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SPECIAL ISSUE ON E-POLITICS OF FOOD FROM ONLINE CAMPAIGNING TO THE AESTHETICS OF FOOD PORN

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Food Porn and the Invitation to Gaze:
Ephemeral Consumption and the Digital Spectacle

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ABSTRACT

In the digital world, 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. 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. Food imagery as a form of transacted materiality online offers familiarity, comfort, co-presence but above all a common elemental literacy where food transcends cultural barriers, offering a universal pull towards a commodity which is ephemeral yet preserved through the click economy. Food is symbolic of human solidarity, sociality and sharing and equally of difference creating a spectacle and platform for conversations, conventions, connections, and vicarious consumption. Food images symbolise connection at a distance through everyday material culture and practices.

Keywords: Digital Culture, Food Porn, Food Rituals, Image, Mobile Capture

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 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 those produced by the smartphone flaneurs, marking the division between production and consumption in the traditional media economy compared with the prosumer economy. The amateur prosumer equipped with her mobile technology can style and capture food through her sense of aesthetics and disseminate it to a potentially global audience. This smartphone food porn democratises imaging practices around food as a cultural artefact, while domesticating food imagery through pervasive technology as form of social exchange. The distance between the amateur and the professional is not obliterated but enables a mainstreaming of food photography in our cultural practices through the smartphone and mobile gadgets. With the late twentieth century's explosion of imaging and visualising technologies, everyday life has become visual culture (Lister and Wells). In this arena of hypermedia and multimedia age of visuality, 'seeing is much more than believing. It is not just a part of everyday life, it is everyday life' (Mizroeff 1999: 1).

There is a vast cultural economy around food online. From food blogging, recipe sharing, gastro tourism narratives, and food reviews to cataloguing 365 days of meals. Food imagery and meals can mediate the temporal and spatial, thus occupying a primacy in our cultural imagination and interactivity. Images are a primary form of content creation today. But what does it mean to capture something for our personal repository and image archive before we consume it? What is this urge to offer these images of food for vicarious consumption? What is it about food images which offer shared moments of communion between friends and strangers? The explanations reside at many levels and the deconstruction of these offer insights into the therapeutic nature of both food images as a cultural bridge but also social media platform as a means for sharing the banal and the mundane, and how these interactions display social relations as well as one's negotiation of self and life in the private and public realms (Ibrahim 2015). Functioning at the level of spiritual and emotional connection, ubiquitous food imaging and sharing remain an intrinsic part of digital culture today.

FOOD AS PART OF OUR EVERYDAY CONSTRUCTION

Food is more than just a fuel for bodies. It is a site of consumption, pleasure, morality and renewed aesthetics. As Krishnendu Ray (2007) asserts the very visibility of something that was mundane, trivial, and habitual is somewhat embarrassing but the source of discomfort for some may be the dissolution of boundary between the life world and the art world. Kerry Chamberlain (2004: 468) concurs that food permeates our relationships, infiltrating our language, our images, and that metaphors of food surround us. Food is entwined with popular culture, saturating our visual and sensory modes through television, magazines, newspapers, specialist food blogs and recipe sharing cites (Chamberlain 2004; Lupton, 1996). These provide voyeuristic escapes into food and cuisines where money or calories are of no consequence (O'Neill 2003). The refashioning of food or gasto porn then refers to the ways in which TV-programs and cookbooks often portray food as perfect, using pornographic features and visual effects (Zukin & Maguire, 2004). Richard Magee (2007) contends that food pornography takes the form of glossily lush photographs of voluptuous and sinfully rich desserts, or of fantasy recipes and lifestyle images that are 'so removed from real life that they cannot be used except as vicarious experience'. The

concept of food porn then describes a movement away from motifs of aesthetics and trespasses some kind of threshold towards the obscene and unattainable; rupturing a gap and breaching the lucidity in judging what is *real* and *illusion*.

The term *food porn* is thus not just about the *content* or *way* food is represented, but rather addresses a much more complex construct of human experience (Mitchell 2014). The term gastro porn may be attributed to Alexander Cockburn's 1977 New York Review of Books when he criticised the pornographic character of the unattainable and picture perfect dishes in connection to the insatiable desires these elicited (Cockburn, 1977). McBride (2010) suggests that the term first appeared in 1979 when Michael Jacobson as the co-found for the Centre for Science in the Public Interest used food porn to refer to unhealthy foods in the Center's newsletter. According to Jacobson he "coined the term to connote a food that was so sensationally out of bounds of what a food should be that it deserved to be considered 'pornographic' (cf. Mcbride 2010). Mcbride (2010) employs the term food porn to denote 'watching others cook on television or gazing at unattainable dishes in glossy magazines without actually cooking oneself'. Signe Rousseau (2013) contends that food porn occupies a contested space between constructions of 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' desires when it comes to eating.

