

Agency to Autophagy: Exploring the Representation of Eating Disorders in *Swallow* and *In My Skin*

Brittney Norton

ABSTRACT

Disordered eating has become a common trope in film, television, and literature, and it is often associated with the horror genre. Both Marina de Van's *In My Skin* (2002) and Carlo Mirabella-Davis's *Swallow* (2019) explore eating disorders characterized by a lack of personal agency and control. Although these films' female protagonists react to their respective situations in differing ways, the films offer viewers a vicarious experience immersed in the symbology of disordered eating. Employing scholarship from a variety of fields, including film studies, eating disorder research, and body horror theory, this study addresses the phenomenon as represented in both films. The behaviors of Esther in *In My Skin* demonstrate an experience of bodily mutilation deeply connected to that of those suffering from eating disorders; those of Hunter in *Swallow* display similar elements, though differences abound in her "style" of disordered eating. Ultimately, lack of agency and control are the catalysts for the characters' bouts of disordered eating, as evidenced through their careers (or lack thereof), their male relationships, and their female relationships. These elements reveal that lack of bodily awareness and disassociation, particularly in moments of consumption, can lead to disordered eating behaviors.

The horror genre in film abounds in themes and motifs surrounding *embodiment*, a component often dubbed “body horror.” The recent films *In My Skin* and *Swallow* contribute to the body horror subgenre in their complex representations of disordered eating. *In My Skin* follows Esther, a young woman blossoming in her career who appears happy, fulfilled, and engaged in meaningful relationships. But when she injures her leg, she falls into a disturbing pattern of self-mutilation and *autocannibalism*. Consequently, she must face her addictions or give in to them completely. *Swallow* presents Hunter, a newly-pregnant young woman married to an exceedingly wealthy executive. Control of her life is consumed by the opinions of her husband and in-laws, leading Hunter to develop an eating disorder that drives her to eat unusual, inedible objects. Events decline rapidly, and Hunter is faced with the decision of whether to give in to her family or claim control over her own life.

Both Esther and Hunter demonstrate patterns of disordered eating. While Hunter is medically diagnosed with *pica* (PIE-kuh), Esther manages to fly under the medical radar despite her obvious struggles, only undergoing medical care for her initial leg injury, a pre-mutilation following the wreck of her car. While Esther’s and Hunter’s ages are not specifically given, one can assume that Esther is in her thirties, Hunter in her late twenties or early thirties. Each is white and presumably straight, with a male partner—conventional media portrayals. Hunter is given the clear diagnosis of *pica*, thus “eating items that are not typically thought of as food and that do not contain significant nutritional value, such as hair, dirt, and paint chips” (NEDA). *Pica* commonly affects pregnant women (Cleveland Clinic). Esther’s behavioral patterns are more nuanced and leave room for interpretation, yet some of Esther’s actions can fit into the category of binge eating disorder. Zoab Tharwani defines binge eating disorder as “persistent episodes of uncontrollable consumption of oddly heavy quantities of food in a short span, typically followed by remorse, shame, and emotional distress” that are “related to [bulimia nervosa] as a maladaptive behavior,” with characteristics “frequently displayed as a result of starvation, impulsiveness, and cue learning, along with a result of harmful episodes involving periods of starvation followed by binge eating” (1). Esther, as seen in the hotel room scene, indulges in large quantities of flesh rapidly, in a single sitting, a loss of personal agency stemming from a mind-body disconnection at an uncomfortable business dinner.

Binge eating disorder is characterized by overeating, clinically defined as “the consumption of a substantial quantity of food rapidly while feeling uncontrollable”; typically the person engaged in the eating is left feeling disgusted and shameful after the over-indulging (Tharwani 2). Curiously, neither Esther and Hunter appears to feel these emotions. Each seems to portray a serenity at finally giving in to the urges. This variety of binge eating, when coupled with “inappropriate methods of making up for the extra calories consumed [,] is the hallmark of [bulimia nervosa]” Tharwani 2). While Hunter is seen vomiting on occasion, she never attempts to reverse digestion of what she has consumed. In fact, the object of consumption returns after her refusal to eat it. Tharwani explains that these forms of eating disorders are heavily associated with depression, self-hatred, anxiety, and guilt, all of which can present as comorbid with self-destructive behaviors, as evidenced by Esther’s and Hunter’s actions (3).

