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Mary Jane Coppock
Scripps College

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**POLARIZING NARRATIVES: HARMFUL REPRESENTATIONS
OF MENTAL ILLNESS AND BIPOLAR IN POPULAR MEDIA**

by

MARY JANE COPPOCK

**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR TRAN
PROFESSOR DAVIS
PROFESSOR MACKO**

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I. History/Context

Representations of mental illness in mainstream media have historically been infantilizing and dangerous. In the last century, dominant media has perpetuated inaccurate and damaging tropes about bipolar disorder in particular, perpetuating misunderstanding and stigma. Despite this fact, art can provide an outlet through which healthy images that promote understanding and sympathy can be dispersed. My project, *Polarized*, presents a more accurate representation of the disorder and its effects on individuals who struggle with it, as well as their loved ones.

Bipolar disorders are a group of mental illnesses that cause dramatic shifts in an individual's mood, energy, thinking ability, and sexual drive. These shifts occur in a sort of cycle, and can include individual depressive, manic, and hypomanic episodes; cycles can vary in duration and frequency (www.bphope.com). In popular media, bipolar is represented in a number of different problematic ways ranging from childishness to irrational violence, which provide damaging stereotypes of the bipolar community and ultimately serve to further ostracize the bipolar community.

Bipolar stereotypes in media, to some extent, seem to be drawn along gender lines. For example, men like Bruce Robertson from John Baird's *Filth* exhibit manic symptoms that are vilified. Male characters are shown as irrational, violent, and immature forces of chaos that cause danger and detriment to their environments. Women who showcase symptoms of mania are alternately endearingly helpless, shown as quirky, cheerful individuals with a childlike view of the world. This representation is so pervasive throughout pop media that it's become a trope; the "Manic Pixie Dream Girl" (MPDG) appears in films like *500 Days of Summer* (Webb), *Garden State* (Braff), and

Elizabethtown (Crowe), usually opposite a melancholic or “sensitive” male protagonist. The MPDG displays all of the idealized characteristics of a manic episode: the euphoria, borderline delusional outlook on life, and incredibly sociable and charming personality; she’s fickle and seems to change her mind constantly, but is painted as almost endearingly dreamlike. Her supporting-character purpose is to motivate the male protagonist by giving him a thirst for life or to help him on his hero’s journey while she either needs rescuing or steps aside. In essence, the MPDG exists not for herself, and not as an independent, self-driven entity.

These depictions are problematic because each is only half of a misleading, factually skewed representation of a multifaceted, complex individual who suffers from bipolar disorder. In reality, individuals who have bipolar experience all intensities of mood manifesting in positive and negative forms, from naïve euphoria to dangerous recklessness (Jamison). The MPDG romanticizes mania (or hypomania) by omitting the real, negative aspects of the illness. In contrast, the violent male bipolar characters are monsters that cause harm to those around them even when they are outgoing and likeable to others, exhibiting behavior very similar to that of sociopaths. These are harmful because they propagate inaccurate or negative images of individuals with mental disorders rather than realistic ones. They reinforce prejudice against mentally ill individuals, and emphasize an “us versus them” othering narrative.

Historically, in mainstream society and media “there is little that affirms” disabled individuals as complex, independent, sexy beings (Erickson 42). Representations of disabled persons performing everyday tasks are instead rendered as “miserable, dependent, heroic, and entirely unattractive” (42). Even in the idealized form of the

MPDG, she is reliant on her more stable partner or love interest. This structural system of social isolation combined with personal “experiences of rejection” can lead to “the internalization of stigmatizing beliefs” and “a significant loss of self-esteem” (Wright et al, 93). Even the label ‘mentally ill’ has been shown to be tied to “three central stigma processes” that work in tandem to bring about a negative change in self-perception and a social status loss: “individual discrimination, structural discrimination, and internal social-psychological responses of the stigmatized (93). For example, “structural discrimination imposed by psychiatric care” makes it more difficult for individuals undergoing treatment to “fully acknowledge and embrace” their own sexuality and identities as sexual beings further devaluing their self-worth (93). “Direct oppression” is imposed in institutional settings such as hospitals or nursing homes, where adults are prevented from exercising basic rights such as consensual intercourse; they are “told it is against the rules to have sex at home,” and even “asked to leave if they are discovered” (Erickson 43). The cumulative effect of this structural “systematic desexualization” is borne by disabled individuals daily, and manifests in several damaging ways, including the internalization of “misguided notions [of inferiority], both sexually and in general” (43).

