

Shocking Flesh : Fatness, Feeling and The Politics of Interpretation

Title	Shocking Flesh
Subtitle	Fatness, Feeling and The Politics of Interpretation
Lead-in / Abstract	<p>In my PhD research on fat embodiment in the media, I look at different kinds of images of women and men who are defined fat by the contemporary body standards, and these images almost always provoke strong feelings. Some of the images tend to annoy me or even shock me at first. Most of the popular, mainstream images of fat bodies seem to support very conventional power relations in terms of body size, gender, sexuality and "race". During the process of interpretation the feelings and attitudes towards the images necessarily change.</p> <p>In the presentation I will discuss how my feelings, interpretations and ways of looking as a feminist researcher meet and are constructed in the research process. I am especially interested in the cultural constructions of distance and proximity between the researcher or the viewer and visual material, and how the variations in distance can be of use from a feminist perspective. Distance and proximity are produced through bodily experience as well as research objectives and conventions. The assumed bodily similarities or differences between the viewer and the image are important factors in producing different ways of identification. However, through feminist reading and interpretation some images that have first felt distant to me have become closer – sometimes images that have felt uncomfortably close have become distanced. To illustrate how the consideration of embodied distances can be useful, I compare my interpretation process of pornographic images of fat women on the Internet with some other typical representations of fatness in the contemporary popular media.</p>
Participants and speakers	Kyrölä, Katariina (FI)
Short biography of participants	Katariina Kyrölä is a researcher and a PhD student in Media Studies and teaches Women's Studies at the University of Turku, Finland. In 2004-2005 she will be studying at Utrecht University, in the Netherlands Research School of Women's Studies. She is working on her PhD on the popular representations of fat bodies in the contemporary media and the politics of difference.
Full text	<p>In my PhD research on fat embodiment in the popular media, I look at different kinds of images of women and men who are defined fat by the contemporary body standards. These images often provoke strong feelings. Most of the popular, mainstream images of fat bodies seem to support very conventional power relations in terms of body size, gender, sexuality and "race", and this explains a significant portion of my annoyance, but there is also a more immediate, embodied shock that feels unavoidable, uncomfortable and unexplainable. In this paper I want to take up some of these uncomfortable moments and feelings, and try work through them in a way that would turn them into a richness instead of a disturbance, in the framework of feminist thinking. I am especially interested the construction of identification or lack of it, distance and proximity between the researcher or the viewer and disturbing visual material. I discuss my experiences of looking at and</p>

thinking through 1) pictures of fat women in dieting stories of a Finnish tabloid magazine *7 päivää*, and 2) pictures of fat women on the Internet where weight *gain* is eroticized. Both these picture types immediately provoked rejection and shock in me.

The Importance of Feelings for a Feminist Researcher

Research objectives are of crucial importance in making interpretations. One of the central goals of my research is to map out both media conventions in representing fat embodiment, and possible ruptures in those conventions that may question the slim, gendered body norms. This way I simultaneously distance myself from negative viewing experiences and bring the material closer to myself. A representation which I manage to read against the grain or reveal ambiguous often begins to feel pleasurable, becomes closer to me, as I have shown myself a different way to look at it. Some images that have first felt distant become closer -- sometimes images, that have felt uncomfortably close, become distanced.

Feelings or emotions produced by research material are necessarily central in constructing feminist research questions and knowledge, since feminist research is, to my view, always political by definition. To formulate research questions, one must ask: what do I find problematic and irritating in the material, and how do I argue against it? On the other hand, defending irritations can be valuable as well. The critique of so-called mainstream (or male-stream) science is in the core of feminist research, therefore one of its goals is to irritate, to ask non-traditional and uncomfortable questions.

