

Delville, MICHEL, and Andrew NORRIS. *The Politics and Aesthetics of Hunger and Disgust: Perspectives on the Dark Grotesque*. London, Routledge 2017, ISBN 978-1138203051, 238p.

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Motivated by the surging interest in food studies, along with their multiple interdisciplinary areas of evolution, the book aims to be a pertinent study of the recent developments, with emphasis on the embodied stasis as derived from material phenomena, complementary therefore to several influential works in the area. Incorporating the concept of “dark grotesque” at the heart of the investigation, the book focuses prominently on the myriad states of existence that a starving body experiences, detailing its descent into disgust, along with the subsequent tropes it generates.

By exploring the body in its undecided nature, envisioned in its dichotomy between openness and closure, the book reinforces the importance of the material, contesting the metaphoric tendency that posited the real as a liminal space of understanding and analysing concepts of hunger and disgust within a wide cultural area which broadens their spectrum of understanding. Emphasising the role of the audience in the reception, the book aims to reveal the multiple dimensions of starvation, oscillating between artful performance and disgusting repulsion bordering on abjection. The grotesque is further refurbished within the novel approach, rejecting Bakhtin’s ideal model and opting for the alternative proposed by Kristeva through her influential account of the negative, abject body. Hunger is reimaged as an aesthetic experience, with the multifaceted iteration as proof of a preference towards spectacle. Capitalism is yet another point of interest, as the book partially attempts to explore and deconstruct the accepted account of eating disorder through a politicized reception of the cultural acts generated through hunger. In this revisionist addition to food studies, the body and the embodiment experience is regarded as central, of foremost importance to such an analysis and, although

frequently ignored or overshadowed by more transcendental preoccupations, it is converted into the focal point of a cultural web of ramifications.

The first chapter explores the archetype of the starving artist in a variety of literary works in order to validate a “poetics of hunger and disgust” when faced with the capitalist machinations and cultural considerations. By voyaging through the temporal evolution of the fasting adepts’ profile, from the golden age to contemporaneity, the book sheds light on the thought process of those professional fasters, fictional or of real existence, inquiring in this manner about their motivation and about the targets they strived to reach through this voluntary disruption of a natural, basal necessity. Establishing starvation as an attempt to acquire meaning in a bourgeois mode of organization which has been voided, these “anti-performing” (32) hunger artists are revived through this renewed interpretation which considers the theatrical dimension of their character, a paradigmatic shift that disrupts the established mode of assessing their behavioural imbalance. They are disguised as clerks during their habitual pattern of existence and their resistance to the norms of a highly regulating society is spectacular in itself, whilst their refusal of routine is an assertion of uniqueness, a proof of artistry against the barren land of their employment, in this way birthing a grotesque *Kunstlerroman* which devolves and culminates in abjection.

Hence, tracing the metamorphosis of hunger as a starvation performance constitutes the focus of the second chapter, as several figures are analysed and repurposed in reference to novel tendencies of examination which imply the necessity of reconsideration. Its exhibitory nature is described as further explored by various entertainers, some of whom, rather than interiorising it in its aesthetic dimension, comprehended its lucrative nature and subsequently exploited it. Professionalizing what was traditionally considered in its artistic measure, this gesture is only one of the interferences that starvation and capitalism, through its mass consumption imperative, acquire, with the following chapter providing a more in-depth analysis of the phenomenon. The artistic side, nevertheless, still resists the assault of this law of compulsory expenditure, positing the fast as an attempt to avoid self-effacement, as it oscillates between Christic imagery fraught by an abject dimension and representations firmly grounded in the material, exposing the necessary condition of the embodiment of the subject. Travelling to the territory of contemporary art and its distinct features, the fourth chapter is a pertinent

investigation into the mechanisms of the hunger aesthetics, with emphasis on the nature and drive of disgust. The borders which delineate outsides from insides are further reconsidered, with the former seen as the originating point of abjection, its visceral essence as a source of pollution unbearable to those rejecting the necessary physical dimension of the subject. Perceived as otherness, food is regarded as inimical and undesirable; such consideration as the source of a cleansing starvation found in disgust is seen to evolve mainly as “a protection against unhealthy food” (88), its intrusion generating an alien, unrecognizable body and, in this manner, self. Following a similar line of thought, the potentiality of confounding and conflating the anal and oral orifices develops the irrepressible idea of human defilement.

To signal the political dimension of the starving body as a mechanism of resistance is the purpose of the fourth chapter, the borders of the embodiment when faced to external oppression are negotiated and the potential of fasting in birthing the monstrous is analysed. Skin is investigated as an element of negotiation between self and others, signalling their exchange and announcing any disruption occurring in the self to the external public. As skin registers the dissolution of self, the individuals are progressively compelled into erasure, their personality pulverized under the crushing force of hunger. The starving subjects appear as diseased, their condition as a risk of contamination which leads to the rejection of social contact, signalling a rupture of an isolated self in crisis. The authors also attempt a short incursion into the potentiality of post-human and its connection with the hunger narratives, a necessary condition for its recognition being the inability to access the monstrous, delineating a few tenants of humanity and tracing their evolution through several dystopic narratives which expose the potential of such a malign (d)evolution.

