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“It’s Not Okay”: FX’s *Starved* and Eating Disorders as Entertainment

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*In 2005, cable channel FX made the risky decision to air Eric Schaeffer’s *Starved*, a bold experiment that challenged preconceived notions about eating disorders, anorexia, bulimia, and compulsive eating. The show poses interesting questions about illness, forcing the viewer to consider whether eating disorders can ever be considered funny. The show ultimately received mixed reviews and was cancelled after just seven episodes. Through an exploration of this challenging show, the author examines what happens when eating disorders are explored through comedy rather than the more typical tragic narrative. By comparing the show to similar sitcoms such as *Fat Actress* as well as serious reality programming such as *Intervention* and made-for-television movies, it becomes clear that while *Starved* may push the viewer to confront the horror of the disease, it fails not only to create empathetic characters and situations but also is unable to make audiences laugh.*

“Belt Tighteners is not affiliated with any twelve-step group or dieting program. We believe we need a more radical solution to arrest our eating problems. By creating a community of accountability and shame, we don’t act out.”

—*Starved*, “Pilot,” August 4, 2005

The fictional support group Belt Tighteners, at the heart of the sitcom *Starved*, is not actually supportive. As the group leader makes the introductory statement in the first episode, the viewer is alerted to how distorted and unnerving the show intends to be. After each character states

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his or her name and type of eating disorder, the entire group shouts, "It's not okay!" *Starved's* shocking content and tone prompted much discussion before the show even aired on cable channel FX in August 2005. After its debut, *Starved* was met with harsh criticism, and reviewers used their headlines to play on the way that the show used eating disorders for entertainment. For example, *The Spokesman-Review* proclaimed that FX's *Starved* was "far from nutritious," whereas Andrew Wallenstein for NPR argued that *Starved* was "not hungry for laughs." Other titles, such as *Deseret News'* "FX *Starved* for Attention" and *The New York Times'* "Looking for Humor in Americans' Struggle to Become Smaller," however, point to some of the larger critical concerns with a comedy that is based on illness and complicated by the United States' preoccupation with body size.

Although only seven episodes of *Starved* may have aired, the show was a bold experiment that challenged preconceived notions about disordered eating, anorexia, bulimia, and compulsive eating. Upsetting viewers' expectations, the show was not primarily based on women, who suffer from approximately 90% of all eating disorders. Rather, the show focused on three men and one woman who become friends after attending Belt Tighteners, the dysfunctional support group that structured the show. Comparisons to *Seinfeld* abounded, as critics noted that the group often met in a diner to share their latest dramas (Lloyd, 2005; Pierce, 2005; Wallenstein, 2005). Choosing a restaurant as a central meeting place has larger implications in *Starved* in that it becomes a space to illustrate characters' concerns with eating and food.

Each episode of *Starved* was created, written, and directed by Eric Schaeffer, and the series was based on his experiences with eating disorders, although it did eventually end up incorporating stories of the other featured cast members as well (Stanley, 2005). By using illness as the primary subject for the show, Schaeffer is encouraging the viewer to consider whether eating disorders can *ever* be considered funny. Viewers did not tune in, and the show was cancelled after its first season. Through an exploration of this rebellious and unconventional show, I examine the way eating disorders are discussed using a frank and sometimes comedic approach, rather than a more realistic take. What is most perplexing about *Starved* is not that it pushes the viewer to confront the horror of the diseases, which it certainly does as characters eat directly from the garbage, violently force themselves to throw up, and deal with crippling depression. Instead, the problems of the show lie in the fact that the characters in *Starved* are not well-rounded or fully developed, and they often come off as extremely unlikeable and are not relatable to the viewer.

Focused on four main characters, *Starved* is able to show a variety of different types of eating disorders and relationships with food. Sam (played by Eric Schaeffer) is a Wall Street executive who suffers from anorexia and binges on chocolate Ne-Mo cakes in times of emotional turmoil. He

is sometimes in love with the bisexual Billie (played by Laura Benati), who was a dancer and is now a singer. She is a recovering anorexic and bulimic who is now using alcohol, and even exercise, as a crutch. Sterling K. Brown portrays Adam, a bulimic who uses his position as a police officer to accept bribes and steal large quantities of food. He eventually gets caught vomiting on the job, using his nightstick to induce the purge. Last, Del Pentecost is Dan, an obsessive overeater. Dan repeatedly postpones his gastric bypass surgery in favor of eating large quantities of donuts.

