Anorexia Speaks: Eating Disorders in Modern Japanese Films, Novels, Manga, and Poetry

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1 Two young girls standing in front of two different refrigerators speak. One says, “There are all sorts of things to eat in here, but I don’t eat anything cold. I want to eat something warm, and my mother will make it when she comes home, but she’s busy at work, and she won’t come home until very late.” The other girl appears, and while speaking the camera turns into a close-up of rosy lips: “Our refrigerator always has lots of red meat. My mother is good at cutting red meat into thin slices. But I think that a refrigerator with only orange juice and green apples is enough.”

2 This is the opening scene of 301, 302 (1995), a film of Korean director Cheol-su Park (1948-2013). The narrative begins when these two girls, now grown women, move in next door to each other in an apartment building. The woman who has moved into room 301 brings food to the woman in room 302, but the woman in room 302 doesn’t touch it. She throws it all into the trash. As a child, 302 had been raped by her stepfather, a butcher. As a result of this abuse she developed anorexia nervosa. It is explained that she “associates food with love and sex, causing her to lose her appetite.” On the other hand, 301 suffers from bulimia brought on by a dysfunctional marriage that ended in divorce. The film depicts a dialectic of the two diseases – the woof of anorexia and the weft of bulimia in a diametrical structure of a woman who wants to feed, and a woman who doesn’t want to eat.

3 The viewer is presented with the near-empty refrigerator of 302 containing little more than water and pills. We also see a spotless room covered in books. In contrast stands the extravagantly stocked refrigerator of 301, with its rows of sauces, spices and cooking equipment. Even after 301 learns that 302 suffers from anorexia, she continues cooking for her neighbor; but 302 throws up all that she receives from 301. Here 301 repeats the actions that led to the failure of her marriage, namely cooking too much food and trying to feed her husband. For her husband, his wife’s message of love could
only be interpreted as an unbearable “food-hell.” After these rejections of her expressions of love 301 began to eat the leftovers, initiating her journey to pathological over-eating. The conclusion of the film is overly dramatic and clichéd: there is a catharsis that takes the form of the character’s complementary problems – to eat and “to be eaten.”

However, from the beginning, it is clear that the anorexia of 302 cannot be healed by 301’s over-production of food. One woman’s mouth continually engulfs food while the other’s continuously vomits it. The meat and fish that is received ends up in the waste bin or the toilet bowl, as either trash or vomit. Put another way, such trash and vomit comes to resemble dead bodies. Flatfish, beef, sausages, abalone, and dojo fish soup: all of the images of food appearing repeatedly in the film waver between the antonyms “food” and “cadaver,” never settling upon a fixed meaning. At the same time, this indicates that the act of eating (or more precisely, the act of living) is in a state of flux built on a fiction. To survive we must kill others and consume death. To take it a step further, in order to live we must ingest death.

Predating 301, 302 is an excellent film featuring this image of “eating death”: The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover (1989), by Peter Greenaway (1942-). Greenway does not disappoint the viewer’s desire for the most dramatic and most clichéd ending possible. Given the similarities between the two films, one might claim that 301, 302 is simply repeating Greenaway’s method. However, the meaning of cannibalism that the two films arrive at is somewhat different. This difference is not limited to the simple question of who is eating or who is forcing another to eat.

In The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover, Greenaway presents the visible “stage” of a restaurant with Rembrandt-like luster and the brilliance of opulent, upper-class dinner tables, while at the same time “backstage,” in the kitchen, there are images of barbarous and violent grotesque animalism, maggot-infested leftovers, vomit and excrement. Beyond that there are the acts of sex secretly occurring in the toilet and kitchen. In other words, the film depicts a “gastronomy of the distasteful,” which is an aesthetic of contrast, a reversal of refinement and vulgarity structured around an axis of food and sex. Cinematic aspects of the film, namely questions concerning the inner psyche of the character of Georgina as she exacts punishment on her violent husband in the concluding scene, are beyond the scope of this talk.

In 301, 302 the bulimia of the character in room 301 seems to be held within the rising and falling pitch of the phrase “Eottae? Masisseo?” (“How is it? Delicious?”) which always accompanied the coercive feeding of her husband. The taciturn woman of 302 explains her refusal to eat by uttering, “it is not just food, but everything in this world that I hate. I wish I could just disappear.” The quotes about refrigerators referenced above posit the origins of the women’s illnesses being situated in their childhood experiences and family lives. This background depiction functions to link the characters’ illnesses to a maternal relationship. The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover refuses to include narrative that goes beyond what can be expressed in pictures. In contrast, the narration in 301, 302 has a correspondence with literature. Furthermore, where Greenaway has ignored the question of anorexia and bulimia, the Korean movie takes up the question in a somewhat scandalous manner, and in this aspect 301, 302 resonates with a series of problems surrounding the female subject and its representation in Japan since the 1980s.
It might be said that the representation of extravagant food in Greenaway’s film, at least in terms of outward appearance, puts it within the same lineage as [The Gourmet Club] / 美食倶楽部 by Tanizaki Junichirō 谷崎潤一郎 (1886-1965). In Greenaway’s film the cooks who prepare the meals are generally men, those who feed guests and the thugs are men, as well as those vomiting. The bookstore owner, who has knowledge stored in books, is a man, and the poetry that flows through the entire story is again sung by a young man: a boy soprano. Tanizaki’s Gourmet Club is also a story of men eating gourmet food together as a form of male bonding. The female body with its bewitching sexual charm here is made to represent high-class cuisine, and at the climax of the story, the men eat “meat of a splendid Korean beauty”. Men eat and women are eaten; their meat is savored. This is a classic example of the role of gender as it relates to the ideology of eating, which runs as an under-current through The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover. It is a barbarous diner table, a potlatch, and women are there given away; women are eaten. Of course, The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover ends with revenge for the female side preparing the meal, but no one believes that the heroine, Georgina, has been saved from the potlatch mechanism in the course of her revenge.

