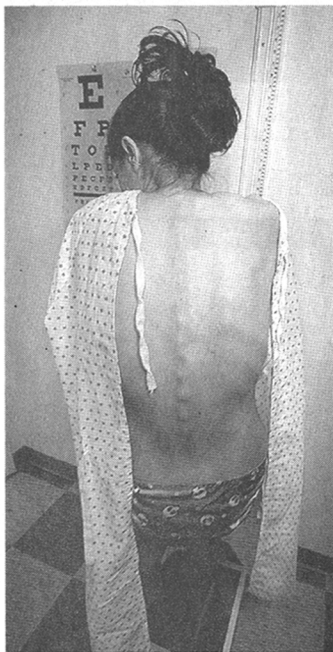


The New York Times

Copyright © 2006 The New York Times

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 14, 2006

Yes, You Can Be Too Thin, and Treatment Can Be Heavy-Handed



Lauren Greenfield/HBO Documentary Films

A young woman battling anorexia on HBO's documentary "Thin."

"Thin" could have been "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" for women, a rousing parable about the extinction of individual souls by American institutions.

VIRGINIA HEFFERNAN

TELEVISION REVIEW

But the HBO production, which appears tonight, is a documentary by a compassionate and detached photographer, and not a novel by an inflamed polemicist, and thus its point of view is more passive-aggressive than Ken Kesey's.

That's O.K. The upthorn hands of the filmmaker, Lauren Greenfield, come through anyway: clearly the treatment for anorexia, even at the Renfrew Center in Florida, one of the plushest eating-disorders clinics in the country, is exasperating. Infuriating, even.

Women and girls are tossed out of Renfrew when their insurance runs out, or for trumped-up boarding-school-style infractions of rules that have nothing to do with putting on weight and leading joyful lives, and everything to do with tyranny and

convoluted recovery-movement styles of deploying power. "Thin" is a melodrama. Every viewer should put aside his or her feelings about anorexia and try to imagine being shipped to a place like this for a habit turned obsessive and destructive — work, exercise, housecleaning — and see how the institutional condescension might come across.

Nurse Ratched's frank wickedness would almost be a relief in the context of the fake sympathy displayed here. During their stay at this dopey, well-meaning place, the emaciated patients are treated to patronizing encouragement, a capricious merits-and-demerits system and open contempt.

These impressionable patients are also force-fed weird jargon about the primacy of the "community" (officious nurses, patients, orderlies, therapists and nutritionists they have to endure for months at most) and its "safety." Many don't seem to mind this, although the viewer can't help wishing that they had more food and fun, and fewer lectures and tribunals.

Thin

HBO, tonight at 9, Eastern and Pacific times; 8, Central time.

Directed by Lauren Greenfield; R. J. Cutler, Ms. Greenfield, Amanda Micheli and Ted Skillman, producers; Ms. Micheli, director of photography; edited by Kate Amend; original music by Mirian Cutler. For HBO: Lisa Heller, senior producer; Sheila Nevins, executive producer.

Moreover, the "integrity" of the patients, which mostly means their willingness to rat out fellow inmates for common young-women stuff like swearing, smoking in the bathroom, getting tattoos and trading prescription pills, is constantly called into question. It's exhausting. And after all this restraining of their evil ways, the women can only conclude that they are undisciplined, depraved and out of control, though to look at their gaunt forms and hear about their seriousness of purpose, you can hardly imagine that willpower is what they lack.

Ms. Greenfield shows many scenes that are out of view of the

staff. We see Brittany's lunch with her mother, who talks about nothing but her own food restrictions.

There's Polly's trip to the tattoo parlor, where the tattooist advises her to eat six small meals a day if she wants to lose weight. And finally there's Alisa's laborious puke session as soon as she's discharged. These scenes strongly suggest that Renfrew is missing the point.

The biggest problem at the hospital may be the profoundly simple-minded responses of the staff to the patients. One staff member calls a patient a "bad seed"; another calls a patient "sneaky," and says, "I don't trust her as far as I can throw her."

Why do these so-called professionals talk like carping schoolmarm? Anorexics notoriously inspire annoyance in other people; it's not clear why. Maybe, in their self-discipline, they make the rest of us feel slovenly. (Interestingly, many of the staff members are overweight.) Or maybe it's just depressing to see someone do herself in.

But people who treat anorexics must overcome that distaste. It's not

just Mr. Kesey's heroic madmen who deserve our patriotic sympathies for their anti-institutionalism. As "Thin" makes clear, the quirky girls with their calorie obsessions and their steadfast determination to resist life's imperatives are impressively powerful too.

The rare moments when the patients smile suggest that a decent therapist or a friend might be able to help these women without so much chastisement. Brittany clearly enjoys the food mischief of her mother; maybe they come together in less destructive, but equally vain, pursuits, like makeup or shopping.

When Polly and Shelly flop around on a bed together, they seem joyful. Clearly both need some irreverent slumber-party friendships. And when the beautiful and charismatic Alisa talks in a kind of solemn, self-assured way about life's lessons, she becomes happy. HBO's Web site, HBO.com, says she has recovered (after a post-Renfrew relapse) and become a teacher. Like little else here, that seems absolutely right.