Variant sexual identities that defied heteronormative systems have been historically associated with mental illness as well. Psychiatrists have condemned “low-status” sexual deviancy such as “fetishism,” “transsexuality,” and “exhibitionism,” going so far as to classify them as official “mental diseases” (American Psychiatric Association, 1980; Rubin 151, 152). As a result, this judgment invokes sentiments of “mental and emotional inferiority” rather than “categories of sexual sin;” this only reinforces the idea

that mentally ill individuals aren't capable of self-awareness and therefore can't have healthy sex lives (Rubin 152). It wasn't until the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) was published in 1980 that homosexuality was removed from the official, nationally accredited list of mental disorders (Rubin 151).

Freud proposed the practice of psychoanalysis as a holistic treatment for mental illnesses, specifically to replace “sedatives and rest cures” for anxiety and depression-related disorders, and his work often addressed deviant sexual identities (*The Interpretation of Dreams* 4). In the simplest terms, Freud's psychoanalytic therapy is the act of resolving repressed emotions and experiences by bringing unconscious desires and fears into the conscious mind, where they can be properly addressed and reconciled (*The Interpretation of Dreams* 32). One part of his method was the analysis of dreams, wherein Freud believed the unconscious was made visible and unhindered; the “repression,” he surmised, comprises the “coherence” of otherwise illogical dream thoughts (*The Interpretation of Dreams* 33). Freud's psychoanalytic practice attempts to treat mental illness, specifically mood disorders (here he gives “hysteria as an example), by targeting unresolved sexual desires and fears (*The Interpretation of Dreams* 33). Notably, sexually variant identities are often addressed in Freudian theory; he's written that “no other impulse” has been so suppressed by societal standards and conformity than the “sex impulse,” which explains the prevalence of dreams with sexual stimuli (*The Interpretation of Dreams* 53). Psychoanalysis would support the idea that we repress any socially deviant tendencies (such as those historically associated with mental illness) in order to be accepted by our peers, but that these suppressions inevitably show themselves

in dreams. However, the aim of therapy in this sense is to “cure” the deviant impulses, specifically to erase them, rather than embrace them or find a healthy channel through which to exercise these compulsions (*The Interpretation of Dreams* 8).

When Freud introduced psychoanalytic theory in the early 20th century, Vienna was in the midst of a major social repression of sexual and sinful thoughts, and younger intellectuals had begun to rebel against the more traditional, archaic norms upheld by the older generations in power (Spiel 54). This sentiment spread quickly, and soon the new generation of European artists lauded Freud’s work; they were determined to expose sexuality and desire without shame or remorse in their increasingly expressive art. The young artists who eventually developed Surrealism were heavily influenced by Freudian thought, specifically his theories regarding the human unconscious. Freud postulated that dreams reveal the unconscious mind, and expose deep-seated desires, hopes and fears; this theory resonated with the artists who felt that their own societies were similarly suppressed and limited by a suffocating history of tradition.

Freud’s theories largely affected the Surrealist art movement, especially in Eastern Europe. Jindrich Styrsky was a driving force in the Czechoslovakian Surrealist movement; he played with concepts and themes from Surrealism such as erotica and mortality. Styrsky used unedited photographs to create dreamlike collages depicting graphic and sometimes disturbing images that often juxtaposed sex and death in one image (Bydžovská 3). The “provocative erotic connotations” of his quasi-pornographic work were often references to dreams that he had in the 1920’s (4). Heavily influenced by Freudian theory, he believed these dreams revealed a suppressed unconscious desire within him that needed to be released. He felt that if he analyzed his dreams through this

process, he could once again “[return] to concrete features and [achieve] a distinct individualization of the object” (4). Styrsky used naked, vulnerable photographs of women in the sex trade to reveal an unabashed fetishization of the female form; however, although some of his materials are pornography, his artworks do not come across as (purely) pornographic. Styrsky successfully changes the context of the pornographic content by juxtaposing it with other images and mediums through the process of collage. In his collection *Emilie Comes to Me in a Dream* (see Appendix a), Styrsky pastes and layers pictures over one another, and sometimes paints over the figures and landscapes to achieve his intended message. His prominent placement of the sexualized female nude in his photographs supports Freud’s statement that the erotic instinct is “by far the more conspicuous and accessible” (*The Ego and the Id* 20).

