

“Food Porn” as Postfeminist Play: Digital Femininity and the Female Body on Food Blogs

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Tisha Dejmanee¹

Abstract

The styling and online circulation of food photography has become a phenomenon endemic to social media. In this article, I explore this digital “food porn” within the feminized space of food blogs and contextualize it within a postfeminist culture rife with contradictions about women’s bodies, consumption, and sexuality. Drawing on postfeminist and feminist corporeal theory, I historicize the longstanding associations between food and the female body, eating and sex. I then analyze digital “food porn” as a form of women’s media production that draws on conventional representations of the female body in pornography, fashion, and popular culture. It is these qualities that distinguish digital “food porn” from “food porn” on other media platforms, and allow it to offer useful insights into the postfeminist subject’s construction of digital femininity. I maintain that digital “food porn” can be read as a playful, pleasurable, and entrepreneurial response to postfeminist contradictions.

Keywords

food porn, food blog, postfeminism, body, mild protest, new media

“Food porn” is the most prevalent of several currently circulating terms that use the marker *porn* to indicate an aesthetic of excess, such as “organizational porn,” “real estate porn,” “ruin porn,” and “disaster porn.” These examples reveal the generative use of “porn” as applicable to a diverse group of topics that seek to disassociate from pornography’s explicit sexual associations while alluding to its production qualities and focus on vivid details to evoke strong reactions in the viewer. Where “food porn”

¹University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA, USA

Corresponding Author:

Tisha Dejmanee, Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, University of Southern California, 3502 Watt Way, Los Angeles, CA 90089-0281, USA.

Email: dejmanee@usc.edu

strives to be mouth-watering (Gayman 2012; Ventura 2012), “organizational porn” is calming (Alleyne 2015), and “disaster porn” gripping (Shafer 2012). In general, and as indicated by the above topics, these “porns” are concerned with subjects that narrate the ambivalent affects of consumer capitalism. “Organizational porn”—with its color-coded, “stylized images of everyday objects stacked, laid and arranged in a neat, visually pleasing way” (Alleyne 2015)—is a representation of the battle between chaos and control that accompanies boundless consumerism, and the pleasures derived through visually and spatially curbing this consumption. “Ruin porn”—a photographic movement focusing on the subject of urban and natural ruins and decay that gained momentum in the wake of Detroit’s post-recessionary depopulation—features sites that bespeak the former glories and present failures of capitalism. These stylized collections use visual conventions and media platforms to heighten the pleasures of consumption while critiquing its resultant excess.

This article examines “food porn” in the feminized space of the food blogosphere as a digital response to contradictory discourses of hypersexuality, consumption, and the female body in postfeminist culture. I argue that the stylistic conventions of “food porn” draw on representations of the female body in pornography, fashion, and popular culture. By substituting food for the body, female food bloggers are able to displace the disciplinary postfeminist gaze from their bodies and direct it toward their creative and entrepreneurial capacity.

I focus my analysis specifically on digital “food porn” on food blogs as this genre gives most insight into the construction of the postfeminist subject on and through new media platforms. The logics of user-generated content allow female subjects to respond directly and autonomously to the conditions of postfeminism through representations of food, as distinguished from the “food porn” that has previously been analyzed in print media and on television. The food blogosphere therefore serves as an important site of feminized media production that engages with digital constructions of femininity and the female body.

I begin by historically contextualizing and defining “food porn,” tracing its evolution across media platforms. I then outline the theoretical foundations of postfeminism—which provides the context for understanding what is at stake in the production and analysis of digital “food porn”—and corporeal feminism, from which semiotic links between food and the female body, eating and sex, are derived. I offer an analysis of digital “food porn” images and styles that link “food porn” conventions to visual representations of the female body. I close by discussing the ways in which women’s production of digital “food porn” may be considered a form of mild subversion against the sexualizing disciplinary gaze of postfeminist culture. This analysis therefore addresses broader questions about the transcription of the postfeminist subject through digital culture and platforms, and the ways that digital technologies simultaneously evidence her exploitation by as well as her resistance to postfeminist discourse.

A Brief History of “Food Porn” across Media

The term *food porn* was first reported in print in 1979 when it was juxtaposed against the term *right stuff* by Michael Jacobson, the founder and executive director of the

Center for Science in the Public Interest, to connote the difference between healthy and unhealthy foods (McBride 2010, 38). Its counterpart, *gastro-porn*, emerged two years earlier in a *New York Times* review of books noting the “curious parallels between manuals on sexual techniques and manuals on the preparation of food” (Cockburn 1977).

Although “food porn” is not a new term, then, its current circulation is tied to changes in the food media landscape that have occurred since the 1990s. These changes include an exponential rise in food print media and advertising (Johnston and Baumann 2010; Miller 2006) and the increasing dominance of the Food Network since its launch in 1993. After achieving mediocre ratings through the 1990s, the Food Network visually rebranded itself in the early 2000s with evocative food styling and shot selections that could be readily analogized to pornographic conventions. For example, Newman (2013, 333) describes the network’s use of vivid imagery and close-ups as the “food equivalent of pornography’s graphic depictions of isolated body parts and sexual acts.” More explicitly, Kaufman (2005, 57) describes the pornographic conventions of an episode of Tyler Florence’s *Food 911* that he views alongside porn director Barbara Nitke: “The camera zeroed in as Tyler expertly spread raw chicken breast across a cutting board. ‘That is the quintessential pussy shot,’ Nitke said.” The Food Network’s makeover also marked a shift from professional chefs to television “personalities” as designated show hosts. Epitomized by U.S. food host Giada De Laurentiis (Buford 2006; Newman 2013), these new hosts were “usually women, who lick their fingers or use sensual terms” (McBride 2010, 38) to aid food television’s “obvious and usually facile comparisons with sex” (McBride 2010). As Chan (2003, 47) neatly summarizes, “TV cooking shows today are, in a word, pornography.”