A key recurring and defining element of the show is Belt Tighteners. The unnamed group leader, played by the fantastic Jackie Hoffman, is constantly insulting the group members, often using a mob mentality to verbally assault those who are confessing their missteps. Written and directed by Eric Schaeffer, the pilot (which aired on August 4, 2005) takes advantage of the stereotypical support group structure, whereby each member says his or her name, issue, and recent struggle with illness. Adam admits his bulimia and shares the depths of his disease by saying, "I ate 212 almonds last night really fast and then puked them back up so they were kinda still whole. I just washed them off and ate them again. I've seen dogs do it." The leader is disgusted, telling him, "You're repugnant and weak. And I'm this close to calling a group conscience to kick you out. You lack commitment and you've been warned." Obsessive overeater Dan is next. He does not seem as upset as Adam, as he tells the group, "I feel pretty good this morning because I have my appointment for gastric bypass surgery in two days." But the group knows better, and the leader shames him: "How many times have you blown off your surgery? Twenty? Thirty? You're a fat pussy and you'll never do it." Sam, simultaneously anorexic and a compulsive eater/binger/exerciser, recounts his recent desperate devouring of a chocolate cake from a trash can. Again, the response is harsh, as the leader bluntly tells him, "If you were a dog, I'd kick you in the face." The viewer, unfortunately, doesn't get to hear the acerbic response to Billie's idea of weighing her laxatives as a way to keep track of them.

The group's self-described use of "accountability and shame" distinguishes *Starved* from many other discussions and documentaries that focus on the necessity and importance of treatment and support. This is the antithesis of *Intervention*, a reality program that also premiered in 2005 and attempted to help people with addiction. The format of the show was simple and consistent. The family would submit the story of an addict who needed help. Under the guise of filming a show about addiction, the subject would be interviewed and their disease—be it alcoholism, drug addiction, gambling, or some type of eating disorder—would be clearly defined. The family, with the guidance of a specialist, would stage an intervention, during which the addict would be offered in-patient treatment at a recovery center. The show, which ended in the summer of 2013, had an extremely high recovery rate of about 75%, in contrast with typical treatment clinics, which

have long-term rate recovery of 15% (Lynch, 2011). *Intervention's* incorporation of eating disorders along with addicts is problematic, however, because the treatment for eating disorders does not typically involve an intervention, and no study has yet been conducted to determine whether this type of approach is actually successful (Kosovski & Smith, 2011).

At the heart of *Intervention* is the family and close friends who *want* to help this person, which differs greatly from *Starved*. Only Billie's dads make an appearance in the show, and her contentious relationship with them is one of the main triggers that spurs her alcoholism. Of the four main characters, they are rarely afforded any type of support and are certainly not pushed to seek treatment. Instead, their friendships and relationships are often based on offering whatever support is needed at the time—which is often to maintain their eating disorder. The exception to this occurs in the last episode (“The Breatharians,” which aired on September 15, 2005), when Sam has discovered that Adam has been deceptive, as he confesses in group therapy, “I’ve been lying about my abstinence. I’ve been binging and throwing up this whole time. I got suspended from my job and I’m really ready to ask for help and do this thing for real. And I hope that all of you, but especially my friends, will forgive me. Thank you.” It is unsurprising that the unnamed leader is appalled, pressing the others to join her in a chant of “Kick him out! Kick him out!” Billie steps in, noting how courageous Adam was being, while Sam also tells the leader to shut up. In this rare moment, the four seem to actually be supporting Adam and promoting healthy behaviors. Later in the episode, the characters attend an Overeaters Anonymous meeting with the exception of Sam, who has suffered a major setback with his eating disorder.