301, 302 was well received in Korea as a feminist film presenting the theme of female identity. The film is an indictment of a patriarchal system under which the kitchen is exposed as a space marked as female in gender: a place where food functions not to help women survive, but rather sets into motion a sexism that functions to kill women. In 301, 302 women have been driven out of public places, and into private ones such as the kitchen, as one result of pregnancy. Starting with the nursing of babies, women are at the same time the subject that provides food and the object which is eaten as food. Certainly there are objections to the representation of the kitchen and the identity of women who cook as only a negative image. If this work were analyzed from a feminist perspective, it is undeniable that there would be objections to this overused, stereotypical framing. Despite this, we cannot ignore the fact that the film is commenting on the ideology of sex and food in contemporary Korean society. This representation is contiguous with and contemporaneous to many of the same problems in Japanese society.

There are a number of Japanese novels which take on the same motif as 301, 302 and which, from the standpoint of anorexia and bulimia, question or criticize the definition of kitchen and refrigerator as a uniquely “women’s space.” Here I will discuss’s Kitchen / キッチン (1988), by Yoshimoto Banana 吉本ばなな (1964-), its continuation, Full Moon / 満月 and [Dawn Never Comes to an Anorexic] / 巨食症の明けない夜明け (1988) by Matsumoto Yūko 松本侑子 (1963-).

First, everything is condensed into the shockingly anachronistic phrase, “I think my favorite place in this whole world is the kitchen”, appearing at the very beginning of Kitchen. It is difficult to interpret the meaning of the phrase, especially because the narrator has inserted “I think,” which serves to make the whole phrase relative, as though it was a self-quotation. The main character/narrator of Kitchen is Mikage みかげ, and she does not question her role as food preparer for her live-in boyfriend Yūichi 雄一 and others in the family. Since there is no problematization or conflict concerning this division of labor, and since it comes from the main character herself, it is difficult to read any kind of disharmony with the statu quo in which the kitchen has come to be identified as female. The action of cooking food, the bliss of eating it with Yūichi and
the general representation of these naïve feelings is surprisingly void of any questioning. Take for example a scene at the end of Full Moon where Mikage brings some pork cutlet on rice / カツ丼 / katsudon to the inn where Yūichi is staying. This scene is often discussed in critical literature. In this scene there is the question, “Why is it that what we eat together is so delicious?” The answer from Yūichi is “it must be because we are family,” but this is a rejection of Mikage’s explanation: “...because we are satisfying hunger for food and hunger for sex at the same time”. However, as Mikage has sneaked into the inn in the middle of the night she passes the food to her boyfriend, and nothing else; here, the food has been charged with the meaning of sex. Of course, that the act of providing food brings gratification could also be explained by the fact that the main character works as an assistant at a cooking school, besides studying cooking herself. Also, as has often been pointed out, this story revolves around the description of Yūichi’s transgender mother Eriko えり子, with the perversion of gender being a major theme of the text. There are also a number of indulgences or attempts at making excuses in the text for the depiction of the gendered division of labor in reference to food.

I argue that Kitchen has had such strong popular appeal because the text goes through a process of exemption by surrounding the main character with other characters who are open-minded in regard to gender issues, who do not run up against the contradictions of the patriarchal system but rather bypass the problem without any worries or fears. Having come from a family with a missing parent seems to have cast no shadow on the structure of the main character’s new family. It is this lack of worries that allows her to put on an apron, learn cooking and think that women who go out to marry are “wonderful”. Expressions like “feminine” (女っぽい / onna-poi) and “masculine” (男らしい / otoko-rashii) seen in the text, although used with critical consideration, shows a stereotypical heterosexism which assumes that gender is fixed. The lack of concern or worry in Kitchen points to its portrayal of the 1980s image of a group of people who, with little family of their own, come together, live together and eat together to share the warmth of togetherness. It might be called a mode of the 1980s family.

Kitchen displays almost no continuation of the struggle of women writers who preceded Yoshimoto Banana such as Tomioka Taeko 富岡多恵子 (1935-) and Tsushima Yūko 津島佑子 (1947-2016), who fought to create an expression of female sexual independence. Of course Kitchen, which touches on a warmth of sharing food and food culture does not touch or injure that connection, nor does it have any kind of catastrophe like that seen in 301, 302. Nor is there any depiction of the kind of ingredients and vivid texture of food like that made in 301. There is no trash going out of the kitchen and no one vomiting in the toilet. No one is overweight or excessively thin. There is only a view of healthy food and healthy bodies. At its core, Kitchen is emblematic of a 1980s image of safe and hygienic food.