Postmodern artists found that the medium of animation served the needs of Surrealism by offering the possibility of non-representative video works. “The Clearing” (see Appendix b) is a collaborative claymation by Nathalie Djurberg (video animation) and Hans Berg (music composition). The plot follows two damsels in distress who are confined to a balcony, waiting to be rescued; ideas of reality, beauty, and sexuality are all warped and questioned as these women wait for some sort of Prince Charming character to arrive (Djurberg and Berg, *The Clearing*). Over the course of the film, the relationship between the women is queered as they seem to struggle with their sexual identities. The work has a garish superficial beauty to it, but upon further inspection, the piece carries disturbing undertones that quietly unsettle the viewer. Thematically, the work mirrors Freud’s theoretical framework as well as concepts explored in the surrealist collage art of Jindrich Štyrsky. The video meanders through a series of complex and serious topics;

specifically, it addresses fluid and repressed sexualities, existentiality, and domestic violence (Djurberg and Berg, *The Clearing*). In her claymation, Djurberg explores dreamlike states that are heavily influenced by psychoanalysis, emphasizing the human obsession with sex and hidden pleasures (Bydžovská 3). Štyrsky used his dreams to “re-evaluate” ideas about his artwork; through figments of his imagination, he was able to reconstruct concrete properties, and access novel representations and spiritual connections with objective features (3). Djurberg seems to use similar methods (such as references to Freudian theories like the Oedipus complex) to bring up contorted dreamlike memories from fairy tales we knew as children in order to critique real social constructs present in society today.

The Clearing, showcased at AROS Contemporary Art Museum in Århus, Denmark, seems almost out of place in a fine art museum due to the childlike nature of the mediums used; modeling clay tends to be excluded from traditionally ‘high art’ categories such as painting. Furthermore, the use of modeling clay with stop-motion video provides an undeniably faux-naïve quality to the work, which disarms viewers through its unexpectedly dark presentation of marginalized sexualities. The melodramatic actions and outlandish portrayals of the two women in the video serve to lighten the overall mood of the piece, and provide a superficial (although misshapen and distorted) beauty to the work that is aesthetically enticing.

In contrast to Štyrsky’s straightforward juxtapositions of death, maternity, and sexuality, Djurberg works with the nuances of feminine identity to present a sexual image of the human body “in its raw beauty and vulnerability” (*The Ego and the Id* 20). The extremely exaggerated style of the video—both in visual garishness and the overdramatic

“performances” of the clay characters—provides an unmistakable critique of society’s ideals, traditions, and concepts of beauty. Specifically, the work criticizes the hegemonic idealization of the world, mimicking colorful illusions to the point where we are aware of the (sexually) queer fantasy and find it slightly unsettling.

Another artist addressing adult themes in claymation is American animator Allison Schulnik. Schulnik employs an eerie, surreal visual style in order to achieve a beautifully tragic aesthetic similar to Djurberg’s; her treatment of movement delivers a mesmerizing animation in which constantly metamorphosing plants are given humanlike (or monster-like) qualities. Her claymation piece, entitled *Eager* (see Appendix c), features a choreographed dance performance and physically transformational flowers enacting a sort of nightmarish nature show of their own (Schulnik, *Eager*).

Similarly, Jan Svankmajer is a 20th century Czech animation artist and an incredibly influential figure in the experimental animation movement. Svankmajer animates multimedia (such as paper, clay, and food) with stop-motion video in order to endow inanimate objects with personality, thereby humanizing them and legitimizing their status as characters. While Allison Schulnik’s *Eager* appears on the surface to present a purely aesthetic representation of a dream sequence without much social criticism, some of Svankmajer’s works seem to take on other facets of Freudian theory, namely conflict of deep-seated desires and emotions. In one of Svankmajer’s surrealist works, *Passionate Dialogue* (see Appendix d), he depicts the story of a man and a woman in an impassioned relationship that eventually destroys them both. In the film, two clay people engage in abstracted intercourse, inadvertently creating a vague, shapeless form. Sadly, the mass is not welcomed upon arrival. Neither person wants

possession of the mass they've made together, be it the physical embodiment of love, as in "making love", or perhaps a fetus. The argument escalates to the point where the ex-lovers literally tear each other apart until they are reduced to a single mound that repeatedly strikes itself (Svankmajer, *Passionate Dialogue*). What is noteworthy about Svankmajer's work is how he animates the faceless, shapeless blob created out of the couple's passion. No humanlike qualities are given to this shape, and yet the way the clay moves and begs for attention and warmth from the characters is heartbreaking; it draws empathy from the audience, especially when the characters reject the mass, throwing it at each other instead in disgust (Svankmajer, *Passionate Dialogue*).