This proactive action is amplified when Dan makes the decision to go to a camp to lose weight, since his heart is no longer healthy enough to receive the surgery. The physical and mental health of Billie and Adam are less clear, but it seems like they are attempting to take better care of themselves at the end of the final episode. Billie seeks solace in her burgeoning relationship, while Adam retreats to the comfort and security of his fictional girlfriend. The episode ends, however, with Sam weighing himself. Dissatisfied with the number on the scale, he takes out his anger about his body on the scale, destroying it with a hammer. He retreats to his couch, binging on the Ne-Mo cake.

While the featured characters have moments where they show depth and emotional integrity, the audience is never given that same view of Sam. He is not just an anorexic but also a narcissist whose treatment of the women is deplorable. For example, in one scene in the pilot, he pushes his girlfriend to give him a blowjob. When she points out he has not asked her anything about her day and life, he reluctantly asks her a few questions. Yet, he can only stay interested or, more specifically, turned on if she speaks in a British accent in order to fulfill his fantasy of morphing the woman into his ideal

woman embodied by a British model. All the while, he continues to push her to finish the sex act. Sam's despicable behavior is consistently evidence of his overwhelming and all-consuming selfishness.

Later in the series, Billie, acting as the voice of reason and potentially expressing the opinion of the viewer, questions Sam, "Do you ever wake up in the middle of the night screaming in terror, realizing that you are you?" ("Scrotal Origami," which aired on August 18, 2005). Many critics and reviewers were concerned about how this show would portray anorexics and, certainly, having the main character behave in such an extreme way can be seen as reinforcing negative perceptions of anorexics. The National Eating Disorders Association actually called for a boycott of the show, with CEO Lynn Greffe claiming, "This appalling and reprehensible program 'Starved' is starved for any empathy toward those affected by the illness. . . . Americans wouldn't find it acceptable to ridicule and mock people with physical disabilities or a disease like leukemia and I don't believe they'll find it tolerable to satirize mental illness" (National Eating Disorders Association, 2005).

And certainly, the number of people who suffered from eating disorders in 2005 was alarming. At the time that *Starved* aired, 10 million females and one million males struggled with anorexia and bulimia. Even more, upwards of 25 million people struggle with disordered eating. Anorexia nervosa has the highest mortality rate of any mental illness, with females aged 15-24 suffering from a death rate twelve times higher than that among healthy females (Hudson, Hiripi, Pope, & Kessler, 2007; Renfrew Center Foundation for Eating Disorders, 2003). These statistics featured prominently in calls to boycott the show, and they are backed by a number of prominent eating disorder studies as well. While it is unclear the effect that *Starved* actually had on those who suffer from eating disorders, Shawn Katterman and Kelly Klump have determined that the show did not affect the perception of people with eating disorders (2010).

Besides the incorrect postulation that it would increase the negative stigma against those with eating disorders, I would argue that one of the other main concerns regarding *Starved*—that it is helpful to anorexics or bulimics by sharing different techniques and tips—is also unfitting. The show, while relying on exaggerated attempts at losing weight (e.g., extreme colonics in one memorable episode) and scenes of bingeing and purging, does not focus on how the actors deal with the main side effects of their diseases. Furthermore, the popularity of pro-anorexia and pro-bulimia websites, which started in the early 1990s, persists, so information regarding how to purge, or ways to lose just a couple more pounds, is easier to find than ever before (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007; Borzekowski, Schenk, Wilson, & Peebles, 2010; Norris, Boydell, Pinhas, & Katzman, 2006).

Lauren Greenfield's documentary *Thin* (2006), which was much more explicit in its in-depth portrayal of an eating disorder treatment center, did not receive the same manner of critical attention as *Starved*. Andi Zeisler

addressed how direct the documentary was, stating, “*Thin*, with its unsparing shots of shivering girls cocooned in blankets, doesn’t glamorize anything about eating disorders. *Starved*, despite being billed as a more food-obsessed *Seinfeld*, seemed designed to disgust” (2007, p. 51). *Starved* did not have any kind of moral agenda, nor did it hope to help others with an eating disorder. Regardless, a show with such a sensitive topic is often held to higher standards, subject to a careful evaluation of how it presents its material, particularly when it comes to promoting behaviors that lead to or exemplify eating disorders. Zeisler (2007) acknowledges this, noting that “there will always be people who take their cues from any bit of media that attacks the subject of eating disorders. What’s true for the future of these movies and books might be what many people have said about pornography: The crucial thing is not to make less of it, but to make it better. And better, in this case, means less appealing. Here’s hoping” (Zeisler, 2007, p. 53).