According to **Sara Ahmed**, feelings are all about the attachments and reciprocal movements between I and the Other, my body and the other's body, the individual and the society. Ahmed claims that intensifications of feeling provoke us to construct a boundary between ourselves and others. Feelings both create distance between my body and other bodies, and connect us to each other. For example, the feelings of fear and pain become possible only through an encounter with what is experienced frightening or painful -- proximity is a condition for separation and rejection¹. Inspired by Ahmed I ask: what kind of attachments and distances are produced, as I, the researcher, encounter disturbing material? Why is it important to explore these encounters, even as they are uncomfortable?

Bodily jolts and reactions, such as crying, laughing, screaming, shivers, and sexual arousal that some media representations may produce in viewers, are often considered involuntary and therefore out of reach². However, I believe these immediate feelings have great significance. Although it might be tempting and common, at least in mainstream science, to simply ignore them, it would also mean ignoring elemental questions about embodiment -- and feeling -- in constructing cultural hierarchies.

Example 1: The fat female body in a dieting story -- approaching through similarity

The first example that I want to discuss is one particular picture in a dieting story first published in a Finnish tabloid magazine *7 päivää*, but now also on the Internet pages of Finnish Weight Watchers³. Dieting stories typically tell of a previously fat, now slim female interviewee and her amazing, happy transformation, illustrated by photographs of her body "before", as fat, and "now", as slim. The "before" picture, which began to haunt me in a way, is a part of the story of a white, Finnish 35-year-old woman who lost 60 kilograms (about 130 pounds) in Weight Watchers. In the "before" picture she sits in a sun chair, on a holiday, wearing a bikini, with her legs spread open, with a small baby between her legs. Her bare skin fills most of the picture space, and the baby seems to disappear into her flesh, to become one of her body's bulges. In the "now" picture she is very slim, smiles and poses in a tight black dress.

The "before" image seems somehow vulgar to me, the amount of flesh on display feels improper. I despise the magazine for showing an intimate picture like that to repel and shock the readers. But very soon I begin to feel shame for my reactions. I am the reader. Why would I consider her picture improper, when I barely notice the bikini pictures of slim models that I see practically every day?

Of course, the feeling of being repelled by a person's body, because it does not

conform to the gendered body norms, is quite intolerable for me as a feminist researcher. I am painfully aware of the ongoing discrimination, especially against women, on the basis of body size and shape in the media as well as in everyday life. I am irritated by the way in which the dieting story format naturalizes body size hierarchies, by showing how fat women are "saved" into the world of "proper" slim femininity, which is pointedly equalized with becoming heterosexually desirable. I believe my first reaction of aversion was what the ideology of dieting stories primarily tries to produce: to present fatness as horrible but possible to overcome. But no matter how I criticize the hierarchies behind my initial reaction, the memory of it remains underneath the layer of feminist analysis.

I do not *want* to feel repulsed, but nevertheless I do. This does not mean that my feelings are out of reach or not on my responsibility because they are not products of completely conscious thinking. These feelings are not only my own, but they are produced in complex webs of social and cultural norms which define, categorize and rate bodies. Therefore analysis of my feelings is much more than introspection: it is analysis of those norms. I must ask if it would or should be possible to feel otherwise, thereby act otherwise and perhaps ultimately shift ways of understanding embodiment.

Elsbeth Probyn's analysis of the potential uses of shame and disgust in fat acceptance politics may offer a useful way to grasp the feelings in looking at the image I introduced. Probyn suggests that pride and complete self-acceptance may not be very useful as goals of fat politics. She does not deny the significance of the politics of pride, for example in gay pride and fat pride movements, but she suggests that the relationship between pride and disgust should be redefined instead of thinking of them as feelings that rule each other out.⁴ For Probyn, assurances of pride can not remove the ever-present dimension of disgust from seeing and experiencing embodiment. Instead, one should pause to register one's immediate, involuntary feelings of disgust and *take responsibility of them by not just letting them be*. Probyn talks about "gut feelings", which, to her, attach feelings to the body and emphasizes the unconscious dimension of emotions. These "gut feelings", such as disgust, have been used to naturalize hostile attitudes towards marginalized groups, but they may also bring out moments of intensely felt proximity between my body and the body I look at.⁵ Pausing to process one's feelings means taking some distance, but distance should be understood as an encounter as much as coming close.

