

Chapter 9

Ubiquitous Food Imaging: Food Images as Digital Spectacle

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ABSTRACT

In our digital world, our notions of intimacy, communion and sharing are increasingly enacted through new media technologies and social practices which emerge around them. These technologies with the ability to upload, download and disseminate content to select audiences or to a wider public provide opportunities for the creation of new forms of rituals which authenticate and diarise everyday experiences. Our consumption cultures in many ways celebrate the notion of the exhibit and the spectacle, inviting gaze, through everyday objects and rituals. Food as a vital part of culture, identity, belonging, and meaning making celebrates both the everyday and the invitation to renew connections through food as a universal subject of appeal.

INTRODUCTION

What is this pervasive act of capturing our meals via our mobile and smart phones and sharing it with wider audiences through personal networks and messaging services? Why are we making a moment of the ordinary? This pervasive food sharing through mobile images is part of our digital literacy today. As an inimical part of digital culture, food images dominate as a universal symbol of social sharing and social gaze, and above all, human solidarity. Food as a subject of digital capture carries social resonance and sociability. As new behavioural and social conventions convene around the production and dissemination of food images online, food as a material yet ephemeral object ingested by the body, amenable to edible iterations as well as decomposition, has become a major subject of material objectification signifying new ways to connect, frame social relations and to negotiate our private and public realms. Food once transformed into a digital image online is often offered for public consumption, transaction and dissemination inviting the gaze of family, friends and strangers. This paper explores the notion of food porn with relevance to new media technologies and contemporary digital culture. It posits the notion that the sociality around producing and sharing food in the user generated content (UGC) economy

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in many ways re-negotiates the unattainable quality that food porn signifies in the mainstream media. Amateur interpretations of food porn not only democratise it as a social activity but imbue new social conventions around the capture and sharing of these images.

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. The mundane and ordinary food is attributed a spectacle in this economy premising food as the message and the medium. The term 'food porn' of course predates these ubiquitous practices of capture today. Used synonymously with 'gastro porn,' it alludes to the fetishisation of food and its coalescence with desire by styling culinary offerings through the vantage point of the camera lens to be consumed by hungry publics. This food is meant to be consumed by sight and other senses (well removed from just ingesting it), evoking our hidden desires while highlighting its unattainability. Its pornographic quality removes food from the mundane and ordinary, elevating it to the level of the pornographic. This paper specifically addresses the imaging of food through new mobile technologies whilst acknowledging the wider ecology of media and marketing phenomena which have socialised us into accepting food images and the practices of imaging food as a resonant part of digital culture in our contemporary reality.

Food throughout history has been a symbol of sharing and sociality, envy and avarice, decadence and depravity, pride and repugnance and equally a resource of commonality as well as difference. Food has an elemental quality of tapping into our emotional reservoir, our nostalgic memories and inner psyche to elicit comfort, familiarity, aversion, desire, greed, degrees of pleasure and displeasure. Food has the ability to trigger forms of affect and ubiquitous food imaging through digital platforms transforms food into a digital commodity, bringing with it a plethora of social and symbolic meanings through the acts of image capture, upload, dissemination as well as archiving. But 'food is extraordinary in its ordinariness, exceptional in the extent to which we treat it as mundane, and outstanding as a focus for the study of consumption' (Marshall 2005: 69). Food serves to confirm membership as well as to set people apart. Food is connected to rituals, symbols and belief systems. It is associated with myth; the sacred and taboos. Food functions in social relationships; in terms of ethnicity, race, nationality, class, individuality and gender.

With increasing appropriation of technologies into our daily lives we don't often stop to question new forms of behaviours, conventions and habits which emerge with mediated communication. As we adopt new rituals and integrate these into our daily lives, we often struggle to completely comprehend why these new rituals become habitual and unquestioning moments of life's patterns and rhythms in contemporary culture. Imaging food and serving these to others via images is a widely accepted phenomenon today. The home photography situated the everyday through imagery. Richard Chalfen (1987) in writing about the 'home mode' and Kodak Culture highlighted the important role of photography in domestic life, where social practices involving family norms, traditions and values can be expressed and sustained. The everyday and its material practices became a site to enact and construct culture. This Kodak culture, which domesticated the everyday through imagery and food, is part of this visual literacy. With the convergence of technologies and the incorporation of recording features on the mobile phone, food becomes a site for multiple iterations from autobiography and memory making to self-representation.

In restaurants, homes and in the streets, food as a commodity is captured, shared and archived, providing a medium for human connection, communication; public and private interactions while contributing to a repository of food images on image sharing platforms online. The domestication of food images through the smartphone and the ability to consume food through screen cultures marks a shift in production values of food porn produced by expert stylists and photographers for the cultivated audience and

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