Therefore, reading anorexia as going against the grain of capitalism is the following topic, considered in the latter part of the book, in what seems to be the most relevant and innovative chapter, as it attempts to reverse its canonical readings and raise awareness regarding its entanglement with the features particular to this era. Rather than being read as conformity to the standards which require unattainable thinness reunited under the imperative of beauty, anorexia is depicted as symptomatic for the era of intensification through globalisation, appraised as a malign, abject product, as an attempt of the body to recapture its integrity, protecting through starvation its inviolable nature from the assault of the “food as shit”. In the

age we inhabit, consumption through election is compulsory. These dynamics ensure the survival of the system, while placing an immense stress on the subject forced into a permanent cycle of choosing and consuming. What was previously a benefit of the system is now a mode of control out of which the self can potentially be seen to evade through anorexia, here revealed as “the unconscious choice not to eat” and, in this way, to cause the system and its prerequisites to be destroyed from within. The loss of appetite is double binding, incorporating a similar loss of speech, with the mouth severing its connection with the violating outside and preserving the body integrity sealed, emptiness as a form of protection.

Ironically, however, even the attempt to subvert the machinations of the state are incorporated into its logic, anorexia as a lifestyle choice being exposed through the multiplicity of websites advocating its adoption. Furthermore, it is habitually regarded as customary to the fashion world, whose models exhibit it as necessary rite of passage into this world of painful elegance. Where, therefore, does the mark of differentiation between battling the system and submitting as yet another victim stand? The answer proposed is, intuitively, in the revulsion, with disgust as a powerful element in the field of play, its presence being the necessary condition for dismembering the cycle of consumption and freeing the subject through an inverted state of catharsis.

Pleasure becomes, then, negated as participation in the narrative of capitalist bliss, but what seems to be overlooked is how the basic principles of the system have already evicted it from its construction, since the chooser, forced to continuously choose and convinced the choice is permanently incorrect, derives no pleasure from the process; the concept shifted to reflect the imperative of perpetual election, mutating to incorporate this movement and not the acquiring of the object itself as a potential for satisfaction. This is how such an unreachable ideal fuels the development of the capitalist machine, its constant acceleration increasing the tension within the subject which, alienated, stands on the brink of destruction, its limits under assault as a necessary condition of societal expansion. Having barely recovered from the recent, devastating economic crisis, capitalism continues to influentially promote itself as the most suitable remaining form of social organisation, despite its glaring flaws, responding to its weakened condition through attempts of increasing its grasp on the subjects who, augmenting their contribution to the system, strengthen its roots and support its expansion. On the opposite side of

the spectrum there stands the defying body of that who fasts. Opposing this demented necessity to endlessly produce and consume, it disrupts the hegemony of this apparatus, resisting food in an attempt to generate entropy in the ideology which heavily relies on its phantasmagorical vision of total control over the subject who chooses and consumes.

This idea of social obedience that capitalism aims to institute finds its climax in the intricate, highly intriguing study of the Apple logo which the authors provide, as this extremely influent and easily recognisable symbol of the capitalist state is exposed in its archetypal nature as descendant of the forbidden fruit, since countless of subjects are “salivating” to sin. As, nowadays, desire and love for people is slowly but certainly relinquished under the requirements of the new cultural norm, they mutate and shapeshift into an intense craving for and devotion to objects, and the fanaticism displayed towards Apple products by consumers becomes the apex of this theory of desire transmutation.

Through anorectic resistance, the subject aims to remain grounded in the Real, resisting the assault by the only means it considers available. If consumption makes the world go round, the starving body forces it to stillness and reflection, a state in which its flaws can be exposed and comprehended, a muted call to action, difficult to penetrate through the walls built within the medium we populate. What is missing from this scheme is, nevertheless, the perception of the anorectic subject as abnormal and diseased, thus silenced and usually force-fed into obedience.

Insisting on how the *homo homini lupus* is the dictate of contemporary society, the authors depict a vivid portrait of the Other as the object of competition, and individuality as the norm one must adopt to survive and flourish. This, by analogy, requires the necessary recuperation of the faster, its reintegration and emergence as the object of rivalry, impossible during the self-starvation stasis which, as absence of consumption, places its subject on a liminal position, leading to the creation of a grim paradox: one must heal the body it seeks to further destroy. In the society suffocated with meaning, therefore, the anorectic, engaging in a play with the thanatic, strives to exit this neurotic mode of existence, to extract the self from the excess and to privilege simplicity in a universe overwhelmed by redundancy.

Having exposed the web of significances of the starving body, the epilogue of the book pervades the very fabric of its existence as a suspended state: alive but host to a deceased second nature which admits no delimitation from its primary,

breathing self. The possibility of empathy is negotiated in its complexity to the dual nature of the faster, a living corpse which admits no grievance in its undecided state.

Resuming the numerous possibilities of the fast it provided original readings to, the book ends with a question whose answer remains undecided, under the influence of cultural or social evolution, settling at the utter core of the book: "Is it possible to live outside of time?" Are hunger, disgust, abjection, fundamental to our understanding of the world? Are the self-starving subjects carriers of a more profound message than those encrypted under the mask of disease? The answer is a definitive "yes".

Travelling from fairy tales to Shakespeare, Kafka or Hitchcock, while incorporating a postmodern perspective, the book is a necessary addition to the ever-expanding field of food studies, as it proves to be a compelling account of the darker dimension of the area; its ominous excursion into the grotesque generate disgust through abjection and expose the superficially hidden threats that loom in the underground of our self-proclaimed capitalistic paradise.