Frederick Kaufman, in likening sex porn to gastro porn observes that 'like sex porn, gastro porn addresses the most basic human needs and functions, idealizing and degrading them at the same time' (cf. Ray 2007). The sex and food corollary is reiterated in Foucault's writing. Michel Foucault (1983) observed that food in the early Christian history was an issue of primacy, just like sex has become in the modern era, where its significance is created through a complex set of restrictions and discursive practices. Food has dominated as a subject of major preoccupation throughout history. Roland Barthes (1972: 22) in discussing the relationship between food, national identity and imperialism was conscious of the centrality of food to other forms of social behaviour;

Today we might say all of them: activity, works, sports, effort, leisure, celebration – every one of these situations is expressed through food. We might almost say that this 'polysemia' of food characterizes modernity. (Barthes 1972: 25)

The fetishisation of food as well as the cultural practices convening around the visual consumption of food have become important in locating the everyday. Raymond Williams (1993) decried that 'culture is ordinary,' in attempting to locate culture as something lived in and common place rather than a work of art removed from social and material practices. Williams (1993: 11) in defining culture as a set of expressive practices implicated not just print, cinema and television, but also employed it to cover a range of new material entities which emerged in post-war Britain including canned foods, contraceptives, aspirin and baby Austins. Culture is then reproduced in multiple sites. Michel de Certeau *et al.*'s *Practice of Everyday Life living and cooking* (De Certeau *et al*., 1998:3) assert that 'culinary virtuosities' establish 'multiple relationships between enjoyment and manipulation'. In terms of food visuality, food is not just consumed orally and ingested, but consumed through other senses and a sense of play and desire.

Food, when dislodged from the kitchen and devoid of its nutritive or taste qualities enters a realm of the performative; valorising the visual above all else and situating it within the performative (Magee 2007). Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1999) argues that food that is dissociated from eating bypasses the nose and mouth. Such food may well be subjected to extreme visual, and for that matter tactile and verbal, elaboration. Our eyes let us 'taste' food at a distance by activating the sense memories of taste and smell. Television shows and cookbooks invite us to eat with our eyes without either cooking or eating oneself. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett reminds us that the

wondrous confectionery presented at the conclusion of Renaissance banquets, while technically edible, might never be eaten, though it might be enthusiastically applauded. She contends that these monumental events cultivate the visuality and appearance rather than the flavour, hence situating appearance as enduring compared to the eating of food, which can be ephemeral. The dominance of visuality or appearance is deliberate, for it emphasises a legible (edible) visual language of emblems and signs. Here the visual is the performative. Similarly, Barbara Wheaton in *Savoring the Past* notes that, in the edible allegorical tableaus that were medieval banquets, visual effects, rarity of ingredients, opulence, and sequence of events were more important than the dishes, ingredients, preparation techniques, or flavours. Richard Magee points out that both food pornography and sexual pornography are primarily focused on food or sex as a performance, and, like all performance, are designed as a voyeuristic exercise.

While considerable attention has been accorded to food as image or symbol, food studies is somewhat muted on the topic of food as a performance medium. Allen Weiss (2002) in drawing attention to a minority stance within Western aesthetics that allows for the definition of food as art contends that the Enlightenment concord has been thwarted to expand the boundaries of form and taste. The new postmodern aesthetic premises 'the disappearance of the boundaries between the arts, disrupting the border between art and craft, repositioning classic hierarchies of form and taste.' Weiss challenges with the question; 'if fashion can become a fine art today, why not cooking?'

This variant of food porn through the smartphone invariably offers a performance medium. In digital cultures the performative and visual elements of food porn enter a complex arrangement where it is conjoined with the creation of self-identity, community, invitation to gaze, memory making, and as a form of social capital to transact and exchange. In the digital economy, the unattainable quality of food porn is mediated and made mainstream for the amateur food flaneur. Amateur food images, rather than emphasising its unattainability, hinge on the individual aesthetics and exchange of image as a form of social capital to elicit validation and to seek attention and bring moment to the everyday. The imaging of food elongates the performative, making food inedible and imbuing it with non-perishable qualities. Imaging food accords performance to the everyday while transforming the mundane into commodities for sharing. Imaging food via smartphones and mobile gadgets enables the formation of ownership to an image and intimacy which food porn of the glossy magazines and television may not engender. In so doing they don't eradicate desire or the notion of the unattainable, where one man's food is offered to another for vicarious consumption but it mediates distance and closeness to this porn through a sense of ownership. With image sharing sites allowing for dissemination, display and curation of images, the processes of creation and ownership online allows for the perception of 'this porn is mine'. The flaneur gaze of the Internet means that images can be culled from the wider web and displayed in what one might consider a personalised space online, while sustaining vicarious consumption. Desire is still a manifest part of the food porn but it can reside in the personalised spaces which we curate and publish online.

