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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.58215/ella.64>

Monsters: Comics and Eating Disorders



Abstract

Through a performative and interdisciplinary approach, the video essay *Monsters* invites viewers to consider the unique ability of comics to represent mental states of young adults and children who struggle with eating disorders (EDs). We use close readings of a selection of panels from two Norwegian comics, the graphic short story “Sulten” (Hunger/Hungry, Neverdahl, 2007) and the graphic novel *Hva skjedde egentlig med deg?* (What Really Happened to You?) (Jordahl, 2020), to reframe utterances made by ED-patients during therapy. This reframing, which is both literal and metaphoric, is meant to illustrate how

comics can create a sensorial space where the difficult emotions associated with EDs can be heard, felt, recognized and articulated. Given the puzzling nature and the social taboo of EDs, the video essay and the accompanying statement bring attention to the therapeutic and pedagogic possibilities inherent in comics like those discussed.

Keywords: comics; eating disorders; psychic concretism; enactment; video essay; stylistic analysis

Academic guiding text

Monsters is the result of an interdisciplinary collaboration between a literature scholar (Dancus) and a psychologist researcher (Coman) who use the performative mode of the video essay to explore how comics afford unique insights about the embodied experience of living with an eating disorder (ED). Starting from sentences uttered by ED patients during therapy (special nurse M. V. Farstad, personal correspondence with Coman, March 17, 2023), the video essay juxtaposes examples from two Norwegian comics where the main character struggles with EDs: the short story «Sulten» (Hunger/Hungry, Neverdahl, 2007) about a young woman and the novel *Hva skjedde egentlig med deg?* (What Really Happened to You?) (Jordahl, 2020) about the eleven-year old Janne. The video essay invites the viewer to consider how comics can help reframe the way we understand and talk about EDs, and what pedagogic and therapeutic possibilities are inherent in the medium of comics.

Eating Disorders and Psychic Concretism

Recent statistics suggest that EDs are widespread, yet taboo among the Norwegian population. A nation-wide study published in 2023 shows that one out of seven Norwegians have, or have had, an ED, only one out of six ask for help, while six out of ten see EDs as a serious problem in the society (Wold, 2023). According to another study, EDs have been on the rise among Norwegian children and youth following the COVID-19 pandemic, with a doubling of reported cases in the specialist health services for the age group 13-16 and almost a tripling in the age group 6-12 (Surén et al., 2022). This public health trend requires increased competencies from the health services, which need to keep up with the demand, but also from pedagogues and close family, who may be puzzled by the relentless preoccupation

with food and the body, and distraught over the unwillingness and/or hesitation to get professional help.

A multitude of factors contribute to the onset of EDs: genetics, childhood and early adolescent experiences, personality traits and comorbid mental health conditions, gender, socio-economic status, ethnic minority background, body image, social influence, and the practicing of elite sports (Barakat et al., 2023). Different theoretical and clinical approaches to understanding etiology and treating EDs exist (Barakat et al., 2023; Hay, 2020), however, for the purpose of this essay, we have found mentalization to be a fruitful theoretical framework (Simonsen, 2020). From a developmental perspective, clinicians tie the pathology of EDs to an underlying difficulty to mentalize, here defined as the mental process by which an individual implicitly and explicitly interprets the actions of himself and others as meaningful on the basis of intentional mental states (Bateman & Fonagy, 2004, in Cucchi, 2018). Mentalization can play out differently in the different types of EDs, individuals cross over and shift between diagnoses, yet emotional dysregulation is a common denominator (Kelton-Locke, 2016; Simonsen, 2020). Mentalization deficits make individuals with EDs vulnerable to dysfunctional ways of dealing with inner tension and emotions (Simonsen, 2020). One mode of impaired mentalization is hypomentalizing, defined as extreme difficulty in developing complex models of the minds of others or the self and linked to a concrete, or psychic equivalent mode of functioning (Fonagy et al., 2016). In EDs, and predominantly in anorexia, this deficiency plays out such that feelings of sadness and emptiness can become intertwined or reduced to bodily sensations, while restricting or bingeing food, or excessive exercise, become concrete ways to regulate difficult emotions, an example of hypomentalization and psychic concretism (Kelton-Locke, 2016).

Therapeutic interventions for EDs oriented towards mentalization deficiencies target specifically the improvement of understanding of own states as well as others' perspectives, as these seem to correlate with symptom improvement (Kelton-Locke, 2016). In this video essay, we wanted to explore the potential in comics' visual and concrete language to challenge a state of psychic concretism.