Steve Macfarlane, in a 2002 interview, posed an intriguing question to De Van. “When I first saw *Dans ma peau*,” he asked, “I wondered if it wasn’t a metaphor for drug addiction, or—as some have theorized—anorexia?” De Van vehemently retorted:

It’s not a metaphor. It’s my story...I insisted on the feeling surrounding self-mutilation, which is feeling like your body doesn’t belong to you.... So explaining the movie, my thesis was: a woman feels her body is not her own, and the only way she knows how to reconnect is through pain. It was not an act of destruction or hate. It was a way to feel that you are whole, and that you are alive.

De Van herself has noted her film is not a metaphorical representation of either drug addiction nor anorexia. Yet much scholarship for the film’s use of *cinéma du corps* hinges on its impact on the spectator. De Van did indeed experience bodily mutilation. She personally dealt with self-harm as depicted in the film. Carlo Mirabella-Davis used a similarly personal approach. In an interview with Jez Stoker, Mirabella-Davis explained:

Swallow was inspired by the life of my grandmother, a homemaker in the 1950s in an unhappy marriage who developed various rituals of control... she was looking for order in a life she felt increasingly powerless in. My grandfather... put her into a mental institution where she was given electroshock therapy, insulin shock therapy (the inducement of medical comas), and a non-consensual bilateral lobotomy... I always felt there was something punitive about the way my grandmother was treated, that she was being punished for not living up to society's expectations of what they felt a wife or a mother should be. (Borrowing Tape)

Both De Van and Mirabella-Davis wrote and directed deeply personal films, taking big hits financially to stay true to their stories. Tales of such a personal nature are sure to have a strong effect on viewers, especially if a viewer can relate experiences of their own, finding resonance in the film's impact.

Tim Palmer argues that the ultimate significance of *cinéma du corps* is the broad impact it has on the spectator. He posits that the impact does not need to be disturbing, as is often assumed, and that the spectator is rather a "profoundly active participant" (179). Palmer further examines the idea that, while other *cinéma du corps* films highlight violence between characters, De Van embodies "corporeal malaise through self-mutilation" (175). Similarly, Angela Failler explains that to observe these scenes is to get "glimpses into a rather private suffering," and more specifically, that they "operate to inform the spectator's understanding of self-harm in the absence of other kinds of encounters" (12).

Failler's main argument is that the spectator must move past "dominant readings of self-harm that view it as destructive behavior with solely negative consequences" and understand that "for those who practice it, self-harm serves as a means of survival"—an argument that holds true for both *In My Skin* and *Swallow* (12). Failler posits that such self-harm serves as a means of self-protection—something both Esther and Hunter desperately try to achieve as their agency and sense of control slips away. Failler explains that "mediatized accounts" of self-harm allow viewers the chance to consider a relationship between self-harm and the spectator, a key consideration between the two films. Scholar Greg Hainge further explores the relationship between film and viewer by establishing that both flesh and wounds are seen through the character's physical representation as well as the image as seen by the audience through their own metaphorical understanding (567).

Eating disorders often are manifested through emotional distress and traumatic events, each of which are evinced by Esther and Hunter. Carina Stopenski posits that within body horror, female protagonists create a "dichotomous space of both feminism and anti-feminism, agency and oppression" and that, through this space, the "female mutilator [can] actualize her identity" (1). I argue that Esther and Hunter employ this concept through disordered eating, to actualize their identities and gain a sense of control over their lives when they feel that control is slipping away (metaphorically for Esther, situationally for Hunter). The attempt to gain control is a hallmark cause of burgeoning eating disorders. Stopenski points out that the "erotic feminine grotesque" is "particularly jarring" (7). This concept is most applicable to De Van's film, as Esther consumes herself in a deeply sensuous, even sexual, manner in the hotel scene, and heavier still in the final scenes as she documents her mutilation process. She behaves in ways considered traditionally feminine while simultaneously mutilating herself in an extreme, disturbing manner.