RITUALS OF THE INTERNET

The Internet as a virtual space is not disembedded or dichotomised from the real world. It is mediated through social and cultural norms of our lived world. But it is equally a space that can produce cultures in its own right (Hine 2000). Our ability to enact new forms of rituals online and to seek communion, validation, therapy or to commemorate and preserve memories through image sharing and uploads has been well documented (Ibrahim 2011; 2015). The emergence

of converged mobile technologies which enable publishing and social sharing while diarising the everyday has given rise to a whole host of cultural activities around image sharing and new media visualities online. Imaging the everyday by capturing our daily routines including meals has become an important part of new media rituals and validation of the self. According to a report by Pew entitled 'Photo and Video Sharing Grow Online' (Duggan 2013), 54% of adult users post original photos and videos online that they themselves have created. Another 47% of adult Internet users take videos or photos they found online and repost them on sites designed for sharing images with many people. According to Webstagram which ranks Instagram images by popularity, food images retain popular resonance through multiple tags including 'foodporn', 'yummy', 'yumgasm' and 'dessert'. For instance #food figured as number 25 in the top 100 tags on Instagram in 2014.

Marking life's everydayness and paces of routine through images, communicating these everyday images and inviting the gaze of others authenticates everyday life experiences; capturing the ephemerality of life while archiving and displaying the banal and the unusual. Food and meal times as symbolic imagery of our everyday (or the temporality of life) provide a means of communication and social sharing of a familiarity. They also serve as spatial and temporal devices to create a sense of space and a notion of lifetime online. This image literacy and reciprocity of exchange is part of digital culture. Food has a universal quality of resonance and food images carry this aura of desire, familiarity, comfort, spirituality as well as a sense of offering and a moment of display. The glimpse into one's private moment inevitably conveys an intimacy, but with social media platforms the intimate and public moments occupy a hybrid space where the private and public can co-exist. Food imagery provides an acceptable space of social and cultural exchange where the private and public can merge, forming hybrid spaces of material consumption, exchange and co-presence. These new rituals enacted through new mobile technologies and social media provide a means for shared and collective meaning making while renewing social connections.

The rich sociological literature on rituals confirms its symbolic, functional and therapeutic elements for humanity and society. Durkheimian interpretation of ritual emphasise the creation of social order and strengthening of group solidarity. Emile Durkheim (1976) accorded rituals a seminal role in enacting and sustaining the 'sacred' and in constructing a communally-shared social reality. Victor Turner (1969) conceptualised rituals as being both creative and equally subversive attributing it with 'social drama,' which can challenge social hierarchies. In contrast, Irving Goffman (1967) stresses rituals' ability to capture interactions and the performative aspects of everyday life. Rituals subsumes both the institutional and formal but also the informal and personal, providing a means for collective meaning making accounting for shared experiences as well as individual identity (Helland 2013:26; Rook 1985). Defying static manifestations to embrace the movements of time and space, rituals can reflect the changing patterns of society. As 'repeated and patterned forms of communication, rituals enable us to attach ourselves to 'our surrounding media-related world' (Semulia 2013: 9).

These new rituals online of imaging food have both symbolic and instrumental value of marking everyday moments like meal times and staples, but equally veritable feasts and culinary spectacles which celebrate the occasion, providing a means to commemorate and remember while creating a sense of shared and or individual identities. Several authors (e.g. Sahlin, 1974; Lupton. 2003) argue that gift giving is a way of validating social relations. Furthermore, gift giving might not only relate to the giving of physical objects but might also (or perhaps even more so) relate to more symbolic acts and practices and therefore, food image are part of gift giving, the purpose of which is to validate social relations. New rituals online such as imaging food before consumption (or during consumption) have instrumental and symbolic qualities where the invita-

tion to gaze by others authenticates life's experiences while enabling the formation of everyday and special memories offered through the process of transacting the food image. These rituals have their therapeutic function in terms of social sharing and reciprocity, but they are equally intertextual with the wider world of consumerism representing material consumption as a site of desire, meaning making, performance and engagement with capital.