This conception of “food porn” has at once been modified and exaggerated by digital media. Ibrahim (2015, 2) suggests that the “term ‘food porn’ is increasingly used to describe the act of styling and capturing food on mobile gadgets, eliciting an invitation to gaze and vicariously consume, and to tag images of food through digital platforms.” I would add that digital “food porn” heralds an important shift in understanding women’s complicity in the production of food styling and photography as a playful, creative, and entrepreneurial response to the prevalent representation of hypersexualized and self-disciplined female bodies in postfeminist culture.

This shift is best illustrated, albeit obliquely, in light of critiques of the validity of the term *food porn*. Krishnendu Ray (2010, 40) claims that “[o]nce you call something pornographic, you bring down moral opprobrium on it. You poison the topic and stop the discussion.” Alan Madison (2010, 40) also questions the legitimacy of the term by pointing out that sexualized/stylized images are so pervasive in media and marketing that “to single out food for this pejorative is disingenuous and hypocritical.” I nevertheless suggest that both these arguments become moot when considering digital “food porn” in the postfeminist context.

First, I argue that there is no moral opprobrium intended with the usage of “porn” as the shock value of this term has been diminished in the current sex-saturated, postfeminist context. Indeed, digital “food porn” is often couched within exaggeratedly chaste, girly, and maternal performances of heteronormative femininity. Second, I believe that

digital “food porn” can be distinguished from marketing due to its existence within the logics of user-generated content. Digital “food porn” is typically produced and published by individual amateurs. Accordingly, it is less aligned with the emotional manipulation of marketing and more with the agency and digital identity play of postfeminist subjects. Ray and Madison’s arguments against the term *food porn* are therefore anachronistic in the postfeminist context, indicating the degree to which digital “food porn” differs from historical understandings of this concept.

Food, Femininity, and Pornography in Postfeminist Culture

Postfeminism, as used in this article, refers to an ideological shift emerging in the 1990s and characterized by popular culture representations of the “‘pastness’ of feminism, whether that supposed pastness is merely noted, mourned, or celebrated” (Tasker and Negra 2007, 1). Postfeminism is largely expressed through consumption practices and the neoliberal “focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment” (Gill 2007, 149). Given this context, I seek to uncover ways in which the female subject is using digital tools to negotiate contradictory postfeminist politics.

Postfeminism offers many insights into the significance of performances of femininity on and through food blogs and “food porn,” three of which I outline below. First and foremost, “food porn” speaks to the centrality of hypersexualization to postfeminist media and subjectivity. Hypersexual postfeminist subjects “brazenly enjoy their sexuality” (McRobbie 2009, 21) as expressed through concepts such as Susan Douglas’ (2010, 13) “ironic sexism,” where overtly sexist media representations are “pushed to new, even more degrading levels, except that it’s all done with a wink,” and Ariel Levy’s (2005, 5) “raunch culture,” where a “tawdry, tarty, cartoonlike version of female sexuality has become so ubiquitous, it no longer seems particular.” Yet, hypersexuality manifests in multiple contradictions that the postfeminist subject must navigate, such as the normalization of hook-up culture and casual sex alongside concomitant attention to the threats of college rape culture, the alleged increase in women’s sexual freedom that coexists alongside abstinence-only education and the repeal of access to abortion facilities (Banet-Weiser 2014), and the increased scrutiny of both young girls and older women as sexual objects (Negra 2009).

In this sex-saturated context, where “all women’s bodies are available to be coded sexually” (Gill 2007, 150), sexuality loses much of its use as a tool for feminist analysis. Moreover, it has always been difficult to critique this “new regime of sexual meanings based on female consent, equality, participation and pleasure” (McRobbie 2009, 18) without attracting suspicion and fears of perhaps repeating the deeply divisive feminist antagonisms of the anti-porn/pro-sex factions that came to a head at the infamous Barnard Conference on Women and Sexuality in 1982. For these reasons, I draw on Elspeth Probyn’s use of eating as an analytical construct that counters this sex fatigue. As Probyn (2000, 6) writes, “[f]aced with . . . the sheer banality of sexual representation, the domain of eating is, I think, reintroducing concepts of pleasure into the realm of the popular.” That is, by exploring the metaphors long forged between

eating and sex—as evidenced in “food porn”—we may revisit these questions and critiques of female agency and embodiment in an age of pervasive sexuality and pleasure-based subjectivity.

Second, “food porn” is intertwined with postfeminism’s “obsessive preoccupation with the body,” which is presented “simultaneously as women’s source of power and as always unruly, requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodelling” (Gill 2007, 149). Digital “food porn” entails hedonistic corporeal pleasures paired with performances of conservative, girlie femininity. While this might superficially be understood as a newfound freedom from the fraught, socialized relationship between women and food, I would argue that as the rhetoric around eating and body image has shifted from dieting to health and from slenderness to fitness, so have the prevalent pathologies of eating transformed from restriction-centered anorexia and bulimia to consumption-centered binge-eating disorder and orthorexia. Accordingly, “food porn” represents a false liberation, celebrating these contemporary consumption disorders while doing little to challenge the overwhelmingly rigid standards to which women’s bodies continue to be held.