At the start of the novel, the protagonist declares that “I also love a dirty kitchen”, especially those “with vegetables on the floor, (...)oil spewed around the gas range and a rusty knife.” The kitchen in this novel, however, seems to lack a feeling of actuality, a place where real food is made for real people. Although it centers around a girl who loves the kitchen, it seems to be furthest removed from gourmandism. In the novel, just before Eriko is killed, Mikage meets her by chance in a convenience store called “Family Mart”- the name being very symbolic. Mikage this time is buying not a pork
cutlet, but a cup of custard pudding. Eriko notes, “you’ve lost weight since you moved out.” The choice of a convenience store for this scene is interesting because it is the convenience store that makes it easy for bulimics to get lots of food. It is also said that the spread of convenience stores with their various ready-made foods was a prerequisite environment for eating disorders. There is a hybrid of vulgarity and pleasure in the process of food preparation and representations of kitchens and convenience stores as places where orifices for excreting, evacuating or vomiting are excluded. This has some correspondence with the dark side of the 1980s.

[The White Paper on Japanese Lifestyle] / 国民生活白書, published by the Economic Planning Agency / 経済企画庁 and Cabinet Office / 内閣府, reports that at the beginning of the period of high economic growth between 1960-1967, less than 20% of Japanese homes had refrigerators, but by 1967 80% had them. Moreover, by the mid-1970s nearly 100% of households had refrigerators. The price of a refrigerator as measured by average monthly income also fell markedly, from two months’ salary in the early 1960s to one month’s in 1969, while by 1985 a refrigerator cost only about 2 weeks of an average salary. The refrigerator became a means of calculating the nation’s progress; it was not unusual for there to be more than one refrigerator per household. In the 1970s it was the microwave that appeared in every home, and the two appliances spurred the spread of instant boil-in-the-bag foods and frozen foods.

This environment gave rise to convenience foods and resulted in a large-scale dependence on ready-made foods and eating out. 7-Eleven, Lawson, and other convenience store chains that appeared in the 1970s experienced rapid growth in the 1980s. By 1982, Lawson had sales of more than 100 billion yen and more than 1000 outlets. This expansion did not stop. Rather, every few years it has added another 1000 stores and increased its sales by factors of one hundred billion yen. This astonishing expansion has been especially noticeable since the 1990s. A large amount of this increase has been made possible by the sale of foods that can be eaten off the shelf, or with very little preparation. Just like in Kitchen, where Mikage encounters Eriko late at night, convenience stores are a 24 hour-a-day space where people can get foods that are simple to eat. Behind the easy-to-eat store culture is the reality of the huge waste of food that has sat on the shelf beyond its expiration date. In Kitchen, there is no consideration of trash disposed of as dead meat, nor does it evoke questions of food as trash that has been vomited up by a bulimic. In this way, by dividing what is seen on the outside from what is hidden on the underside, Kitchen averts its eyes to the big-picture reality of food production. It only approaches the question of eating from the point of view of the mouth. This is one kind of vacuity or emptiness that is reflected very well in Kitchen.

In 1987, one year after Kitchen was published, a novel by Matsumoto Yūko, [Dawn Never Comes to an Anorexic] was published, and received the 11th Subaru Prize for Literature. Since the writer, Matsumoto Yūko, was a young staff member of a TV news program, the novel was much discussed in the media. However, the book’s popularity probably resides in its ability to pique the interest of readers through its depiction of a young, isolated woman suffering from an eating disorder. The novelist Mizukami Tsutomu水上勉 (1919-2004) wrote as a comment on the selection of the Subaru Prize for Literature, “I’ve always wanted to take a peek inside a young student who lives alone in an urban apartment, but this novel shows her horrendously solitude and darkness”. It is the kind of interest where one might be captivated by looking at the
life of a woman as she makes trips to the convenience store, eats, and then vomits the food back up. In the novel, the main character has little choice but to go to counseling with a psychiatrist for her bulimia, which actually followed anorexia. The psychiatrist is only able to give a stereotypical diagnosis. However, as the novel is written in the polite language that might be used in a doctor's office, it seems as though the work itself could be read as one long written confession to a counselor. The image of male counselor as a kind of Freudian analyst can then be transferred onto the male readers of the novel.

I rip open the plastic bag that contains the sandwich and take a bite. A ham and lettuce sandwich... but I bite and swallow before I can tell what is going on. As I eat that, my hand opens the paper box that holds the custard-cream puffs. Before I can finish my sandwich, I start on a cream puff. Some of the custard comes out of my mouth and gets on my cheek. Powdery sugar falls like snow onto my black coat. I don't care and stuff my mouth with one after another. I feel like I am going to choke.4

Such a narrative is haunted by cruelty and obscenity. The sense of obscenity may be related to the fact that this young woman's repeated self-analysis is just too childish. The archetypical example of this obscenity is the fact that she dislikes the Japanese word “kashoku-shō” / 過食症 (disease of overeating) and uses instead her own neologism “kyoshoku-shō” / 巨食症 (disease of giant consumption.)