If Esther's femininity and disconcerting behavior are dichotomous, landing at extreme ends of the spectrum, Hunter's behaviors are more nuanced. Hunter maintains a traditionally "feminine" daintiness. She is not working as a career woman in a "boy's club," and she maintains a home for her husband. While Esther takes aggressive, animalistic bites from her flesh, Hunter, maintaining her dainty self-conception, consumes small objects individually. She suffers as a traditional housewife is expected to suffer: in silence. Her attempts to exert control remain quiet and internal, while Esther's attempts are loud and external. Both women centralize their femininity, albeit in different ways. Stopenski argues that "the female mutilator is a feminist icon in her own right" as she recognizes her mistreatment, or lack of control, and takes steps, good or bad, to rectify the situation (16).

Researchers have found a "close connection between dysregulated dopamine levels and

the symptoms of eating disorders,” indicating that, to Esther’s and Hunter’s brains, their behaviors are self-protecting, possibly even saving them from their lack of control (Tharwani 7). When asked why she has eaten such dangerous objects, Hunter replies, “It made me feel in control.” This feeling of control allows Hunter to activate her agency and remove herself from the abusive situation; for Esther, viewers are not offered a resolution.

To examine the notion of control further, it is important to consider the male relationships and interactions that Esther and Hunter experience. Carrie Tarr posits that this kind of behavior can be an argument for “woman’s response to the patriarchal world around her” (70) and that a self-mutilating woman can be seen as a “form of rebellion against the constraints of...patriarchal society” (71). This juxtaposition forces the viewer to ask if this action is a “bold and necessary act of female defiance” or a sign that a woman’s mental health has plummeted to unknown depths. The men surrounding Esther and Hunter are, I argue, the highest form of control-reduction for the two women. Esther experiences lack of control in her career sphere as she is groped by her boss while seeking a promotion, and upon receiving that promotion is thrown into a pool, fully clothed, by a group of her male colleagues—arguably a metaphorical rape scene. Once she is established in a new role, Esther faces backlash from her male boss after struggling through an awkward client dinner. Esther’s boyfriend, Vincent, cannot handle Esther’s emotions; he shuts down and does not supply her with any assistance, even when he knows she is struggling.

Hunter, too, faces extreme issues with the men in her life in the domestic sphere. Her stability lies entirely in the financial resources of her husband and father-in-law, which leaves her with few options. As her situation begins to spiral, and her struggle with pica hospitalizes her for the second time, both her in-laws and Ritchie, her husband, tell her that (rather than ask her if) she will be going to an in-patient care facility. Her father-in-law declares, “if she won’t go, Richie wants a divorce.” Her father-in-law is even present, alongside Ritchie, at Hunter’s first psychiatry appointment. While clearly under the thumb of his father, Ritchie is still guilty in his poor treatment of Hunter. He shares with many of his colleagues that Hunter is struggling with disordered eating, and when confronted by an upset Hunter, he cruelly exclaims, “Can you please not ruin my birthday?” as if Hunter is the one at fault for the discomfort at the party. Certainly Hunter, even before marrying into such a sadistic family, has already had a trauma involving an abusive man, considering that her biological father raped her mother—an act resulting in Hunter’s birth. And one cannot discuss the male relationships without bringing up the caveat of Louis. While viewers may find him initially off-putting, he is the reason Hunter is able to escape. One could argue of Louis’s role that a male savior was necessary for Hunter’s escape.