Polarized draws from the Surrealist works of Jindrich Styrsky, which were in turn largely inspired by Freudian psychoanalytic theory. The surreal, haunted style of my project is inspired and based in part on Nathalie Djurberg's, Allison Schulnik's, and Jan Svankmajer's sexually charged clay stop-motion films. Surrealist themes and images are used in my dreamlike animation in order to show the deeply affective nature of Bipolar on the psyche; the clay figures' unrealistic aesthetics will change throughout the course of the film in order to show the way it feels to experience the disorder. Similarly to how Styrsky transformed pornographic material into existential artworks, I took pornographic actions and show how sex can be a necessary part of adulthood for individuals with mental illness. Many motions in my work are choreographed, inspired by the slow, dance-like movement that drives so much of Schulnik's work; the jerky motions of the flowers in *Polarized* is reminiscent of Schulnik's anthropomorphized plants as well. I was inspired by Svankmajer's ability to endow the inanimate with life; I drew from his style to endow my personified bipolar disorder monsters with personality.

I drew inspiration from Djurberg's fantastical and over-exaggerated style in order to emphasize the enticing and misleading face of mania. I have created a series of extremely colorful flowers and creatures that could never exist in reality; these flowers grow and become more colorful when the protagonist enters her manic sequence. Additional flowers made of colorful wire also make brief appearances for a few frames each, popping in and out of the video in rapid bursts of color. The protagonist herself even grows in size, becoming more curvaceous to exemplify unrealistic Western beauty ideals and begins to exhibit traits associated with the media trope of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl (MPDG). However, as aesthetically pleasing and romantically charming as these representations seem at first, there is something quietly unsettling about them. The flowers couldn't be that garishly colored in reality; and the protagonist's manic body shape isn't something that could ever occur without surgical intervention. Although these idealized images are visually enticing, the viewer is aware that they could never really exist.

Polarized presents unrealistic expectations of mentally ill individuals in an exaggerated manner, and then contradicts them to validate the complexity of people living with mental illness. My work focuses on the intersection of disability and sexuality. Most importantly, I want to emphasize the sexual identity of individuals with mental disorders and the sexual side effects of bipolar disorders because, as Erickson writes, "People with disabilities also need to be seen and recognized as the...sexy beings we are.... 'Pride and self-love [are] mighty powerful byproducts of being admired and loved'" (48). The project is arguably pornographic, due to the plot's sexual nature, the nudity of the female protagonist, and a scene in which the two main characters express

arousal and engage in foreplay. By exhibiting sexual content, the work challenges what is considered pornographic or inappropriate; in addition, it illustrates how a relationship made dysfunctional by the protagonist's disorder can still be tender, loving, and mutually beneficial. I purposefully made the protagonist's partner ambiguously gendered in an attempt to queer the sexual narrative, and quietly problematize assumption that the relationship is heteronormative. Although it's perfectly acceptable to assume a gender identity for the partner, I don't want it to be absolutely clear whether they are male or female, thereby challenging viewers' assumptions about the intersectionality of mental illness, sexuality, and sex.

Polarized's critique of representations of disability in dominant hegemonic culture and discourse is informed by true stories and histories of mental illness. The short's narrative is fictional, inspired by my own experience as a young woman with Bipolar II and augmented with the research and memoirs of manic-depressive diagnosed clinician Kay Jamison as written in *An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness*. The film presents a more accurate representation of mood disorders, specifically bipolar disorders, including verified positive and negative symptoms and effects. The mania is initially seen as a pure euphoria, but eventually develops into destructive and disturbing behavior that causes detriment to the environment and the characters' relationship. The depression at first seems to be a relief from the hyperactive, restless mania, but becomes impossibly heavy and drowns the protagonist as well as her relationship with her significant other. The film ends on a tragic note, with the emotional and physical space between the protagonist and her partner growing as a direct result of the depression and an indirect result of the rapid shifts in mood from "normal," to manic, and finally

depressive. The protagonist is physically smothered and emotionally paralyzed by the disorder; at the end of the film, she and her partner both seem to be at a loss for a solution. This ending reflects the constant search to improve oneself and heal, and emphasizes that there isn't a simple solution to mental illness or personal demons.