On the other hand, listening to her psychiatrist's explanation, which she doesn't believe, causes her to take up the habit of vomiting. Also at his suggestion she reads Freud's libido theory, which then leads her into bulimia. We can read this process of her bulimia-onset as an ironic protest against the phallocentric Freudian viewpoint. The protest against phallocentrism is also represented in her affections for her boyfriend, who looks almost like a girl, and in her lust for a feminist friend during her days of anorexia. Of course, she cannot free herself from the hold of heterosexism. However, it is not her relationship with men, but the one with her mother that projects her onto a heterosexual world and functions as a basis for analyzing her eating disorder. [Dawn Never Comes to an Anorexic] is without a doubt written as a work which revolves around the loss of the mother. When the main character was still just an infant her mother abandoned her and her family. Because of the scars left by the lack of love from her mother, she attempts to live her life in a different way than that of her mother. She wishes that she would not become like my mother and would be neuter, a human with no gender. It is this attempt at losing her gender that led her to starve herself and then to rebound from that dieting. The process of this break from the mother and then a return to the mother culminates in her decision to write her mother to say that she would like to meet her. At that point the reader sees that the writer is not writing a report to her male counselor but rather to none other than her own mother. And in the final chapter, where the daughter/writer of this letter (which is actually the novel itself) is to part ways from her mother, the reader is simultaneously delivered outside of and back to the primary text.

This novel can then be classified as a nested story, a story within a story, and the use of this plot contrivance led some of the judges to disagree with the choice of the work for the award. The text does not end with a reunion of the mother and daughter who have been separated. Rather, at the conclusion, an outer primary text or frame encloses the secondary text and the primary text comes to be foregrounded. This outer text decouples the mother-daughter union. Therefore, this novel can be seen as showing in
relief the “mother-daughter dyad” that breaks away from the Oedipal plot, a major theme that Marianne Hirsch (1949-) discusses in her work on Western literature from the 19th century. Hirsch intentionally holds up an image of the mother which was wholly essentialistic, and describes the “suppression of the mother” in which the daughter can speak but the mother is kept silent. Matsumoto Yuuko’s novel has introduced the mother’s voice into the primary text, making the critical choice to wedge a gap between the suppression of the mother of the traditional mother-daughter stories. It could also be easily argued that Matsumoto’s novel has just borrowed the theme of bulimia in order to write a novel whose main theme is a “daughter’s message to her mother”. The loss of ties with the mother is also used to explain the motivation for the main character’s eating disorder. From the beginning, some have indicated that this novel is essay-like in this respect, arguing that this is a weak point of the work. Nevertheless, the work develops a dysfunctional mother-daughter relationship which leads the daughter to have a desire to be thin and to start dieting. This dieting causes anorexia and from there she develops bulimia. The fictionalization of this stereotype is in fact a point that I wish to praise.

21 The reason for this is that the stereotypical story which appears in the novel is composed from various aspects of real-life eating disorders, which the language within the text reproduces. It works as a paradoxical and critical discourse which exists within the mass media. Many psychiatrists believe that eating disorders, as in Yamato Hiroyuki (1957-), stem from a person’s refusal to mature into adulthood. This is a theory that feminists have criticized to some degree as well. But it is interesting to note that the manga [The Cherry Orchard] / 櫻の園 by Yoshida Akimi 吉田秋生 (1956-) and the novels of Shōno Yoriko 笙野 頼子 (1956-) offer hints to Yamato’s thinking on eating disorders. In this way, fiction is used as a reference for medical discourse alongside case histories, reminding us that medical discourse is actually a process of doctors reorganizing the patient’s story or history. This fictional narrative functions as a catalyst to further regulate eating disorders, as pointed out by Katō Madoka 加藤まどか, who has criticized the theory that the family is the origin of eating disorders.

22 Another scholar who is very critical of the “refusal of maturity” theory behind eating disorders is Asano Chie 浅野 千恵. Asano suggests that it is the mass media, especially women’s magazines, that are causing eating disorders, and notes that people with eating disorders are forced to be labeled with an identity of “ordinary deviants” (Howard Saul Becker). She problematizes the tendency of sufferers to blame eating disorders on their own personality, thereby internalizing the cause. Asano and Kato criticize the “family relationship factor” theory as well as the “refusal of maturity” theory. Their criticisms expose the development of those discourses of psychiatry and mass media that seek to separate mothers from daughters, forcing daughters back into a patriarchal system of control and repressing mothers. In other words, mass media and medical discourse are repressing the notion of femininity itself which encompasses both daughters and mothers.

23 If the novel [Dawn Never Comes to an Anorexic] has any strategy as a narrative, it is to repeat the privileged stereotypical discourse produced by the medical profession and the mass media. The writer is trying to disclose the fact that this discourse is problematic by copying it in her novel. However, despite dealing with the same stereotypical theme of a causal relationship between eating disorders and childhood sexual abuse, failed marriages, and lost parents, among other factors, [Dawn Never...
Comes to an Anorexic] is inferior to the film images of 301, 302. 301, 302 concentrates and simplifies the luxurious grotesque-ism with the same brilliant type of cinematography as Greenaway’s. It skillfully portrays the trauma aspect while [Dawn Never Comes to an Anorexic] has nothing to compare to the animalistic avarice of 301, 302. With its deodorized and abstracted depiction of food, Kitchen has some similarities with the fresh texture emitted by the emotional structure of 少女マンガ / shōjo manga and brings that into the genre of novel, but it does not attain the same quality of expression as the mangas themselves. We have thus seen some typical examples of how current contemporary novels do not live up to the level of movies and manga which themselves have learned much from the genre of the novel. 301, 302 has a nearly clichéd two-dimensional story line that can be understood by anyone; the simple narrative is similar to Kitchen and [Dawn Never Comes to an Anorexic] with little depicted aside from the food. In 301, 302, the apartment building is almost like a jail, in which each of the women balances the other out in terms of desire and excretion, and because of this we cannot find any point where the female subject resists the patriarchic system. The work reproduces the discourse of the medical profession and the mass media, including stereotypes of cause and effect without stepping outside of them. However, even in this film, the reproduction of the simple and stereotypical narrative is one type of strategy. As a story that concerns causal relationships, the prison-like situation within the apartment building should be seen as a necessary requirement. The film images of faces eating and the graphic images of the food eaten are beyond the capacities of linguistic expression.