Third, “food porn” offers commentary on women’s consumption practices, being literally concerned with consumption and simultaneously signaling a shift from empowerment through consumption to empowerment through production that takes place through fetishizing women’s private-sphere, Do It Yourself (DIY) activities. Emily Matchar (2013, 5) labels this trend “new domesticity,” a “180-degree turnaround from the consumerist fantasies of the late 1990s and early 2000s” that is driven by “longing for a more authentic, meaningful life in an economically and environmentally uncertain world.” Similarly, Diane Negra (2009, 5) uses the term *retreatism* to describe recurrent popular culture depictions of the “the postfeminist subject [who] is represented as having lost herself but then (re)achieving stability . . . by ‘coming home.’”

These romanticized visions of domestic pleasure are indicated by the transmedia success of ranch wife Ree Drummond, better known as The Pioneer Woman, as well as the celebrity turn to lifestyle blogs and products by Gwyneth Paltrow, Jessica Alba, Reese Witherspoon, and Blake Lively. Food blogs tap into this DIY culture through a preference for old-fashioned and labor-intensive food production, combined with a bucolic aesthetic designed to celebrate women’s domesticity as creative, self-actualizing, and apart from urban alienation. Yet, it is important to remember that while the glamorization of these traditional performances of femininity speaks to the pleasures and “choices” available to the privileged postfeminist subject, it has also traditionally “operate[d] as a powerful device for shepherding women out of the public sphere” (Negra 2009, 5).

Food, Sex, and Violence in Postfeminist Times

Ecofeminists have long established a link between the violence and power inherent in the consumption of animals and the sexualization of the female body. Carol J. Adams outlines the systematic, patriarchal connections between eating and sex in *The Sexual Politics of Meat*. Using Margaret Homans’ term “absent referent,” Adams (2010, 13)

describes the semiotic process necessary to socially sanctify the violent practices of eating animals and sexualizing women:

Once the existence of meat is disconnected from the existence of an animal who was killed to become that “meat,” meat becomes unanchored by its original referent (the animal) . . . Animals are the absent referent in the act of meat eating; they also become the absent referent in images of women butchered, fragmented, or consumable.

Adams (2003) supports this argument in her follow-up book, *The Pornography of Meat*, which offers an extensive visual documentation of the sexualization of animals as meat, and the animalization of sexualized women. This link between food and the female body, and the object/subject power relationships connoted by eating and sexualization, are integral to contextualizing “food porn” within a history of the sexual objectification of women’s bodies, the substitutability of food and the female body, and the significance of women’s agentic, creative, and potentially parodic deployment of these pornographic visual conventions.

This connection between women’s sexualization and food consumption is exemplified in the postfeminist context through a current Carl’s Jr. ad campaign featuring scantily clad, hypersexualized women voraciously eating large, juicy burgers. This campaign inverts the approach of former burger chain ad campaigns where men prove their masculinity through the consumption of red meat, and marks a textbook example of Douglas’ ironic sexism. In this coalescence of sexual and gustatory desires, the postfeminist viewer is left desiring empowerment through her aggressive assertion of both sexual and physical appetites. In place of the secretive binge-eating, restriction, and repression that have historically and pathologically defined women’s relationship to food (Bordo 1993), postfeminist rhetoric locates women’s empowerment in the unabashed pursuit of corporeal pleasures.

Where women have long been understood as suppressing their own appetites to nurture those of their families (Bordo 1993), postfeminist food hosts—in a hyperbolically pleasurable and often sensual manner—occupy the dual positions of producer and consumer. This autoerotic self-cannibalism is epitomized by U.K. TV cook Nigella Lawson, who expresses her desire for “minimum effort for maximum pleasure, in both the cooking and the eating” in her television program *Nigella Bites* (2000, episode no. 1). Decadence and pleasure permeate Lawson’s self-presentation and her media brand, with her customary ensemble of soft curve-hugging jersey dresses; the fearless and unapologetic use of cream, butter and chocolate in her “goosey” and “unctuous” (*Nigella Bites* 2000, episode no. 1) chocolate puddings; and close-up, profile camera angles that force her to coquettishly glance sideways to meet the viewer’s gaze. These close-up shots are also useful for revealing the delight on her face as she sucks cold noodles off her fingers and licks chocolate batter off mixing spoons.

Many of Lawson’s promotional images capture her licking ice cream or catching falling strands of spaghetti in her mouth while staring assertively at the camera or, alternatively, offering food framed by and used as a metaphor for her body: a handful of ripe, round tomatoes; a bowl of sweet, juicy cherries; and a tray of dainty frosted

cupcakes with cherries on top. However, these images of feminine power so carefully cultivated by Lawson were viciously undercut in 2013 when tabloid photos were released showing Lawson being grabbed around the throat by then-husband billionaire art collector Charles Saatchi, effacing her public performances of empowering sensual pleasure with the private realities of a physically abusive intimate relationship. It is this threat of intimate violence that underwrites and most undermines the potential for empowerment from these modern expressions of feminine/postfeminist sexual agency.