FOOD IN MEDIA AND CONSUMER CULTURE

Throughout history we have been socialised into food imagery whether in art history, food advertising editorials, magazine features, specialised cookbooks or personal photography. Food once transformed as an image or commodity signifies a permanence, defying its perishable and destructible qualities. Imaging provides an ethereality; an ability to transcend time and space and to be accorded different cultural significance by new audiences who consume it, appealing to their senses and sensitivities in different ways. With the invention of mobile photographic equipment, particularly the Kodak camera, food has remained a subject of rites of passages, of events as well as the everyday, marking the moments and routines of life within the domestic and beyond.

With print culture, broadcasting, advertising and branding, food imagery entered a realm of consumer capitalism denoting the construction of desire and its circulation through mass media platforms. The selling and packaging of food to the masses drew on our nostalgic bonds with food while recruiting consumers for advertisers. Food porn in the hands of capital sought to create a consumption community through desire for new offerings on the market. Food advertising came through our TV sets and magazines, offering the ease of assemblage to the homemakers, enticing new audiences while renewing our intrinsic ties with food in domestic settings. The increasing incorporation of leisure readings in newspapers and proliferation of lifestyle and women's magazine also socialised us into accepting stylised food imagery as part of a new consumer culture which packaged fantasy, escapism and romance into everyday fast moving consumer products. Advertising of food took it to new heights pledging desire and enticement through the lens, which could yield pleasure and yearning en masse.

The everyday staples of bread, butter, milk and coffee could be re-fashioned through the co-optation of photography which worked to lure mass audiences to mass production and into the hands of capital. The emergence of mass advertising of consumer products through mass media enabled food imagery to be accepted as part of the consumerist landscape to fashion instant desire like instant coffee. We were socialised into food porn as part of our consumer culture through mass media even before the advent of satellite television, which could assuage niche interests. The increasing tabloidisation of the public sphere and broadcasting also saw a proliferation of cookery shows, food channels and celebrity chefs, making food a ubiquitous subject of human consumption and of decadence and a symbol of high living where the concerns were about offering creativity and variety through food rather than issues of starvation, austerity or famine. With the tele-visualisation and tabloidisation of food, food imagery entered an era of the spectacle where it can be 'groomed' for consumption through the vantage point of the lens but removed from the immediate pleasure of consuming and ingesting food. Food porn online did not emerge from a vacuum – its prominence on the digital platforms today harks back to a wider media and capitalist socialisation which leveraged on our spiritual connection with food as a symbol of culture, survival, sustenance and solidarity.

With increasing globalisation of the world, food is increasingly a part of popular culture and popular imagination. Claude Fischler contends that what we have seen in fast food is not the "menace of Americanization" or a threat to traditional French cuisine, but an essentially benign

reflection of the global circulation of culinary cultures. The globalisation of coffee chains and conveyor belt sushi joints symbolises both the increasing diversification of cuisines in cosmopolitan cultures and equally the dominance of standardised offerings through the Mcdonaldization of the globe. In the process, food acquires a popular global currency and can symbolise a multitude of meanings from the McDonaldization of society, the increasing curiosity and acceptance of world cuisines to the exoticisation of the ordinary meal.

FOOD, UGC AND PROSUMERISM

With the incorporation of Kodak culture and home photography, food retains a primacy as a subject of photography. With the convergence of technologies in the digital age and the incorporation of the digital photographic tools into mobile telephony the mobile phone becomes an extension of the body and memory, archiving and imaging events and rituals of the everyday. The body embedded with technology such as the smart phone is a space of double articulation in terms of functioning as a repository for memory. Beyond the cognitive ability of the brain to store visual memory and images, mobile technology such as the smart phone facilitates the production of mobile repositories, including cloud computing which can produce and carry images while on the move. Food provides a means to document and memorialise the everyday and the eventful. In the social media economy cultural food production also signifies the production of the self and diarisation of everyday life. New rituals around food consumption including the uploading of the food image before consumption, integrates seamlessly into a UGC economy where content creation and human behaviour fuse together to manifest new social conventions and rituals.

UGC is integrated into many commercial platforms and with the proliferation of social networking sites, image sharing and video archives, UGC has in parts entered a monetised economy while feeding this notion of consumer sovereignty and user empowerment online. This user-centred economy of publishing online through its emphasis on interactivity and online conversations is seen as celebrating a prosumerism, blurring the boundaries between production and consumption. In tandem with this, mobile telephony today enables people to record and publish images while on the move. In this digital economy where people can produce and consume incessantly, the image plays an important role in communication and in enabling connection both in the everyday and in marking the unusual. Web 2.0 celebrates the coexistence of a multitude of forms including images both mobile and static. In expressing everyday flows of life and in establishing co-presence as well as endorsing human communion, images are seen as a vital part of this connectivity. The virtual world yields to our desire to see ourselves in it and equally to look into the lives of others. Food provides a means of intimacy into a private realm while being a symbol of collective consumption.