As mentioned above, Asano Chie problematizes the dominant narratives found in women’s fashion magazines, as well as those suggested by medical experts, questioning what she views to be the true cause of eating disorders. At the same time that eating disorders began to receive greater public discussion during the 1980s, women’s magazines experienced a drastic increase in circulation. Fashion magazines aimed at young women, such as Non no / non-no and An an / an.an, increased sales by 160% over a ten-year period starting in 1982. As a result, these magazines expanded their readership while at the same time increasing the number of articles about eating disorders. According to Asano’s argument, the discourses of women’s fashion magazines are structured by a semantic chain of health / beauty / diet / anorexia / bulimia. Against this background they feature articles which, from a moral stance, give a negative image of dieting as possibly unhealthy (eating disorders are also presented therein as a side effect of unhealthy dieting). However, what is really salient in these discussions is not rigorous semantic differences, but the suggestion that the only way to find beauty and health is to diet while doing one’s best to avoid eating disorders. In other words, they are creating a questionable chain of endless images that are tied to a nebulous standard of beauty and health.

Current advertisements for magazines announce “It’s spring, so let’s get that weight off!” or “Reduce your weight by X kilograms and your waist by Y centimeters in Z weeks!” Another source of this image is newspaper insert advertisements for aesthetic salons, health and diet foods, and other companies in the health industry. This kind of discourse links ideas of health to dieting and beauty, creating what could be called the absolute necessity of a slender body, an ideology we might term “slenderism”. In [Dawn Never Comes to an Anorexic], the main character gets the idea of vomiting what she had eaten from her psychiatrist. Similarly, Asano introduces cases of people who started to practice vomiting after reading about it in women’s magazines. There is a
chance that [Dawn Never Comes to an Anorexic] is offering us a new canon of narrative through its reproduction of the dominant mass media narrative of eating disorders. However, a more powerful critique of the slender-ist image can be found in a fictional genre that deals intimately with such images and is even sometimes a co-conspirator in the implantation of the slender-ist ideology. That genre of fiction is my next topic: shōjo manga.

A manga that takes up the question of the desire for a slim body, dieting and overeating in a direct way is Anno Moyoco 安野 モヨコ (1971-) [In Clothes Called Fat] / 脂肪と言われる名の服を着て (1997). It originally appeared in the magazine 週刊女性 Shūkan Josei under the title [Gotta Slim Down!] / 瘦せなきゃダメ！. This work drew attention because it was published in the midst of the discourse on eating disorders in women’s magazines. The work begins with the main character suffering from being overweight as well as being an overeater. She goes to an aesthetic salon that promises weight reduction treatment. The story follows the character until she begins the habit of induced vomiting. In the end she is dumped by her boyfriend for slimming down, and starts overeating again – indeed a pitiful story. Both her boyfriend and her “patron”, an old man, belong to the category of the so-called デブ専 / debu-sen or men who have a fat-woman fetish, depicted as a nostalgic desire for the mother. In this way, the work includes a critical reversal of discourses centered in the male gaze.

Another manga author who must not be ignored is Matsumoto Michiyo 松本充代 (1962-), whose first-person narratives provide a lyrical quality while relativitizing the image of female beauty associated with slimness. Matsumoto enjoys depicting unusual topics in her work including menarche, boys’ voices breaking, masturbation, love-hate relationships with one’s mother, sexually late-blooming girls, etc. Among these, [“Trash”], included in [What I’m lacking] / 私にたりないもの (1992) is about a girl who longs to be anorexic, but fails. Here the author depicts a character who is unable to become an adult, as envisioned by the “refusal of maturity” theory. In this way, the character’s portrayal undermines the dominant theory. Another work is [“A Suicide Note in the Mirror”] / 鏡の中の遺書, published in [Hidden Voices, A Suicide Note in the Mirror and Other Short Stories] / 潜む声、鏡の中の遺書、その他の短編 (1999), which depicts a junior high school student who is “fat and homely” and therefore unable to have any self-confidence while also experiencing serious problems of school bullying.