In response to this state of affairs, I find evidence that food blogs and “food porn” have become forums for women’s resistance against the multiple contradictions and limitations of postfeminist culture. That is, in a context where women’s bodies continue to be gratuitously and explicitly presented as objects for sexual consumption, the blogosphere offers a platform for women to strategically, ironically, and creatively play with the representations, limits, and visibilities of the postfeminist, female body.

Dissecting Digital “Food Porn”

The digital “food porn” published on food blogs is user-generated content that showcases the digital postfeminist subject. The food blogs I examine are typically individually authored digital texts that offer original or adapted recipes that are produced by the bloggers in their home. These recipes are contextualized within intimate narratives of personal life, and great attention is paid to the aesthetics of food styling, website design, and creating a visual brand.

While food bloggers typically present themselves as amateurs—distinguishing themselves from professional food workers by focusing on their identities as wives and mothers—their professionalism is nevertheless evident in their scheduled, vast output and the high production quality of their work. This ability to embed “food porn” within a potentially lucrative self-brand (Banet-Weiser 2012) marks a key difference between bottom-up and top-down food media and in the agentic potential of “food porn.” For example, while food hosts such as Lawson and De Laurentiis purposefully deploy feminine sex appeal, their obvious backing by media corporations detracts from the narrative that they are personally empowered by these performances. Alternatively, while the work of food blogging is similarly underwritten by corporations and technology firms, bloggers generally exhibit more personal control over their digital brand and identity. For this reason, I believe it is significant that so many of them have chosen to forego sexually explicit presentations of self.

Food blogs can be contextualized within a burgeoning lifestyle blogosphere skewed toward female authorship and readership, and revolving around “women’s” topics such as motherhood, fashion, health, and crafting. Although males do participate in the food blogosphere, they are a minority. While precise demographic information on the dynamic and nebulous blogosphere is difficult to ascertain, men’s minority status might simply be inferred from the public attention the 18.9 million American women bloggers receive (Matchar 2013, 51) including the specific gendering of the blog coalition BlogHer, Technorati’s special recognition of “the influence of women and mom bloggers on the blogosphere” in their influential State of the Blogosphere report

(Technorati 2010), and comments from bloggers that the blogosphere is a “sea of estrogen” (Henry 2011) that allows the male minority to “stand out in an overwhelmingly female world” (Henry 2011). Accordingly, the food blogosphere may be characterized as a feminized genre and community.

I provide here an analysis of “food porn” to document the main stylistic conventions currently circulating in the blogosphere, as well as to underscore the ways that “food porn” metaphorically and semiotically references the sexualized female body. My analysis is drawn from my observation of selected food blog image aggregator sites—including *foodporndaily.com*, *foodgawker.com*, *tastespotting.com*, and *findingvegan.com*—and digital ethnographies of individual food blogs. I focus on more successful food blogs as indicated by analytics, mainstream media coverage, and cross-promotion within the food blogging community.

Sexualizing the Food Body

“Food porn” frequently alludes to the fluidity, messiness, and merged positions of the sexualized female body through the styling and positioning of food. This point is most clearly demonstrated through the strong aesthetic preference for food oozing in various manifestations. Oozing is present in the popped soft yolks of poached eggs which dribble onto a bed of sharp green asparagus, the molten centers bursting out of chocolate lava cakes, and the creamy frosting and sauces dripping down multi-layered cakes.

Figure 1 by blogger Nora Rušev captures the popular usage of poached eggs in the blogosphere to enact the dramatic visual effect of oozing. This image of the popped yolk dribbling over the salad is featured as the lead image, in preference to a similarly composed image with the yolk intact, which appears at the very end of the blog post. Moreover, the composition of this image centers the runny egg yolk, with its vivid yellow contrasting with the predominantly green and red salad. Drawing on the fact that the “most obvious association . . . between sex and food is the shape of the dish in question [for] even in elementary school, we knew about bananas” (Crumpacker 2006, 23), the image metaphorically evokes the female body through its focus on the egg, the neat slit cut to reveal the runny yolk, the curly fringes of the lettuce garden bed, and the sweet and soft ripeness of vivid red strawberries.

Helen Grace Ventura (2012) traces the use of oozing in food photography to a successful 2004 Marks & Spencer ad campaign where “movement and texture became the key aspects of interest. Seductive voice-overs accompanied oozing, chocolate puddings, drizzled sauces and meat being craved. Juices trickled in slow motion, intensifying the portrayal.” The immediacy and warmth of these viscous sauces were seen as an important departure from the precision and perfectionism in the detailed images published by Martha Stewart’s early food media—driven by the ethos that “[p]resentation must be attended to with care and precision” (McFeely 2000, 156–57)—and the static, still life representations of overlaid tables and ornate dishes that were popular in the second half of the twentieth century.