Tarr asserts that a “disaffected heroine” will “actively (and violently) reject the male-ordered social world” (78), and when viewing these films through the lens of a male-ordered social world, one must also consider the way relationships between women function in these films. For Esther, there are two main women with whom she interacts: Sandrine and the female client. The female client represents an extension of the male-centered career sphere, and while she may be intended to serve as a gap between the two represented genders, she does not meet Esther on any womanly level and remains stoically business-oriented. Sandrine, while serving as a traditional female friend, does not offer Esther necessary support as Esther’s disordered patterns continue to blossom. She is jealous of Esther, particularly for things that have a focus in a male-oriented sphere, such as her career and the attention she receives from the men around her. Sandrine even ignores Esther’s pleas for help when their colleagues throw Esther in the pool.

While Esther’s self-mutilation is more visually apparent than Hunter’s, it is Hunter’s lack of agency in her relationships that are most disturbingly, painfully obvious. Hunter’s mother has relegated her to a “less-than child” due to the trauma of her conception, and as such, Hunter experiences this loss of agency very early on. With her mother-in-law, Hunter faces constant scrutiny on her daily activities, her appearance, and her finances. She tells Hunter that “Richie likes his girls with long hair” and suggests Hunter change her appearance. She also makes insulting remarks regarding Hunter’s career choices and lack of financial stability. In one of the biggest betrayals, Hunter learns that her psychiatrist is working directly with Ritchie and his family behind her back, revealing confidential information. As soon as Hunter has finally created a stable and

beneficial connection to another woman, the rug is cruelly pulled from beneath her. Much like Sandrine and the business client, the women in Hunter's life operate as cogs in the machine of a male-centered world, and both Hunter and Esther are continually chewed up.

With an understanding of the relationships that remove agency from both women, one can consider the mind-body divide, and how such a divide creates an avenue for disordered eating. The opening scenes to both films immediately inform the viewers of the cognitive separation occur. In *My Skin* showcases staunchly juxtaposed images of office spaces and cityscapes in a split-screen format that feel jumpy and disjointed, appearing inverted or negative. *Swallow* takes an approach that can leave the viewer with whiplash. The opening scene is serene, clean, crisp, and beautiful—a morning of slow chores and getting dressed in fine clothes. The scene changes to a hay-bedded barn where a lamb is slaughtered, rapidly diverging into scenes depicting blood and raw meat. Both opening scenes evoke a disjointed experience that will be replicated through the disconnection between mind and body in Esther and Hunter, which leads to disordered eating.

Both films highlight painfully awkward dinner scenes in which Esther and Hunter respectively lapse into unusual trances, accentuating their separation from their physical condition as they feel unheard and invalidated by their dinner companions. Both women experience these trance-like states—Esther at her plate of food and Hunter at her ice water—until they submit to their impulsive yearnings. Hunter aggressively grabs a chunk of ice and aggressively chews, while Esther, experiencing the loss of a phantom limb, stabs and slices at her own arm under cover of the table. All other parties are uncomfortably aware that an odd moment is transpiring for the women, but none speaks on it or even acknowledges it. At this point in the respective films, Esther has already been yielding to these urges, while Hunter experiences this uncanny urge for the first time.

In a triggering situation, an increase of tension leading to a momentary and severe form of mind-body disconnect in the disordered eater can result in rash decisions and impulsive behavior. Esther experiences this disconnection as she sits at the table. While she experiences a “normal” level of mind-body disconnect throughout the course of the film, there are three moments that specifically enter the heightened state that leads Esther into disturbing scenes: the aforementioned dinner scene, the hotel scene, and the photography scene. As with binge eating disorder, Esther is full to bursting with the urge to act on her addictions, and when she finally gives in, she experiences a sexual, nearly euphoric sense of relief in finally surrendering. These acts leave her once again entranced as she comes down from the high of the surrender.