Lifetime movies and family programming have attempted to follow Zeisler’s advice regarding eating disorders. They go into great detail about the negative side effects that accompany eating disorders, much more so than *Starved*. Many of these television movies rely on a narrative arc that follows their lead character before, during, and after her eating disorder, and because of that, these movies often focus substantially on how the characters are losing the weight, even providing insight as to how to deal with nosy parents and well-meaning doctors. Over the past 20 years, *Lifetime* has repeatedly returned to these themes with, for example, *When Friendship Kills*, also known as *A Secret Between Friends: A Moment of Truth Movie* (1996), *Perfect Body* (1997), *Sharing the Secret* (2000), and *Dying to Dance* (2001). Actress Christina Ricci claims that she learned all about anorexia and eating disorder behavior from television movies, elaborating, “I did get all my tips from a Tracey Gold *Lifetime* movie on anorexia. It taught me what to do. There was also one on HBO, starring Calista Flockhart when she was really young. She was bulimic and anorexic. She’d vomit into Tupperware containers and keep them in her closet. It was so crazy to me that for some reason it was appealing” (Haynes, 2002, p. 138). Here, Ricci is referring to *For the Love of Nancy* (1994) and an episode of HBO’s *Lifestories: Families in Crisis* entitled “The Secret Life of Mary Margret.” Ricci and many other girls have turned to these types of films for hints about how to have and hide an eating disorder. While scenes do occur where we see characters binge or purge on *Starved*, the show does not focus on the techniques. Many of the instances shown are so extreme and over the top they are not actually helpful for the ordinary person. These are often played for humor, functioning as slapstick. This is a show that is intending to be comedic and is *clearly* meant for an adult audience; in that vein, *Starved* has a much different appeal than *Lifetime* movies or after-school specials.

The cable network FX green-lit *Starved*, hoping to build on their reputation for pushing the boundaries of the original programming that cable

channels could air (Sepinwall, 2013). Seeing success with *Nip/Tuck*, *Rescue Me*, and *The Shield*, the network hoped to compete with the risqué nature of HBO (McCabe & Akass, 2007). *Starved* debuted following the premiere of *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, and FX clearly hoped that the raunchy, edgy quality of the two shows would create a powerful comedy block. Neither show attracted great reviews, but most of the vitriol was directed toward *Starved*. *The Spokesman-Review* declared, “Unfortunately, outside of therapy, all of these characters, particularly Sam, lurch into areas of petty self-absorption that cross the line between quirky and distinctly unlikeable” (2005, para. 5), and Neil Osterweil of CNN proclaimed, “‘Starved’ is a tasteless, exploitive travesty that mocks people with serious, life-threatening eating disorders” (2005, para. 2). It was clear that of the new and returning shows on FX, *Starved* was the riskiest, but it also was the biggest failure of the season. By comparison to the rest of FX’s original programming, *Starved*’s 680,000 viewers falls below its fellow new show *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*’s 750,000 and pales in comparison significantly to FX stalwart *Nip/Tuck*’s 2.6 million viewers (Martin, 2005). In prioritizing edginess, it appears that FX got caught up in the push to get the most attention for their willingness to take chances, even if it meant sacrificing quality along the way.

Similarly, Kirstie Alley’s show *Fat Actress* received tough criticism. Debuting in March 2005, just a few months before *Starved*, the press had been discussing the project for months. Alley had landed the deal the previous year, and Showtime relied on the personality of the star to build buzz for the show—and that she did. Having gained a significant amount of weight after successful runs on *Cheers* and *Veronica’s Closet*, Alley had struggled to get jobs with the same kind of notoriety. This show provided her an opportunity to use her weight to her advantage, and the improvised sitcom was centered on an extreme caricature of the actress herself when, in reality, Alley defined the show as taking about 20% of its material from her own life (Gold, 2004). The mock-documentary was created with the intent of critiquing the way larger women struggle to succeed in American television and film. Yet, as Catherine Orenstein articulates, “What she illustrated is not the impossibility of a fat woman having a career in Hollywood, but rather the centrality of weight to a woman’s cultural identity. A fat woman can carry a hit show, but only if it’s about her size” (2005, p. 47).