The demand for oozing can perhaps be attached to the need for food media audiences to consume food through external visual and auditory cues. The moment of

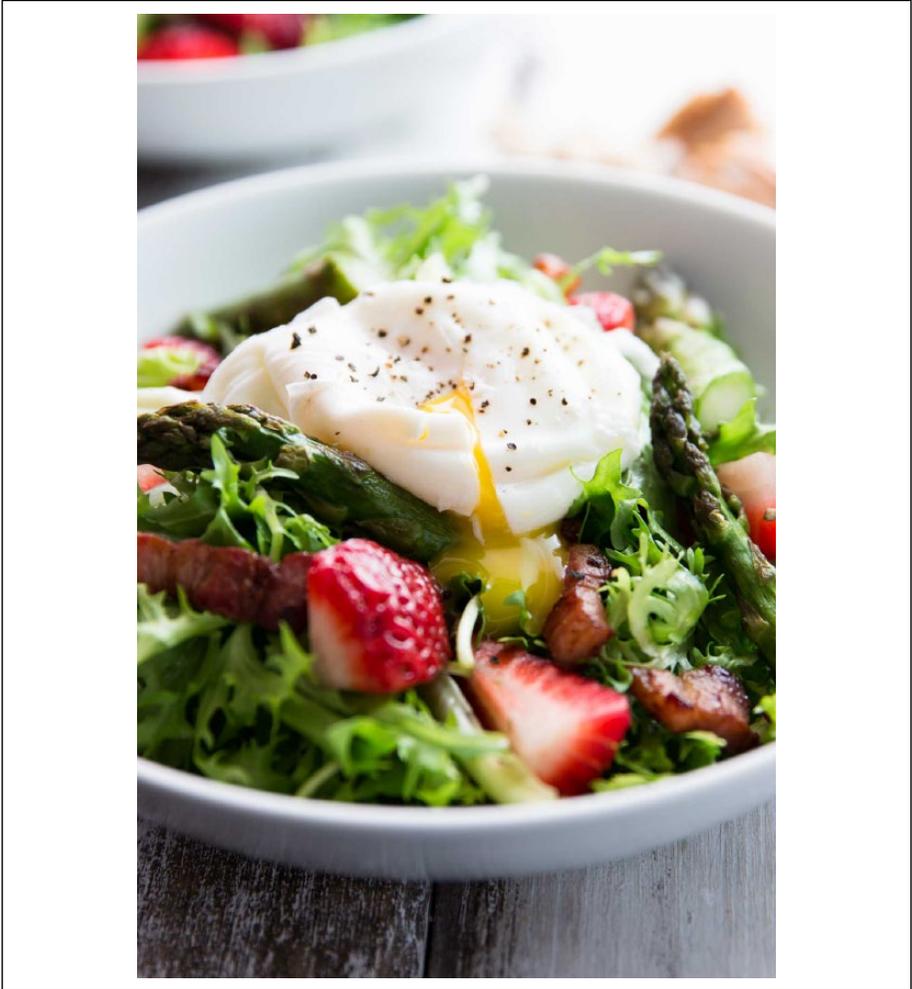


Figure 1. Asparagus, bacon, and strawberry salad with poached egg.
Source. Rusev (2015).

anticipation before the chocolate lava cake or soft-boiled egg is split open is a now tired trope for dramatic tension on food competition shows; the presence or absence of a sufficiently gooey filling is a predominant feature used to judge the technical skill of the cook and success or failure of the dish. Moreover, successfully capturing food oozing demands planning, action, and urgency. As food photographer Jonathan Gayman (2012) recounts, “I recently shot a soufflé for a magazine . . . we built the set right next to the oven, so I could shoot as soon as the soufflé came out . . . Got the money shot in three takes.” Gayman’s recollection of this task establishes the active and masculinized subject position of the photographer. Indeed, oozing literally recalls the “money



Figure 2. Purple ombre sprinkles cake.

Source. Michaelis (2011).

shot” of pornography as chocolate sauces and yolks burst to life in a manner that speaks to Susan Faludi’s description of the “on command male (erection) orgasm [that] is the central convention of the industry: all porn scenes should end with a visible ejaculation” (Faludi in Chan 2003, 52).

Despite the inherent masculinity of the pornographic money shot, the oozing portrayed here is feminized in many respects. The visual appeal of oozing lies in the way it engulfs and unifies separate elements on a plate, recalling a maternal, oceanic plentitude that binds the viewer to the screen and the image. Oozing recalls not only the stickiness and lubricated mergings of sex, but also the leakiness and fluidity particular to “the female body, which bleeds, gives birth, and produces milk” (Mizejewski 2014, 99).¹ Oozing is a visual representation of the creamy textures of typical comfort foods—mac and cheese, sticky toffee pudding, and mashed potatoes with gravy—and



Figure 3. Surprise on the inside gender reveal cake.

Source: Betty Crocker (n.d.).

it is this sense of comfort and desire for both food and the female body that is purposefully elicited by mouth-watering “food porn.”

Sexing the Food Body

“Food porn” styling aims to literally give “body” to food over the flat surface of the digital screen through compositions and angles that emphasize height, surface, and depth. Accordingly, digital “food porn” has popularized the motif of stacking food through multi-layered cakes, overstuffed burgers, and extravagantly topped cupcakes that flourish in the food blogosphere. Not only does stacking give food “body” and visual interest, but it is also suited to the affordances of digital platforms. For example, a composition of stacked or layered food encourages portrait-oriented photographs that are conducive to the vertically biased layout of Pinterest (Arias 2014).

Stacking also draws visual attention to the depth and texture of food, as exemplified in the common presentation of layer cakes with one slice removed. In figure 2, Stephanie Michaelis’s purple ombré sprinkles cake recipe, the striking cake is composed with one neat triangular slice plated in front of the viewer. This view contrasts the chaotic rainbow-colored sprinkles with the meticulously cut and shaded purple cake layers. The gravity-defying quality of this five-layer cake is further emphasized through its positioning on a cake stand that allows it to tower over the plated slice. This composition invites the viewer to participate in the fantasy that “food porn” is presented for their personal consumption and participation. The waiting slice also contributes to the sense of immediacy favored by “food porn” stylistic conventions.