Among the four girls whose lives of loneliness are depicted in Strawberry Shortcakes (2002), the work of Nananan Kiriko 魚喃 キリコ (1972-), one repeatedly overeats and induces vomiting. With her special touch, Nananan erases all the shadows and gives the reader a bleached vision of a hellish inner-world of her character:

I want to eat / just eat // then / in my stomach / with that in my stomach / when it gets all full / all of it, all of it, / I’ll puke it all. /// it feels like...// ----everything miserable in me / moves from inside my body to the outside.12

The text is explicit about the cause of her overeating and induced vomiting – she has been thrown aside by her lover. However, the act of overeating and vomiting here is depicted almost entirely as output, and the Freudian theory of desire never intervenes in the explanation of it. The story of cause and effect has been thrown away unconsciously. The strategy which we can find in Anno, Matsumoto, and Nananan is the same: they balance out the machismo of manga created for male consumption and the image of slim women defining beauty, refusing to become an adult. They are able to
use the standard image of femininity in the opposite direction. Beyond this they are able to visually shake the model of narrative to the extent that it falls apart.

Another group of manga works that shake the standards of the inner structure of shōjo manga and invite disfavor and rejection from male readers are the comics of Okazaki Kyōko (岡崎京子 1963-). For example, we can look at her 1996 work "Shotgun from the Lips" / くちびるから散弾銃. The story features three women characters who enjoy talking amongst themselves and who do so in a way that is compared to a shotgun, the image of which lends itself to the title of the comic. These three young women, all aged 23, have no need for men, and spend their time discussing an array of topics. They go as far as discussing the Chernobyl disaster, in addition to the cultural topics raised in women’s magazines. There is no place for male desire in this world. In the afterward, Okazaki writes that the time is merciless for the girls who did not want to grow up to be women. But despite this thematic setting, the male gaze, which is what one expects in a story where the characters refuse to grow up, has been elided altogether. Even in her works that deal with murder, rape, violence – where women’s bodies are substantiated as the object of male desire, like ["A Small Sun in the Water"] / 水の中の小さな太陽 included in [End of the World] (1994), ["I am Your Toy"] / 私は貴兄のおもちゃなの, included in Watashi wa Anata no Omocha na no (1995). In the 1996 チワワちゃん, the male gaze has been completely objectified, or elided from the text.

Two works that take up the problems of sex and food are Pink and River's Edge / ピンク and リバーズ・エッジ. Pink, written in 1989, is a manga that critically approaches the genre of the novel in order to differentiate itself from it. The main character is a business woman who has an alligator for a pet and who works as a prostitute (hotetoru-jō / ホテトル嬢 [a call-girl working in love hotels for a company]). She also has a boyfriend who is the lover of her stepmother. The boy, her stepsister (the daughter of the stepmother), all are good friends. For this complex system of human relations, the story can be seen as a parody of Schneewittchen (Snow White) which follows the stepmother – child pattern. Having had her young lover stolen, the stepmother (who also makes apple pies) kills the pet alligator as revenge. Through this parody of stereotypical narrative, the writer is critically analyzing the act of narrating.

The young lover is an aspiring novelist. He was ridiculed at by his former girlfriend with saying that the readers of novels must surely be some kind of pitiful Cro-Magnons. Also he is told that in today’s world, magazines, TV and manga are enough. The young lover is threatened by the stepsister to make something interesting if he wants to be a novelist. He then writes a novel by stealing (cutting and pasting) someone else’s text, and for that plagiarized work he wins a literary prize.

The main character also wants to live her life watching TV and live her life looking at pictures in ‘an an’. Her role here is to contrast with the young lover, who sees himself as an aspiring novelist. The problem is that the heroine does not try to live the lifestyle that is being introduced by these forms of media. This fact causes a gap between her speech and her real desire.

When she wishes she had a home like that in Sazae-san, an animation program featuring an idyllic, happy, traditional Japanese family, this is probably not coming from her real desire. At the same time, she does not seem to be longing for the lofty lifestyle that her boyfriend, the aspiring novelist, is chasing. The story seems to proceed in linear time without defining the true nature of her desire, never returning to the starting point. She is living without any separation between her postured image
and her real self. She is not, however, in need of any self-definition in this respect. In a traditional novel, there is no mode of reading that will allow the reader to distinguish the character’s posturing from her real desire. It would be necessary to have some explanation regarding the unrepresented real desire from the narrator or the character. But in a manga, the pictures can make up for this lack. So when her customer abuses her for being a piece of meat lower than animals, the text does not explain her pain, or the necessity of why she needs to make money. This brutal and irrational emptiness is what Okazaki is skillful at depicting. Due to this depiction, the reader is assured that he can witness rape, murder, and prostitution without much pain or discomfort. Kitchen, which I discussed earlier, is an example of a work that brings the kind of manga-esque narrative of emptiness into the genre of the novel. However, Kitchen cannot provide the level of vicarious experience of the irrational that Pink does when it forces the reader to witness this irrationality.

35 Of course, Pink does not deal with eating disorders, but with a pet alligator that eats chickens whole, as well as a Maltese that the main character’s stepsister has captured. However, Kayama Rika 香山リカ (1960-) points out that the food that her stepsister buys at convenience stores is “what people with anorexia or bulimia might do”. This alligator’s ferocious appetite stands as the essential theme of the manga; in this way, then, “eating” is undeniably a central idea of the piece. Since the main character sells her body, there is also an aspect of prostitution in the form of “meat”. Additionally, the alligator is awakened by the smell of menstrual blood, at which point the heroine admits that she is indeed also meat. Having sex with her boyfriend becomes the equivalent of “eating”, and as the lovers are eating meat at a restaurant they remember the body of the main character’s mother, who has committed suicide. Just at that time the stepmother is having the alligator taken away to be made not into meat but into a handbag. It lived as meat that eats meat, and then dies and becomes meat. Like many of Okazaki’s other works, the conclusion is punctuated by death.