Fat Actress is an important comparison to *Starved*, as both shows were based on the lives and behaviors of the lead actor. Alley and Schaeffer brought their issues with food and their bodies to their respective projects. From interviews and from the shows themselves, it is clear that neither one has resolved their position on their bodies. Schaeffer has continued to express concerns about his weight and his body in interviews after *Starved*’s cancellation, making note of bingeing and constant yoga practices. Shortly after the show’s end, he went public with his search to find a wife,

chronicling it first in a blog and then later in a book, *I Can't Believe I'm Still Single* (2007), and another little-seen television show of the same title on Showtime from 2008 to 2010. While his weight was not the primary focus of his work at that time, it's grip on his life and livelihood is very apparent.

More directly and similarly, in an interview with *People*, months before *Fat Actress* had debuted but had already been filmed, Alley made very clear the complicated relationship she has with her body: "I don't want to be the demigoddess to fat people. I just noticed that I was fat and now that I've noticed, that's it. My goal is that in March, when my show is released, I'm skinny" (Gold, 2004, para. 5). She continues to clarify how she feels about fatness by saying, "I don't think fat is pretty. . . . It doesn't look sleek or stealth. It looks funny. I think that's why people through history laugh at fat people. They're round and funny-looking. I'm funny-looking" (Gold, 2004, para. 7). This position is also epitomized by Alley's relationship to weight-loss company Jenny Craig. In the opening scene of the *Fat Actress* pilot ("Big Butts," which aired on March 7, 2005), Alley is distraught about her weight and only perks up when her agent calls to say he has a job for her. To her dismay, its Jenny Craig and they want her to be their spokesperson and she quickly hangs up on her agent. After the show had been filmed, she actually *was* contacted by Jenny Craig and went on to serve as the company's spokesperson from 2005 to 2008.

Both Eric Schaeffer and Kirstie Alley attempted to use their quirks, hang-ups, and concerns about body image to recapture their early successes, be it Schaeffer's well-known indie films including *If Lucy Fell* or Alley's success on *Cheers*. Yet, neither actor found success with these endeavors. Many people, including Alley and the show's producers, figured *Fat Actress* would get a second season pick-up, and Showtime even rushed production of the first season DVDs. However, the critical attention was not all positive, and Alley's success by losing weight with Jenny Craig undoubtedly spelled trouble for a show with "fat" in its title. Schaeffer's failure, on the other hand, was less related to his body size and more related to the unlikeability of his "character" and, potentially, himself.

However, it is equally important that neither show really addressed the idea of redemption with its central character. From Kirstie Alley resorting to sleeping with Jeff Zucker, then head of NBC, in an attempt to get a new television show in the final episode of *Fat Actress* ("Hold This," which aired on April 18, 2005) to Sam binge eating Ne-Mo cakes after Billie rejects him ("The Breatharians," which aired on September 15, 2005), the viewer is not allowed a fulfilling conclusion. Sam is never shown actually making progress on his eating disorder or his narcissistic behavior. While it might seem like he makes strides with regard his feelings about food, by the end of the seven episodes he is still obsessed with Ne-Mo cakes above all else. Furthermore, his intense and problematic treatment of women persists, and even intensifies, over the course of the season.

Schaeffer has also failed to create a character for himself that inspires empathy in the audience. Rather than being able to root for Sam, it becomes easy to root *against* him. Unlike the powerful and memorable anti-heroes Don Draper of *Mad Men* and Walter White of *Breaking Bad*, Schaeffer focuses on Sam's pathetic inability to get his life together. He never seems to have success at love, friendship, or health, nor does he seem to even get close. Instead, he is always struggling, flailing about to try to get his life together and continuing to make detrimental and often unbelievable decisions. What makes Draper and White appealing is the tension the viewer feels; that is, the conflict between wanting the character to get his life together while also hoping that he gets caught for his terrible behavior. In contrast, Sam's words and behaviors become so outrageous and so hurtful that it is impossible to desire his success.