The cross sections opened up by these strategically removed slices are necessary to showcase the new array of elaborate baking techniques and effects that have gripped

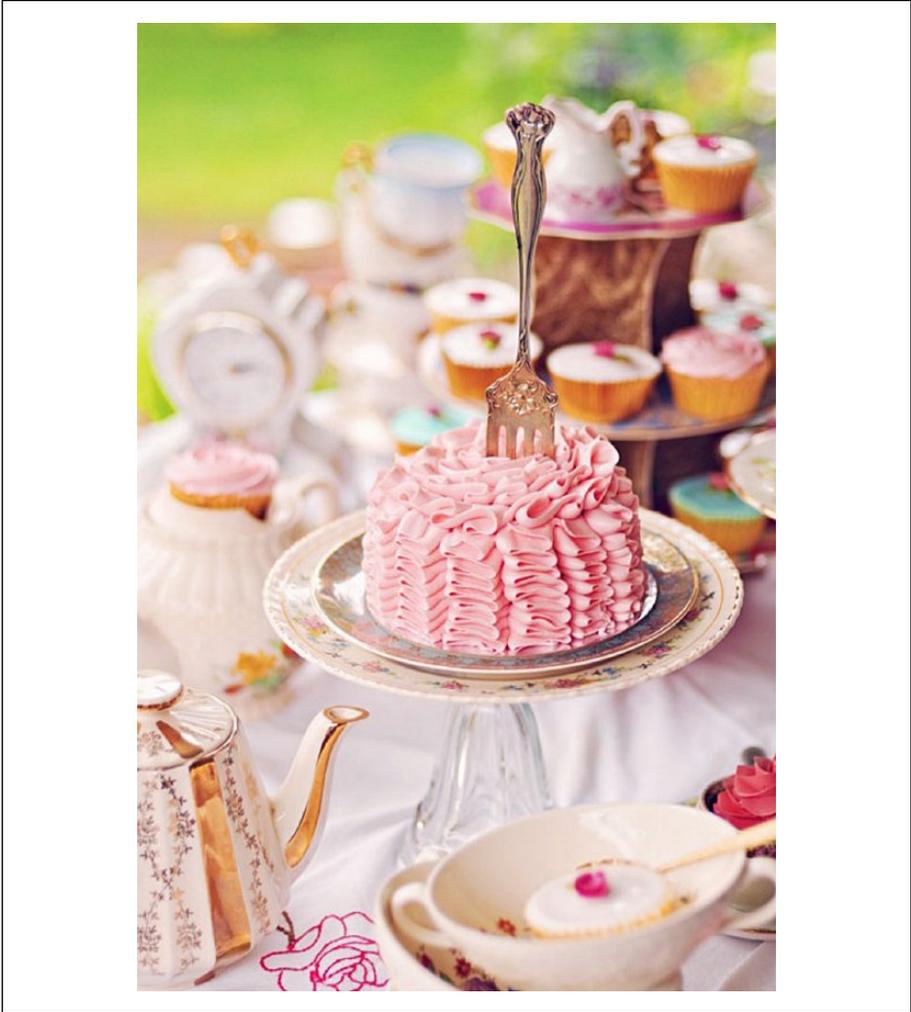


Figure 4. Ruffles and roses tea party.
Source. Alyea (2011).

the food blogosphere including checkerboard cakes, ombré and rainbow tinting, and intricate, excessive layers. To fully appreciate these skills, the viewer is forced to glance inside via a cheeky and engaging photographic angle that mimics the strategic poses of the playboy centerfold who offers a thrilling, voyeuristic peek into the “flesh” of the cake. However, in “food porn,” the erotic intimacy evoked by the centerfold is sublimated onto the ways that bloggers open up their private lives and domestic spaces for public scrutiny. Moreover, in the postfeminist context, the notion that creative skill and detailed attention must be applied not only to the superficial appearance of a cake



Figure 5. Chocolate peanut butter cake.
 Source. Perelman (2008).

but also to its internal structure parallels the increasing penetration of self-disciplinary and self-surveillance regimes into the postfeminist subject's body and intimate life.

For instance, the fashion for Brazilian waxes and labiaplasty—the surgical reduction of the labia minor and majora—exemplifies this increasingly penetrative, post-feminist disciplinary gaze and its notion that bodily discipline should extend to the vagina. As Negra (2009, 119) writes, Brazilian waxes fall under the realm of the post-feminist popularization of painful and intimate pornographic aesthetics and regimes, as a procedure that “not only stylizes the female genitalia so as to appear pre-pubescent, [but] also reflects a misogynist belief that female genitalia are excessively complex and need to be simplified . . . for the comfort and pleasure of a male sexual partner.” If these layered cakes and oozing soft-boiled eggs are accepted as metaphorical representations of intimate feminine parts, then this process of simplification and sweetening becomes literally applicable.

I also wish to extend these representations of dissected cakes to Butler's arguments about corporeal surface and depth. (Butler 2007, 186) describes “the inner truth of gender” as a fabrication that emerges “as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity” (Butler 2007, 186). This idea that binary gender is contained “inside” the body is baked to realization through the Surprise Inside Cake™, which blogger Amanda Rettke (n.d.) describes as “very simply a cake that has been decorated on the inside, and offers up a surprise when you cut into it!” These surprises include colors and patterns that are imprinted in cake batter, and cakes carved out and filled with

candy and cream. In figure 3 from the Betty Crocker website, a white butter cake is hollowed out to reveal a cache of cascading blue candies.

