Food porn, pro-anorexia and the viscerality of virtual affect: Exploring eating in cyberspace

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ABSTRACT

By engaging with 'pro-anorexia' and 'food porn' on the Internet, this paper explores eating in cyberspace. Reflecting on the ways in which virtual, but affective, consumption is central to both food porn and pro-anorexia websites, the paper asks what the act of eating 'triggers' and produces, connects and displaces. It traces how eating in, and through, cyberspace shapes the biological materialities of bodies whilst also collapsing neat distinctions between offline and online worlds. Virtual vectors of spectating, salivating and digesting are disembodied and yet corporeal. Eating is seen to take place beyond and among bodies and to be dissipated both spatially and temporally. As such, cyberspace is outside and other to lived corporeality, and yet also folded into and productive of the intimate geographies and embodied subjectivities of everyday lives. As eating takes myriad forms across the de-materialised viscerality of the Internet, it also emerges as central to the production and 'matter(ing)' of cyberspace itself; this is (an) eating space in which what is eaten, by whom and with what bodies, perpetually shifts. Thus, seeking to contribute to geographical scholarship on affect and food, this paper engages with eating as both the subject of enquiry and also as a productive pathway into an interrogation of cyberspace and its place within the affective productions of the everyday. It suggests that this is a key site in which to explore the intimate socialities, materialities and biopolitics of food.

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1. Introduction

At first glance food porn and pro-anorexia websites might seem to have little in common other than their 'location' in cyberspace. Yet, taking an interrogation of the act of eating as its focus, this paper suggests that the virtual consumption of imagised food is central to both. Beginning by exploring food porn as viewed, the discussion sets out to unearth the affective viscerality of looking at images of foods whose material presence is spatially and temporally elsewhere. This reveals such engagements to go beyond visceral viewing and constitute, instead, acts of eating. Conceptualising food porn as corporeally consumed in this way opens up an analytic pathway into an interrogation of eating itself. This has been argued to be an act that forges connections between bodies across distances (cf. Abbots and Lavis, 2013a; Probyn, 2000). Extending that work, here it is eating itself that is dis-assembled and reconnected in diverging ways; the consumption of food porn gives rise to nascent and contingent forms of eating. It emerges as an act that not only transcends and produces the materiality of

food but also that is enacted in myriad ways which stretch beyond and among bodies. As such, although recent scholarship has argued for the need to take account of eating bodies in social and cultural explorations of food (cf. Abbots and Lavis, 2013b), turning our attention to cyberspace also suggests the necessity of interrogating the uncertainty and contingency in eating's relationship to bodily materialities, as these may become dislocated. With this reconfiguring of eating in mind, the final part of the paper 'follows' (Appadurai, 1986; Cook et al., 2004, 2006) food porn into pro-anorexia websites to explore how imagised food is engaged with by participants there. Although an attention to these cyberspaces might seem to signify a focus on only one highly-specific enactment of the eating of food porn, it is one that is analytically central to this paper. How some individuals with anorexia eat in ways that bypass bodily incorporation, and the role of food porn in these processes, underpin the analysis of this paper and its theorising about eating. I have suggested elsewhere that such enactments of eating maintain an illness that is profoundly dangerous and distressing and yet which may also offer a way of being in the world to individuals affected by it (Lavis, 2013, 2015). Against the background of those discussions, and maintaining a

constant recognition of anorexia as a frequently 'miserable and life blighting' (Palmer, 2014: iii) illness, my focus here is different. This paper asks how the eating of food porn, and the ways in which this calls into question what is meant both by 'food' and 'eating,' further wider theorising of the act of eating. As such, it seeks to contribute to existing geographical enquiry into affect and food.

Ian Cook et al. has suggested that 'food is more than just an area of geographical enquiry. It offers rich, tangible entryways into almost any issue in which you might be interested' (2013: 343). Echoing more literal reflections on circulations and flows, such as those of food 'from farm to fork' (Jackson et al., 2006. See also Coles, 2013; Cook et al., 2004, 2006), one area into which food has recently offered geographers an entryway is an exploration of affect. An attention to affect in geography (cf. Anderson, 2006; Pile, 2011b; Thrift, 2004; Woodward and Lea, 2009) has included reflections on differences or slippages between affect and emotion (Dawney, 2011; Pile, 2010, 2011a) and even engagements with the molecular (McCormack, 2007). This has echoed a wider concern across the social sciences with the 'capacities to affect and be affected that give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations' (Stewart, 2007: 2. See also Clough, 2008; Clough and Halley, 2007; Massumi, 2002; Navaro-Yashin, 2012).

As such, alongside more literal interrogations of the Internet as virtual space, scholars have explored the 'virtuality' (Deleuze, 1991; see also Grosz, 2005) embedded in material life. Characterised by potentiality, this has arguably been at the heart of many geographical reflections on affects as 'virtual synesthetic perspectives anchored in (functionally limited by) the actually existing, particular things that embody them' (Massumi, 2002, 35–6. See also McCormack, 2003; Thrift, 2004). Keeping both meanings of the virtual visible, and exploring their intersections, thus, this paper will explore how eating and not eating maps materiality as virtual and the Internet as visceral.