This failure to grow and develop over the course of an episode or a season contrasts directly with *Intervention* and even *The Biggest Loser*, which premiered in 2004. In each of these endeavors, the main figures all attempt to seek help and treatment, which creates an empathetic relationship between the viewer and the contestant or participant. These reality shows and competitions also present a very formulaic approach to the narrative as participants/contestants are given clear goals and offered the ways and means to achieve them. It does not even seem to matter if the participants succeed, because in their attempts to get treatment they are seeking betterment (Jones, 2010; Kosovski & Smith, 2011). While obviously these reality shows differ from the sitcom approach, the success of these programs relies on the successes and failures of their participants, whereas *Fat Actress* and *Starved* do not encourage the viewer to invest in their characters. Both shows rely on the hope that the sardonic wit and satire will sustain viewership.

And yet, does *Starved* make the viewer laugh? From the critical responses, it is clear that for most people it does not. Wendy Solomon (2005) briefly and importantly related humor theorist John Morreall's theories to Schaeffer and *Starved*. Morreall (2007) has suggested that the person with the disease (in this case an eating disorder) can offer the viewer permission to laugh because they have the experience of the illness themselves. But Eric Schaeffer struggles to find a comedic middle ground, whereas other shows that deal with illness, such as *The Big C* or *United States of Tara*, are able to succeed. Perhaps this is because eating disorders and disordered eating are commonly misunderstood, whereby the sufferer is perceived as making poor choices and the depth of the disorder is not fully comprehended (Bordo, 2004; Brumberg, 2000; Gooldin, 2008). Schaeffer does not attempt to address the complicated misconceptions about eating disorders; instead, he relies on slapstick elements and vicious, derisive remarks made by the lead character to both strangers and friends. While perhaps joking can create a permissiveness to laugh, Paul Lewis has argued that when joking is "combined with potentially unwelcome ideas, this seductive and playfully

nudging permission is exactly what can trigger resistance, as a listener steps back from the implied assertion that it's okay to laugh about the subject at hand" (2006, p. 14). It is in this space that the viewer often ends up while watching *Starved*, unable to see the humor because of the extreme repulsiveness that is being shown.

At the center of the show are people who are incapable of freeing themselves from their addictions and diseases, and yet the audience is only given glimpses of the way the disease shapes the characters' lives. Rarely is the viewer actually clued into the motivation or causes of the eating disorders. Instead, we often only see the triggers and their results, such as when Sam professes his love to Billie in the episode "3D" (which aired on August 18, 2005). He only does this upon catching Billie drunkenly making out with a woman whom he desires. In a rage at his manipulative actions, Billie asks him to tell her the color of the wrapper on a Ne-Mo cake, and Sam quickly responds with the exacting answer of yellow with black and blue writing. Turning her head away from him and directly to the camera, she then asks him about the color of her eyes. Sam answers brown, but the camera clearly shows that her eyes are green.

Billie has clearly illustrated that Sam cannot be in love with her completely as he is too consumed with his eating disorder. Describing him as an "active junkie," she draws attention to the all-consuming nature of eating disorders. Sam tries to defend himself and his actions, claiming that real life is messy but that it should not matter as they are in love with each other. That is not enough for Billie, however, and she says the only way for them to be together would be for him to "break-up" with his cakes—specifically, no binging for 90 days. Immediately after agreeing to stop eating Ne-Mo cakes, Sam goes to convenience store after convenience store to find some of the cakes. When unable to find them at a store, he heads to his office where his secretary has stored some in a locked drawer. Seeing him struggle and fight to get his beloved cake is not funny; rather, it is pathetic, even upsetting. At the end of this episode, and, as we have seen, at the conclusion of the series, Sam's (and by logical extension, Eric Schaeffer's) problematic relationship to food takes priority over everything else in his life. This is someone who is in the throws of a serious medical problem. For Schaeffer, who seems to be so caught up in the disease himself, he cannot see beyond the illness to create comedy out of the situation. At least for *Starved*, it seems that "it's not okay" to try to create comedy that relies on the drama and turmoil created by those living with eating disorders.

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