Such cakes are commonly adapted for gender reveal parties whose documentation is prevalent in the blogosphere and widely circulated on feminized social media including Pinterest, Etsy, and Instagram. These parties serve as a celebration that takes place after a pregnant woman has had the sex of her baby revealed by sonogram and, in the postfeminist context, can be read as evidence of the further fetishization of the hyperfeminine state of pregnancy. The party seeks out creative ways to surprise guests—and sometimes the parents—with the announcement of the unborn child's gender through cakes filled with colored batter or candy or, in a slightly more disturbing iteration, piñatas filled with pink or blue confetti that are smashed open by guests and the mother-to-be.

Gender reveal parties evidence what Gill (2007, 149) describes as the postfeminist “resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference” as gender is represented through cute binary stereotypes—Pistols or pearls? Ties or tutus? Cupcake or stud muffin?—that are reinforced through ancillary circulation via social media. These whimsical objects become visual cues that serve to celebrate a conservative and uncomplicated understanding of gender as innate. Moreover, this symbolic smashing and slicing—reminiscent of the female body's long history of penetration and invasion through medical technologies—reveals the discursive truth of gender “in” the body as narrated whimsically through cakes, candy, and the celebratory atmosphere of a surprise party.

These various baked treats and their styling are used to evoke the sexual female body by referencing the centerfold, the pregnant body, and the innately sexed body. However, these sweet food items simultaneously render the sexual female body innocuous by foregrounding girlie qualities such as hyperfeminine decorations and the excessive sweetness of elaborate cakes. This selective visibility is also applicable to the female food blogger who publishes manifold iterations of these appealing images while strategically making absent her own body in these digital texts.

Styling the Food Body

Food blogger Stephanie Shih (2012) uses the phrase “bright and propped” to describe the food blogosphere's prevalent use of shallow depth of field and light-flooded settings to produce “a style that evokes a bucolic and idyllic atmosphere by using brighter but softer light . . . and by incorporating elements beyond the food in a variety of props, more background details, and staging.” Such staging characteristically employs “colors and patterns,” “precise, delicate staging,” “full framing, with foreground and background elements,” and “vintage, rustic props” (Shih 2012). This detailed, meticulous styling recalls the traditional positioning of the female body within fashion photography.

In figure 4 by Rosie Alyea, a pink tea cake is embedded within props that intensify the romantic, feminine decoration of the cake. The table setting is predominantly white with pink accents, complementing the girlie qualities of the ruffled buttercream

frosting, the rose motif, and the garden tea party theme. This setting exudes femininity, particularly with the central positioning of the round pink cake, which is somewhat violently and unexpectedly pierced with a large, phallic antique silver fork as a reminder of the visceral nature of both sex and eating.

“Food porn’s” elaborate settings and mood building allude to the treatment of the female body in fashion magazines. As Ray (2007, 58) writes, “cuisine has a lot in common with haute couture. Cuisine happens when food enters the fashion cycle, where its fluctuations are described, debated, contested, predicted, and awaited in magazines, on television, on the Web.” As with fashion cycles, food styling replicates and circulates similar props and aesthetics, including antique silverware and distressed wooden backgrounds, bunting banners and paper straws, brightly colored and patterned napery, and white minimalist tableware, giving an indication of the close networks of influence created by the food blogosphere as well as adjacent, influential sites such as Pinterest and Etsy. Moreover, “food porn” generally evidences the excess, “superfluous and beautiful” qualities of fashion that also “bring with it obsession, waste, and playfulness” (Ray 2007, 58). Returning to Alyea’s tea party setting, a sense of abundance and extravagance is indicated through the busy and full table setting, replete with ornate tea pots, tea cups and saucers, cake stands and cupcake stands, creamers and sugar bowls, all with delicate and antique floral designs. The table brims with cake, cupcakes, and fairycakes that fill tiered cake stands and are stuffed into tea cups. It is this excess that distinguishes couture from prêt-à-porter, erotic art from pornography, and “food porn” from home cooking.

The fashionably styled female body adopts the passive object position. However, when this object position is transferred onto food and embedded into food blogs, it is possible to recognize the female body for its active and productive creative laboring, the fruits of which include digital “food porn.”

Digital Play and the Postfeminist Subject

The digital context is unique as it gives women a platform to creatively inscribe performances of femininity and the body in response to postfeminist contradictions. At the same time, while I advocate for the significance of “food porn” as a postfeminist media production, I wish to temper the heady rhetoric of user-generated content and empowering entrepreneurialism that surrounds the feminine blogosphere and social media/Web 2.0 by making clear the tendencies for the nonironic and hyperbolic reproduction of conservative, hegemonic femininity as content generated by the postfeminist “user” themselves.