Together, the style, plot, and context of the film serve to critique harmful representations of bipolar disorder in dominant media culture, and challenge viewers' assumptions about mentally ill individuals as complex, capable beings, as well as their sexual identities and relationships. It addresses the intersectionality of sexuality, mental health, and gender by drawing on art and media theories revolving around Surrealism and psychoanalysis, ultimately producing a more accurate representation of what it feels like to live with bipolar disorder.

II. Production/Reflection

Most of my process was in pre-production. It took several months just to create the studio, characters, set, plot, storyboard, and to solve all of the unforeseen problems that came up along the way before I could start filming. After all of the preparation and planning, my process was very loose and sometimes even improvised. Even though I planned out every scene in seconds, movements, and camera angles, when I got to the actual filming of the work, I would slightly change what the characters were doing to match what felt right in the moment. Mostly, I used the storyboard to plan out camera angles, so that the final work reads like an actual film, and not like a play or theater piece shot from one stationary and direct frontal angle. Nathalie Djurberg and Jan Svankmajer's videos exposed how dynamic camera angles can dramatically enhance a

film's quality, so I utilized their techniques to further engage the viewer. I still included static, straightforward shots because they allow for an uninterrupted view of movement from many different parts, like the choreographed videos of Allison Schulnik.

Filming was somewhat difficult, because it had to take place at night when there was no outside light—I needed to be in control of all of the light that was on set, so that I could control the continuity or lack thereof, depending on the scene I was shooting. Furthermore, bending over a table for hours on end making minute changes to small figurines is mentally and physically taxing. I shot the video on the application Dragonframe, which was perfect for the quality and editing that I was aiming for; it simplified the entire process immensely, and I'm not sure I would have finished if I had not bought it. I then edited and assembled the clips I exported from Dragonframe to Adobe Premiere to add sound, and added animation and keying in Adobe After Effects.

Technically, I've learned a lot about experimental stop-motion and animation in particular throughout the production process of this project. Although I have a strong background in sculpture, video art, and planning, lighting, and shooting a film sequence, before this semester I had very little experience in claymation. In addition, I'm taking animation classes concurrently with my thesis, but before this year I had no previous work in 2D digital animation. Specifically, I've learned about different frame rates and how they contribute and relate to the final video product. For example, after speed tests I decided to do my film as a 24f/s video, shooting on twos. Essentially, I take twelve different pictures for every second of footage, with each picture appearing for two consecutive frames ("shooting on two's"). This allows for a steady, standard rate that I can still play with if some parts of the scene need to move faster than others. For

instance, scenes where animals are moving are shot on one's (where each photograph only appears once, rather than twice consecutively); the characters move every other frame (they are still shot on two's), but the animals, moving at a faster rate, move every single frame. I also use one's sporadically for short falling sequences or rapid changes within the scene.

I've also gained a lot of insight into the technical impediments for shooting stop-motion. I found pre-existing systems in the media and art programs that provided technical workshops and meetings to be incredibly useful. I ran into many technical difficulties and setbacks along the way, but was able to solve them one by one by using available 5C resources and materials available to students that Scripps already has in the studio. For example, I needed to create a "studio" in which I could control every aspect of the scene, from the setting, to the lighting and surrounding visual "noise." The senior studio has a fully-black painted cubicle, and I was able to use found clamp lights, fabric, and supplies from Scripps' existing art resources to make spotlights, light diffusers, and a protected, static set. I didn't realize that there are so many things to consider that can hinder progress, whether it's the ability of the characters to stand without additional support, position and direction of the lights to minimize shadows, or even the heat of the studio with the lights melting the clay.

I solved all of these problems through trial and error. The characters were given wire skeletons so that they didn't crumple under the weight of their heads. After all of the scenes where the characters are sitting or lying down were filmed, I readjusted the wire skeletons and molded stands out of plastic pellets, painting it neon yellow so that I could key it out later in After Effects. I set up light stands, diffusers, and crossed light beams in

order to minimize the amount of shadow that shows on the clay. The clay is malleable because of the heat of the room and becomes almost unworkable under the heat of the lights, so I use them sparingly and in short periods.

