, the disparity comes from the recesses of our most sedimented, unquestioned notions about gender.