Defined by Longhurst et al. as 'the sensations, moods and ways of being that emerge from our sensory engagement with the material and discursive environments in which we live' (2009: 334), the visceral has been argued to be a way in which to understand identity and power through the materiality of everyday experience (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy, 2008. See also Guthman, 2003; Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy, 2010). Viscerality therefore offers up the possibility of reflecting on the materiality of social relations. Elspeth Probyn, for example, has suggested that eating 'can be a mundane exposition of the visceral nature of our connectedness and distance from each other, from ourselves and from our social environment' (2000: 13).

Complementing this focus on viscerality, work beyond geography has also explored connections and relations that are produced or ruptured, mattered or displaced by eating. This has emphasised that 'in the act of placing food in the mouth, landscapes, people, objects and imaginings not only juxtapose with and fold into one another, but are also reconstituted and reordered' (Abbots and Lavis, 2013b: 5). At the level of lived coreality, moreover, eating has been argued to be both individual and yet universal (Simmel, 1994). It is integral to the continuation of selfhood and bodily integrity, whilst also being mired in cultural symbolism. As such, it has been suggested that interrogating eating may offer nuanced and inclusive ways to re-figure subjectivity and agency (Mol, 2008). Eating, thus, is an act that draws paradoxes of agency and affect, singularity and multiplicity, to the fore. By engaging with these as they are played out in cyberspace, this paper seeks to extend existing explorations of the biopolitics of food (cf. Mansfield, 2012a, 2012b; Nally, 2011). In tracing the role of eating in the productions and mediations of selves, day-to-day lives and spaces, it scopes the edges and possibilities for an intimate biopolitics of food, one both visceral and affective.

2. Methods

In order to explore eating in cyberspace, this paper draws on content analysis of 'food porn' websites and blogs (2013–2014) and participant observation and interviewing on pro-anorexia websites (2005–2013). Data from this latter are presented against the background of wider ethnographic research into individuals' lived experiences of eating disorders comprised of participant observation and interviewing in an English NHS inpatient eating disorders unit (2007–2008). Informed consent was obtained both for interviews and for participant observation in this setting, and the study received ethical approval from the NHS.

Food porn websites were identified through a scoping exercise which led to a snowballing effect as links from food porn blogs led to others and still others were identified through press coverage. Archived content on these blogs was read and noted. Pro-anorexia websites were initially scoped in a similar manner. Having identified ten pro-anorexia websites on which to focus, consent was obtained from website creators to 'hang out' and observe the processual unfolding of these spaces. Interviews were then conducted with some participants to pro-anorexia sites. These were conducted online and informed consent was obtained.[1]

The Internet has been much explored in terms of the shifting dynamics of virtual space (cf. Dodge and Kitchin, 2006; Graham, 2013; Grosz, 2001; Kinsley, 2013). Such discussions remind us that cyberspaces are not merely technologies. Rather, in these spaces, lives are lived out, and identities made and exchanged, as 'people do things' (Hine, 2000: 21). Thus, when asking 'just exactly what it is they do, and why, in their terms, they do it' (Hine, 2000 21), ethics is key. There has been much debate regarding whether websites, chat rooms, and blogs offer 'a free source of data for researchers to use, or must they negotiate access' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 213). Although there are differing views, three stances prevail (Hookway, 2008. See also Flicker et al., 2004). Some researchers argue that archived material is publicly available and therefore consent is unnecessary (see Walther, 2002). Others suggest that although online postings may be publicly accessibly, they are written with an expectation of privacy (Elgesem, 2002). The third position states that there is no clear-cut definition, but rather that the Internet is both 'publicly private' and 'privately public' (Waskul and Douglas, 1996). This latter argues for a contextual approach, with researchers taking our lead from how actors within cyberspaces themselves frame their participation. This offers up the argument that 'accessible blogs may be personal but they are not private' as they are written for an audience (Hookway, 2008: 105) in contrast to the way in which 'blogs that are interpreted by bloggers as "private" are made "friends only"' (Hookway, 2008: 105). As such, there is a 'strong case for blog researchers to adopt the "fair game–public domain' position"' (Hookway, 2008: 105) alongside a need to be being mindful of the differential public and private spaces within each blog, even if these may *appear* public.

Taking its lead from Waskul and Douglas's (1996) stance, for the food porn blogs, this paper takes a doubled approach. I draw on the archived blog posts themselves as public, and therefore also mention the names of some blogs. However, quotations from creators are not attributed to individual sites or persons, in line with other studies of online blogs (cf. Campbell and Longhurst, 2013). Moreover, I regard postings by commentators to the blogs as private and therefore no quotations from these appear in this paper.

Diverging stances on this issue of public and private have been taken in relation to pro-anorexia websites. For example, Mulveen and Hepworth (2006) requested retrospective consent for the use

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[1] For more detailed discussion of methods, see Lavis, 2011.