I also learned a lot about animation, both as a direct result of this project and from a separate animation class I'm currently taking at Harvey Mudd College, taught by Rachel Mayeri. In Mayeri's Digital Cinema: Experimental Animation course I learned the basics of stop motion and animation software, as well as 2D animation and green screen and keying techniques. Although 2D animation is a very small part of the final video, keying out the neon stand is integral to the flow of the work, so that it looks as though the characters are walking on their own.

I had a very specific idea of how I wanted the film's audio track to sound, but didn't know where to obtain the audio. I would have a repetitive, ambient musical track with three discernable parts, each mimicking the energy of each the "normal," manic, and depressive scenes. Sound effects would ground the audio track in the visual scenes, but there would be no dialogue, so the relationship remains as ambiguous and relatable as possible. I employed a system for the sound: each time there is an impact of some sort, I would add an effect. By this logic, I applied sound effects when the manic monster bites the protagonist, when the protagonist pushes her partner on to the bed, and when the protagonist slaps her partner.

Professor Mike D'Errico from Pitzer helped me immensely with choosing the music for the film; after a few minutes of discussing what I wanted, he suggested a few different bands whose sounds matched what I was looking for. After I perused the bands, I settled on several songs by The Books' for the soundtrack. The repetitive songs are

composed of found sounds, most of them organic; they function in slowly evolving cycles that encompass calm, manic, and depressed moods. I also spoke to Professor Macko, who suggested I include binaural beats—a homeopathic sound-based therapy for anxiety and mood disorders—in the audio track of the work. This was an incredibly interesting suggestion, and the aspect of treatment was an important issue to consider addressing with the film; however, I ultimately decided against using binaural beats in the film, because therapy and medication isn't otherwise part of the project.

I received a lot of very helpful feedback along the way from faculty members and peers that pertained to and influenced the direction of my project. Visiting artist Carolina Caycedo suggested that I put more focus on the sexual aspect of the relationship, because in the discourse of bipolar disorder, that was the part she felt was least represented. Melanie Nakaue was immensely helpful in helping me solve most (if not all) of my technical difficulties. My peers in the arts and media seminars were wonderful, offering conceptual support throughout the process, because nobody else really had any experience with advanced claymation. They also helped me talk through all of my ideas, so that I could get a stronger sense of my project and had practice justifying it for presentations and walkthroughs.

In all, through this project I have developed greatly as an animation and conceptual sculptural artist, and improved dramatically in technical skill. I've also become much more eloquent and patient when engaging in discussion and dispelling myths and misunderstandings about mood disorders, and bipolar in particular. I'm very happy with the final product and am excited to produce works to accompany it in an installation next semester.

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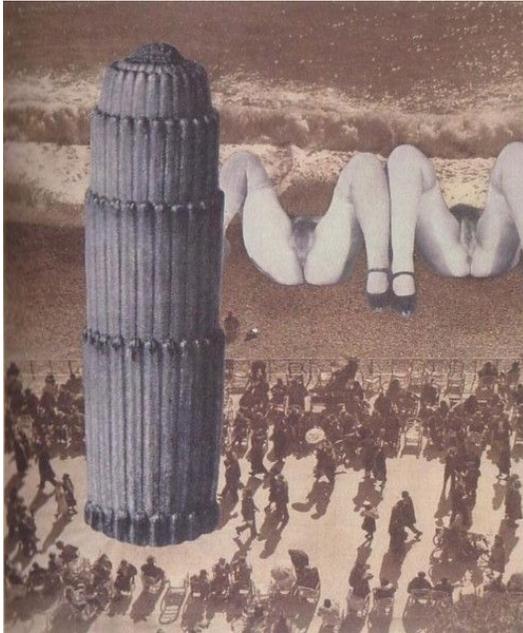
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Appendix

a) *Emilie Comes to Me in a Dream*. Jindrich Styrsky. 1931.



b) *The Clearing*. Nathalie Djurberg and Hans Berg. ARoS Aarhus Kunstmuseum (Aarhus, DK), 2015



c) *Eager*. Allison Schulnik. ZieherSmith Gallery (New York, NY), 2014.



d) *Passionate Dialogue (Dialog vášivny)*. In *Dimensions of Dialogue (Možnosti dialogu)*. Jan Svankmajer, 1982.