“Food porn” does not challenge the notion that women’s subjectivity remains tied to the body. However, the authorial voice and influence of female food bloggers is no longer strictly tied to literal, visual representations of their bodies. While the blogger’s body or face may be depicted on the biographical About page, the visual interest of food blogs relies on images of food and an intimate, confessional tone to signal authenticity. “Food porn” therefore acts as a digital avatar for the food blogger, possessing the advantageous qualities of endless transformation and a vehicle for the guilt-free

consumption of hedonistic pleasures. Moreover, in drawing the viewer's attention to "food porn" as a media production, food bloggers force attention to the creative and productivity capacity of the female body. This subverts the typical position of women's sexual objectification in visual media. In this sense, "food porn" is successful in relieving some of the stresses of regulating the postfeminist body by allowing subjects to evade the disciplinary gaze while nevertheless adhering to prescribed performances of heteronormative femininity. Moreover, as the hypersexual expectations of the postfeminist subject are transferred onto food, food bloggers are freed to perform a comparatively asexual femininity evoked through the pairing of "food porn" with mundane recollections of domesticity, wholesome girlie pleasures and heteronormative family life.

However, it is also necessary to point out that this concept of postfeminist empowerment that is so quickly drawn upon in the entrepreneurial blogosphere must be questioned in an environment where the postfeminist subject does not simply engage in a pleasurable performance of self but increasingly exists within a compulsory "neoliberal *moral* framework, where each of us has a duty to ourselves to cultivate a self-brand" (Banet-Weiser 2012, 56). Not only do food bloggers rarely evidence overt political or radical feminist positions, but food blogs are typically only granted the success of visibility when bloggers willingly adopt the brand of the ideal postfeminist subject, performing femininity in the tradition of the White, upper-middle-class nuclear family whose lifestyle is most fetishized in the blogosphere, and affirming their fulfillment in these traditional, domesticated roles.

Furthermore, I am concerned by the ways that the material labor of the female body is erased by digital technologies and their tendency for "time-space compression" (Harvey 1989, 240) which—in the blogosphere—is designed to evoke pleasure for the viewer. This erasure is particularly evident in what Rettke (2013) names the "side by side" style of photography that is ubiquitous on Pinterest. This style references the sequential images produced by a photobooth. However, unlike the images of the photobooth—which are snapped in a matter of seconds—the side-by-side food shot is carefully curated and selectively conjoined over a number of hours or even days. The pleasure of this style is described as "[t]he beauty of . . . instant gratification. Your eyes are typically met with a larger shot that encompasses all the elements of the food." (Rettke 2013).

In figure 5, blogger Deb Perelman's post on chocolate peanut butter cake, she includes the above side-by-side sequence. The layout of these images compresses the temporality of the process of glazing this elaborate cake, as Perelman uses contemporary digital technologies to nostalgically reference the 1950s process of magical transformation wrought by "wondrous scientific discovery in which postwar America had a deep investment" (Polan 2011, 21). While the instruments of cooking are visible—a measuring cup and an offset spatula—the images crop any evidence of the human body or the hands presumably directing them. The result is a cake that seemingly frosts itself, pairing the abundance and excess of food blogs with a seemingly effortless, immaterial productivity. In this mode of representation, "new" media adopt "old"

values, repeating a long history of erasing the material investments and tedious feminized labor of food preparation.

Conclusion

In a hypersexual context in which the exploitation, regulation, and objectification of women's bodies is predictably commonplace, "food porn" plays with ideas of the pornification of the female body, while inversely generating attention toward individual and select postfeminist subjects' empowerment through creative labor. While food bloggers may not characterize the production of "food porn" as a radical feminist act, their creative, digital labor is often guided by rhetorics of pleasure and entrepreneurialism that serve as a political response in the postfeminist context.

At the same time, producing and consuming "food porn" is certainly not a radical act. Indeed, the way in which women's bodies are selectively transcribed on digital platforms run from liberating to obfuscating, and suffer from exclusions built into the technological form. Moreover, there are inherent limits to the use of food as politics for as Krishnendu Ray (2007, 56) points out, "there is something about food, which is both so essential to life and still unavailable to so many...that makes any playfulness, any degree of aestheticization, open to the charge of excess and moral decay." In a similar vein, Bruner and Hahn (2015, 214) operationalize irony on *Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution* to show how "hunger, undernourishment, food insecurity, obesity . . . are part of the larger problem of structural food oppression."

While Bruner and Hahn's use of irony works to reveal perspective by incongruity, "food porn's" relationship to femininity and the female body operates inversely through the excess and creativity of pleasure-based politics. Nevertheless, I believe in the importance of "food porn" as mild protest—drawing on Radway's (1984) pioneering use of this concept—against the conditions of hypersexuality and rigid body discipline in which the postfeminist subject is enmeshed. To be sure, such mild protest is far from the revolutionary politics for which many feminist scholars still yearn. It is flawed by its continued self-reflexive focus on the female subjects already most privileged and idealized by postfeminist culture, as well as the valence of pleasure in the current era, which often serves to guide postfeminist politics in and of itself. However, the circulation of digital "food porn" offers an opportune platform for women to dish up creative alternatives to hypersexual objectification. A further understanding of the true political impact of such work likely entails the exploration of the richness of the female relationships mediated through blogs, the feminized, entrepreneurial agency encouraged through digital tools and social media, and the gift economy of knowledge exchanged and archived within this community.

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Note

1. Linda Mizejewski's book broadly describes female comedians' juxtaposition of the unruly female body with normative femininity as the foundation for their comedy. It should also be considered that the work of contemporary comedians such as Amy Schumer and Chelsea Perretti constitutes a form of strategic and creative body play that, like "food porn," offers commentary on the limits, visibility, and representation of the female body.

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Author Biography

Tisha Dejmancee is a doctoral candidate in the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism at the University of Southern California.