36 The themes of food and sex as well as food and death are condensed in River’s Edge (1994). The heroine is a high school student named Wakakusa Haruna 若草ハルナ. She becomes close to a boy in her class, named Yamada 山田, who is mistreated by other students at her school, including by a boy named Kwannonzaki 観音崎. Through him Haruna meets a girl named Yoshikawa Kozue 吉川こずえ. Yamada is a homosexual and likes a certain boy, but that boy is heterosexual. He sometimes sells himself to men, and he pretends to date a girl named Tajima 田島 as camouflage. Yoshikawa Kozue works part time as a model, and is looked up to by all at the school. Secretly she overeats and vomits (it is also hinted that she may be a lesbian.) Within this complex relationship, there is a series of catastrophes that befall them. Kwannonzaki suspects a relationship between Haruna and Yamada. He has relations with a girl named Rum ルミ, who then gets pregnant. Kwannonzaki plans to kill the pregnant Rumi. Rumi, injured, arrives home only to find her sister secretly reading her diary. Rumi, who practices prostitution (援助交際/ enjō-kōsai), and her older sister, who has uncontrollable eating habits and is overweight, begin to blame each other for their problems, eventually having a fight which ends in blood. Tajima, upset at having Yamada stolen from her, sets fire to Haruna’s house and then later burns herself to death.

37 This tangled plot is saved from failure by the fact that the writer has set up an intricate analogical relationship between the various plot lines, but what holds it all together is
the view of the river which is located near the characters’ high school. Haruna is led to
the river by Yamada and Yoshikawa, and there they look at their “treasure,” an actual
dead body. This dead body functions as a kernel around which the various dead bodies
in the work are drawn. This includes the kitten that Yamada was raising and that was
killed by the other students; Rumi, who was almost killed two times, and the fetus that
came from her body; Rumi’s older sister who slit her wrists; and the body of Tajima,
burnt black. In addition to these dead bodies, there are the not-dead: the emaciated
body of Yoshikawa Kozue, emaciated from overeating and vomiting, or that of Yamada,
whose body has suffered the repeated beatings of classmates. Moreover, near the end of
the work, Yamada significantly confesses that he likes Tajima as a corpse much, much
better than when she was alive. He rejects her as the other when she is demanding a
close relationship, but once she is quiet and unable to speak he finds her more
agreeable. This, however, is neither some kind of philosophical message nor is it a
perverted desire for corpses.

The work ends with a glimmer of hope, as Yamada notes his friendship with Haruna,
but looking at the work as a whole, the story is concluded without even the catharsis of
death; rather, it ends with the corpse. Left with corpses which belong to neither the act
of living nor to the act of dying, we find that the work leaves us with a sense of pain
that cannot be assuaged. We see the overlapping images of the corpse at the river’s
dge and sex between Rumi and Kwannonzaki, as well as the overlap of Tajima’s burnt
corpse and sex between Haruna and Kwannonzaki. Therein, it is clear that death
cannot purify the sexual act which brings a sense of emptiness, equal to that depicted
by the vomiting of food eaten.

As in the films The Cook, the Thief, His bride, and Her Lover and ZOO (1985), Greenaway
attempts to follow the rotting of corpses and dead animals with a camera. In these
works we see to what degree dead bodies and vomit can be depicted in gorgeous and
vivid detail. Fuse Hideto (1960-) refers to the scenes of asceticism (不浄観 / fujō-kan) in
Tanizaki Junichirō’s Captain Shigemoto’s Mother / 少将滋幹の母 (1950) when discussing
the rotting dead body of ZOO. In the Fujō-kan the character Kunitsune 国経 tries to get
over his feeling towards his stolen wife by looking at rotting human bodies, but this
ends in failure. In The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover, the Mafia boss sits in front of
the dead body, but vomits. His vomiting is proof that he is living. In the case of Captain
Shigemoto’s Mother, Kunitsune is led to see how deeply his attachment to this world is.
In both Greenaway’s and Tanizaki’s work the dead body is objectified, and in doing so the
subject experiences a reconfirmation of his verve (will to live) and of desire.

In contrast, the dead bodies in River’s Edge seem to evade this verve. The dead bodies at
the river’s edge and Tajima’s burnt corpse both are left with no more meat on them. In
other words, they cannot be eaten. Like the bulimic Yoshikawa Kozue’s emaciated body,
River’s Edge shuts down avaricious hunger, as in Greenaway’s film. Moreover, if we
compare River’s Edge with 301, 302, the image of the woman in 301, who cooks and
voraciously eats is insubstantial. The static pictures and words of River’s Edge squeeze
out more poesy than the moving images in 301, 302. However, the question here is what
the image of the river’s edge gives to the work. I would like to take a look at a phrase
that appears at both the beginning and the end of the story.