The prosumer economy online has appropriated food photography as a well-established cultural convention of capture and exchange. This is evident where the Internet is saturated with features to improve techniques of imaging food with a smartphone. Conde Nast Publishers in its Traveler magazine ran a feature in 2014 on 'Food Photography Tips for Instagram and Smartphone,' dispensing technical advice on how to get the right lighting and vantage point while staying true to the protagonist, food. Similar articles have featured in Epicurious.com (2015) and the Guardian which ran a feature entitled, ' How to Photograph Food with your Phone' in 2012. A huge litany of similar articles exist online providing amateurs with tips to mainstream food photography with mobile phones. The Internet craves content and food imagery is a vital part of this economy.

People face the burden as well as the freedom to construct their own identities in postmodernity (Giddens, 1991; Christensen, 2008; Baudrillard, 2002), and new media technologies and the image economy are increasingly implicated in this. Consumption in modern (mass) consumer society can be highly individualistic and even narcissistic. While the sensual pleasures of eating are completely individualised, eating is a highly social activity and regulated by the community (Marshall 2005: 71) and food porn becomes a site of both personal consumption and collective desire. Holt (1995, 1998), refers to the way in which consumers use consumption objects to classify themselves in relation to relevant others. Miller and Edwards (2007) similarly explore online photo-sharing practices with sites such as Flickr and Facebook in relation to how different types of people manage public and private boundaries in this space. The coalescing of the public and private realms of consumption and notions of space make food porn amenable to multiple iterations. Like the selfie, food is part of this transaction culture and memory creation. What one consumes and experiences is archived and communicated through food. The selfie and the culture of social networking sites are driven through the uploading of content. The commodification of self and food are entwined online. The construction of the self is renewed through the constant engagement in these sites. Food as an everyday object of materiality and as a part of one's personal domain of consumption offers a means to create a personal connection while providing a common theme of interest for others to gaze.

The increasing number of image sharing sites and the communities which have emerged around gazing, curating, tagging, liking and retweeting, and re-blogging images makes food porn a tool of cultural production and interaction online; equally one of technique and aesthetics. The digital economy is made for forms of public and quasi-public sharing, inviting the gaze of the strange and familiar while enabling the self to be consumed and constructed through this image economy. According to a Pew Report in 2012, photos and videos have become a key social currency online (Lee et al. 2012). The rise of social media, especially YouTube and newer services like Pinterest, Instagram, and Tumblr have made curating activities easier because they are organized for easy image and video-sharing. Beyond content creation, the Internet and social networks drive on a circulation economy constantly merging content in unlikely places. Food porn can be part of disparate narratives and conversations online and equally it can convene dedicated niche communities.

Food as a subject of human connection can transcend cultural boundaries and is often considered a product of cultural diplomacy in terms of tourism and national identity. Food images become tools to personify self, communicate intimacy and to connect to a wider audience of similar and disparate interests. Our intimacy with food means it is a site for self-representation but also a means to leave narratives of social history and autobiographies in a transient mortal world. The Internet's virtuality is in many ways is inerasable and enduring while being amenable to wider circulation and search. Our connection to the image binds us to the mortal world in complex ways. Food, then, is a medium and metaphor for this representation and the preservation of the self through the image economy. Digital cultures are undeniably shaped by the culture of the physical world, which reinforces our need to imagine ourselves beyond our situated mortality; the virtual world provides a means to leave traces of your intimate portrayals where you can both avow and disavow ownership to content you produce. The image economy, particularly the intimate images of creation, tap into this need to preserve ourselves beyond our transient world. The ubiquity of new practices and conventions in many ways reassert this, and the imaging of food is no exception; representing both the need to prolong desire and life through the symbolic metaphor of food, recognising it as an ephemeral entity, but seeking to prolong and immortalise it through the image.

CONCLUSION

Amateur food porn online democratised by the smartphone and convergence technologies appropriates many cultural qualities from the food porn crafted by the experts. It relocates desire as something that can be generated through UGC mediating both distance to food porn and its unattainability through ownership and creation of food images. In the process, it provides a mechanism to create social capital and currency online and to produce these to document the everyday and to renew connections with a wider community. Smartphone food porn democratises the production of desire and in doing so taps into representation of self and identity while being intertextual with our consumerist world and consumption cultures. At the heart of virtual life is our quest for self-presentation beyond our mortal existence. The image economy assuages our need to seek immortality through the virtual world. Food then becomes the medium and message.

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