Much like the medical diagnosis of pica for Hunter, *Swallow* verbally addresses the mind-body divide experienced by Hunter. As her mother-in-law teaches Hunter how to process produce in a juicer, she informs Hunter that her struggle with pica is simply a disconnection between her mind and her body and that, upon re-establishing the mind-body connection, her woes will cease. The use of a specific food as a means to directly solve an eating disorder is a common behavior for sufferers; however, as seen in the movie, this is never at the behest of a medical professional and proliferates solely in eating disorder circles.

Often those suffering from eating disorders fail to understand the true damage they are doing to their bodies, lost in a dreamscape of rectifying their perceived problems while lacking awareness of the problems they are in turn creating. Both Esther and Hunter fall into this mental trap. Esther, in an attempt to reclaim her bodily autonomy, fails to feel any sensation of pain while she stabs and chews; both the doctor and Vincent comment on her lack of response to a problematic injury. After her initial leg injury, Esther suggests going out for drinks instead of getting medical attention quickly. As Kath Dooley observes regarding Esther's lack of pain:

One could view Esther's problem as representative of a mind/body divide: required to be 'all mind' in the corporate world, she lacks the ability to feel the pain of her serious and graphically presented wound as her body is literally disconnected from her brain. Her body's nerve centre, one that registers and processes such sensations, has broken down. According to this reading of the film, the narrative involves a drive to overcome this problem and reconcile Esther's position as both object (body) and subject (mind). (59)

Dooley's argument equally applies to Hunter, who is convinced that she has her struggle with pica under control while consuming objects including a thumb tack, a jack, and even a battery. When

her therapist addresses the dangers of swallowing a battery, Hunter is unfazed. The troublesome pattern continues even further when, emotionally pushed to the brink, she attempts to consume a small screwdriver. Like the three heightened scenes involving Esther, this scene represents Hunter's climactic submission to her self-destructive urges. Unfortunately for Hunter, this action does not bring about a rush of relief, but sends her to the hospital, in a dire state. Such is the case, sadly, for many suffering from eating disorders.

Through large- and small-scale life events, women are stripped of control and personal agency, which can ultimately lead them to deal with their emotional distress through patterns of disordered eating. Esther's career sphere, Hunter's domestic sphere, and their relationships with both men and women who work in the male-centered world are the catalysts that drive these women to the edge and leave them searching for an avenue of relief and a way to gain a sense of control. Both women begin this process by acting out in ways that allow them to stay grounded, albeit problematically. Esther maims only non-visible portions of her body, and Hunter begins with small, unobtrusive items such as marbles. As the addiction of each character grows, their need to feed it becomes stronger. To them, this need is not simply an act of addiction, but representative of the change they deeply desire to see in their lives. By the end of the films, neither woman has a concrete plan, and both have escaped into new, unknown realms. These ending scenes are highly representative of the outcomes that those with eating disorders face. In Hunter's case, she removes herself from the violent and horrifying Ritchie and his family, escapes to a hotel room and "cleanses" herself, both mentally and physically, by confronting her biological father and by aborting the fetus. The viewer is left to assume that Hunter will be okay and will move on to better things. Esther chooses to take a different path. Although she removes herself from Vincent and her career, she leans more heavily into self-mutilation, and the viewer is left to question whether Esther will pull through—or if she will succumb, once again, to her maddening addiction.