Comics and Concretism

While EDs affect women and men of all ages, we direct attention to comics that show how children and young adults with EDs can be trapped into psychic concretism. Nordic comics enjoy a growing popularity among young readers in Norway, which may put works like “Sulten” and *Hva skjedde egentlig med deg?* in a special position to communicate with children and youth in ways that medical discourse and life narratives in prose as well as public debates on social media about EDs cannot. In both these comics, most conspicuous is a monster that creeps on, feeds on and grows inside the body of the main character. Referring to EDs as a monster is a common metaphor in prose about anorexia (Venkatesan & Peter, 2021). In the two comics we analyze, the monster metaphor becomes very concrete: a bulky, slimy creature with hollow eyes that shadows and torments the main character. Following comics scholar Elisabeth el Refaie (2019) and other scholarship in graphic medicine (Venkatesan, Peter, 2021, MK Czerwicz et al., 2015), the video essay highlights how comics use a range of other stylistic and spatial devices to concretize emotional states that are difficult to make sense of and articulate. We bring attention to the type and orientation of the lines (intersecting parallel, sharp, diagonal), the kinds of shapes (bulky, irregular), as well as the arrangement of the panels on the page.

These formal features map onto the psychological concretism that characterizes EDs, first and foremost anorexia, where metaphors are no longer just language tools that can symbolize affective states but become very concrete. One of the hallmarks of recovery is restored emotional and metaphoric capacities, where metaphors gain back their original linguistic and symbolic value, and the body is a tool to symbolize rather than a target of the metaphorical process (Skårderud, 2007). *Monsters* is meant as an invitation to consider how the metaphoric language of comics could have a restorative potential and bring individuals’ metaphoric capacities in the abstract domain. It also invites teachers to consider how comics afford pupils of various ages critical reflections about the phenomenology of EDs and about the socio-cultural norm of depicting EDs as a monster. Where words reach a limit, comics can create a sensorial space where emotions can be heard, felt, recognized, and articulated.

Close Analysis and Enactment Through the Video Essay

In “Sulten” and *Hva skjedde egentlig med deg?*, the bathroom is the locus primus for the ED monster to show up. In the video essay, we juxtapose panels from two bathroom scenes and put them under the magnifying glass. This microscopic comparison is chosen to flesh out the formal features that enable comics to concretize overwhelming, muddy, and obscure psychic states. Working in a video format has further allowed the enactment of the aural dimension of the comics, for example conveyed through onomatopoeia (BLUB, RUMBLE). In our home environment, we generated a soundtrack based on the visual input in the chosen panels. We used our own bodies and objects close to us to produce the sounds we imagine hearing as we move our eyes from one panel to another (e.g., the shower, the stomach rumbling, the monstrous bubbling, the scratching and cracking noises). There is otherwise no voice and no added music, a stylistic constraint which is meant to bring attention to the silences surrounding EDs, both in therapy (Skårderud, 2007) and in the society (EDs as social taboo), but also to carve out “head space” for reflection.

In addition to exploring how the video can magnify the effects of comics, we also examined how comics impact the way in which the video essay enacts the experience of living with an ED. Comics are just as visual as they are tactile, and the tactility of hand-made comics manifests itself in a most immediate way because the line traces the presence of the comic artist’s hands on the page (Scherr, 2013). To preserve this tactility, which also ties to the profound and subtle distortions in embodiment experienced by ED patients, we mobilized the basic gestures of making comics to animate, rather than voice, the narrator in the video essay: hand-writing verbal text, hand-drawing symbols, bubbles, and other simple figures, crossing and brushing over, scribbling, and flipping pages. In this sense, the video essay traces the presence of the researcher’s body both in the aural representations of visible sound in comics and in the visual representations, which record frame-by-frame the movement of the researcher’s hands on the screen. While our animations remain rudimentary, a time-lapse of the writing, drawing, brushing, and scribbling in ProCreate, we were inspired by the critically acclaimed experimental animations *Stressed* (1994) by Karen Kelly and *Bun in the Oven* (1999) by Alys Scott Hawkins. Both use hand-drawn animation to represent the subjective experiences of accumulating stress and pregnancy.

To maintain an intertextual relationship with *Hva skjedde egentlig med deg?* and «Sulten», we used the same color palette from the sequences in the bathroom: shades of pink, blue, and grey. This aesthetic choice allows us to tap into, but also subvert the color symbolism in the comics under investigation. For example, in the video essay, we code pink as the color of the human brain rather than girlhood. This is also another example of how we seek to mobilize the aesthetics of the comics we analyze to enact rather than simply state our own arguments about the potential value of comics about EDs in an educational and therapeutic setting.

About the authors

Adriana Margareta Dancus is Professor of Norwegian at the University of South-Eastern Norway. Dancus has done research at the crossroads of affect and vulnerability studies, with a focus on contemporary comics and films from Norway and topics such as mental health, sexuality, reproduction, alcohol consumption, and multiculturalism.

Alina Coman is Associate Professor at the Department of mental health, substance use and addiction. Coman's research has explored ethical and social implications of neuroscientific knowledge. She is currently involved in course design on trauma and mental illness, and in research on effects of trauma competencies.

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