The place where we live / There is a river running through it / not far from the
mouth of the river / it is wide and flows slowly ... the smell is bad / in the midst of
the riverbed, this mound // Tall Goldenrods / growing thickly / you can often see
dead cats and such.
Yoshikawa Kozue’s vomit might have passed down that same river. This phrase, which envelops the work, is much like a poem. And this is no surprise, because – even if the influence from the Hollywood movie of the same name has been pointed out by others – we can also see the influence of the poetry of Itō Hiromi (1955-) in the above phrasing and in the work as a whole. The image of the river, goldenrods, and dead bodies all appear in Itō Hiromi’s works from [The Sky of Plants] / 草木の空 (1978) to [Underripe Plums] / 青梅 (1982). They are keywords in Itō’s early works. The Goldenrods were a symbol that she developed to represent reproduction and the power of the mother. In her works from the late 1970s and early 1980s, her poems repeat these images, combining eating and death as well as images of corpses. All of these can be found in Itō’s [On Territory] / テリトリー論 series. Moreover, in the 1990s she authored [Noro and Saniwa] / のろとさにわ (1991) (written with Ueno Chizuko 上野千鶴子: 1948-) as well as [Hand, Leg, Meat, Arm: Hiromi 1955] / 手・足・肉・体 Hiromi 1955 (1995), collaborated with photographer, Ishiuchi Miyako 石内都 (1947-). These kinds of themes were in constant repetition at that time. It should be noted that Okazaki Kyōko was in turn influenced by poets who had been influenced by other manga writers like Ōshima Yumiko 大島弓子 (1947-). Furthermore, I would like to note that in Okazaki’s works, she adjusted the images that she had borrowed from Itō. For one thing, in contrast to Itō’s poems, Okazaki wrote River’s Edge in 1994 from a position looking back on the 1980s. Okazaki notes the following: “From the start they were the lost children. They had everything, and for that reason, these children had to give up everything”. But having said that, this comment about the deep sense of loss which the author makes seems highly emblematic of the 1990s, and also extremely poetic.

What I want to stress is the following: Itō’s first writing came out of a period when she was battling with anorexia. This fact does not just fall into the category of background information about the writer, but rather plays an important role in the motifs of her work. For example, if we look at the poem “[So as not to become warped] / 歪ませないように, from [Princess] / 嫦 (1979), we see the female heroine making white dumplings / 白玉, made from rice powder, for her lover. Of course, there is the asymmetrical relationship of the woman who cooks and the man who eats, but merely noting this does not go far enough into the problem.

Itō had already published works featuring the relationship between an anorexic and her boyfriend in the poem “[Anemia] / 貧血 from the anthology [The Sky of Plants]. One could say that the woman in apartment 301 had already been depicted here. Therefore, what is behind the tactile expressions (especially concerning these rice-flour dumplings) like “melting black syrup in the mouth, and silky smooth dumplings” is not just sex between these two lovers, but the sense of touch of the girl who has become “thin as a stick” with “anemic looking white skin” – the image of the girl’s skin after she had tweezed out its hair. In looking at it this way, we see how a text like [“Vinegar and Oil” / 醋油 (included in [On Territory 1])] finely represents the textures of foods’ skins; it cannot be placed into a rough schema of “desire for food = desire for sex”. On this point, the image of a primitive and uncontrolled mother energy was at the center of Itō’s poems. Yet within the text, the words “I want to eat” cannot be read simplistically. Even after this period, Itō continued to work on the theme of eating disorders, while also taking part in workshops offered by Saito Manabu (1941-) and his “NABA” organization (designed to help people with eating disorders). Additionally, she co-wrote [A Bright Anorexia, Cheerfully Bulimic] / 明るく拒食、元気に拒食 (1992).
Out of this work was born the poem ["Pork Cutlet Princess"] / カツ丼姫さま. The work is composed of the voices of two characters, ["Anorekisia"] (anorexia nervosa) and ["Bulimia"] (bulimia nervosa). Itō also included quotations from real-life sufferers of eating disorders.

I just wanted to be sleek
I wanted to get everything out...
Breath, digestion, excretion, hair, sweat, sexual excitement, appetite
All of my organs stop
Clean them
I just wanted to sterilize them"

This poem, spun together from disparate voices, comes together to make a new voice. But this kind of work does not exist merely to help people with eating disorders find help and healing. Itō is saying that people have to enjoy their illnesses and disorders of anorexia and bulimia. Okazaki Kyōko’s work also finds its power in the fact that it is not interested in providing some sort of healing process to those with the disease. How can we free ourselves from a simplistic concept of healing in a reality where, on one side, there are daily updates on the Internet of new personal best records for dieting, and on the other blogs where bulimics write? These two aspects are slapped together like the front and back sides of the same sheet of paper to form a single reality. Is this a reality to which literature can give some meaningful response?

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NOTES

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3. Ibid., p. 6.
4. Ibid., p. 6.
5. Ibid., p. 73.
15. OKAZAKI Kyōko, River’s Edge, Tokyo, Takarajimasha, 1994, p. 2.
16. Ibid., afterwords.
17. ITŌ Hiromi, “[So as not to become warped]”, in [Princess], Kawasaki, Shiyōsha, 1979, p. 35.
18. ITŌ Hiromi, “[Anemia]”, in [The Sky of Plants], Hekinan, Atoriesyuppankikaku, p. 72.

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