Works Cited

- Bassett, Lucy, and Maya Ewart. "Discrepancies Between Media Portrayals and Actual Demographics of Eating Disorders in TV and Film: Implications of Representation." *Journal of Eating Disorders*, vol. 11, no. 1, 18 Sept. 2023, pp. 1–4, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40337-023-00892-y>
- Bray, Abigail. "The Edible Woman: Reading/Eating Disorders and Femininity." *Media Information Australia*, vol. 72, no. 1, May 1994, pp. 4–10, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878x9407200103>
- Brinkema, Eugenie. "To Cut, to Split, to Touch, to Eat, As of a Body or a Text." *Angelaki: The Journal of Theoretical Humanities*, vol. 14, no. 3, Dec. 2009, pp. 131–145, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09697250903407658>
- Chareyron, Romain. "Horror and the Body: Understanding the Reworking of the Genre in Marina de Van's *Dans Ma Peau/In My Skin* (2001)." *Imaginations: Journal of Cross-Cultural Image Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, 22 Aug. 2013, pp. 70–81, <https://doi.org/10.17742/image.scandal.4-1.9>.
- Coulthard, Lisa, and Chelsea Birks. "Desublimating Monstrous Desire: The Horror of Gender in New Extremist Cinema." *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 25, no. 4, 18 Feb. 2015, pp. 461–476, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2015.1011100>.
- Dooley, Kath. "Navigating the Mind/Body Divide: The Female Cannibal in French Films *Grave* (Raw, 2016), *Dans Ma Peau* (In My Skin, 2002) and *Trouble Every Day* (2001)." *Gender and Contemporary Horror in Film*, 25 Feb. 2019, pp. 53–66, <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-78769-897-020191005>.
- Failler, Angela. "Narrative Skin Repair: Bearing Witness to Representations of Self-Harm." *ESC: English Studies in Canada*, vol. 34, no. 1, Mar. 2008, pp. 11–28, <https://doi.org/10.1353/esc.0.0110>.
- Kozma, Alicia. "Mapping the Monstrous: The Horrific Female Body in the Films of the New French Extremism." *International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts 33rd Annual Conference*, Mar. 2012, pp. 1–7.
- Lowenstein, Adam. "Feminine Horror: The Embodied Surrealism of *In My Skin*." *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, edited by Barry Keith Grant, 2nd ed., University of Texas Press, Austin, TX, pp. 470–487.
- Macfarlane, Steve. "Pieces of Me: Marina de Van Talks with Steve Macfarlane." *Screen Slate*, 2 Aug. 2022, www.screenslate.com/articles/pieces-me-marina-de-van-talks-steve-macfarlane.
- Media Funhouse. "Marina de Van on Her Film *In My Skin*." *YouTube*, 2003, www.youtube.com/watch?v=tcV1vfrOec.
- Palmer, Tim. "Under Your Skin: Marina de Van and The Contemporary French Cinéma du Corps." *Studies in French Cinema*, vol. 6, no. 3, Jan. 2007, pp. 171–181, https://doi.org/10.1386/sfci.6.3.171_1.
- "Pica: What It Is, Causes, Symptoms & Treatment." *Cleveland Clinic*, 7 Aug. 2025,

- my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/22944-pica.
- “PICA: Symptoms, Treatment & Support.” *National Eating Disorders Association*, 7 Nov. 2025, www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/pica/.
- Reyes, Xavier Aldana. “Body Horror.” *The Cambridge Companion to American Horror*, edited by Stephen Shapiro and Mark Storey, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2022, pp. 107–119.
- Stoker, Jez. “Swallow - Interview with Film Writer/Director Carlo Mirabella-Davis.” *Borrowing Tape*, 7 May 2022, borrowingtape.com/interviews/swallow-interview-film-writer-director-carlo-mirabella-davis.
- Stopenski, Carina. “Exploring Mutilation: Women, Affect, and the Body Horror Genre.” *SIC - a Journal of Literature, Culture and Literary Translation*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1 June 2022, pp. 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.15291/sic/2.12.lc.1>.
- Tarr, Carrie. “Mutilating and Mutilated Bodies: Women’s Takes on “Extreme” French Cinema.” *Visions of Struggle in Women’s Filmmaking in the Mediterranean*, edited by Laura Mulvey, 1st ed., 2010, pp. 63–80.
- Tharwani, Zoaib Habib, et al. “Exploring the Link between Dopamine Dysregulation and Eating Disorders: A Narrative Review.” *Journal of Neuroendocrinology*, vol. 37, no. 10, 23 July 2025, pp. 1–9, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jne.70070>.