Recognizing even potential similarities between the one looking and the one being looked at is surely one of the strongest affective factors in looking at the "before" picture introduced above. My own reaction while looking at the picture derives from the gendered fear of fatness. As I look I recognize the image as someone *I could potentially be similar with*. Thereby I construct a common denominator for us called "womanhood", but although it is a construction, I would certainly not react similarly, if I recognized a male body in the picture instead.

An interesting question arises: what are the boundaries of the body that I could imagine myself like? For example, "race" or ethnicity have their input in the fear of "becoming the image". It may not feel as threatening for a white woman to look at images of fat black women. The fear of "becoming the image" is not as great, since it does not seem as likely to become fat and black as merely fat. Skin color, and/or bodily features understood as ethnically specific, are rendered culturally much more stable and permanent than body size and shape, in spite of the continuing attempts by innumerable feminist theorists to destabilize "racial" categories. Connected to this, the stereotypical idea that fatness is more accepted and natural in black communities lurks in the background.

Film theorist **Mary Ann Doane** theorized in the beginning of the 1980's the white, Western female viewer's fear of becoming the image, and although she has been severely criticized for it, she may have nevertheless touched a nerve. According to Doane, the female viewer looking at an image of a female must either reject the image or "become the image", because the look brings the image too close, uncomfortably close to the female viewer.⁶

Doane has been criticized for universalizing the category "women", when she means white, Western, heterosexual, middle-class women, and for forgetting the pleasures and desires of female viewers. Indeed, why couldn't my rejection be just as well connected to the fear to *desire* the woman in the image, not only with the fear to *become* the woman in the image? The whole set-up of dieting stories diminishes the chances that the image of the fat female body, even though nearly nude, would be looked at as desirable or sexual, as it is posited as the undesirable opposite to the image of the slim, supposedly more attractive, and fully clothed, body.

But, in a way, this "before" picture is pornographic -- it shows body parts and areas

that are not commonly shown in public, flesh that is culturally demanded to be hidden. As **Jerry Mosher** has noted, there is an impulse in the popular media to both utilize the inevitable over-visibility of fat embodiment and hide its sexual connotations. In part, this controversy easily gives fat a pornographic significance, even if it is not presented in a pornographic context.⁷ But what if the context was eroticized? Or: what if the whole setting was turned upside down, and the fat body was portrayed as the more desirable one?

Example 2: Eroticized weight-gain and fat female bodies -- inescapable distance

Fatness and sexuality or desire are not very commonly connected in Western mainstream media. Being sexy, sexually active, desirable and desiring are portrayed as qualities of almost exclusively slim people, and this has been experienced as a heavy stigma especially by fat women. At the same time, there is also the stereotype of the fat woman as over-sexualized, equalized with loss of control in fleshly pleasures: insatiable in eating, insatiable in sex⁸. The only media where the connection between fatness, sexuality and desire is easily found, is the Internet. There this connection is most often presented in very conventional way in terms of gender and desire: men are the subjects of desire and women the objects. There is a great number of services provided especially for BBW's, Big Beautiful Women, and FA's, fat admirers, who are mostly addressed as men. The naming of sexual attraction to fat bodies as its own fetish appears to be a largely Anglo-American phenomenon -- perhaps in other cultures it is either not considered a fetish, or it is not acknowledged as a sexual preference. In the context of Anglo-American fat acceptance politics, there is a considerable amount of energy invested in the recognition of sexual desire towards and of fat people, particularly women. The fetish status does on one hand give a name to a desire that has not been considered as legitimate, but on the other hand it adds to the deviant or abnormal status of that desire.

But on many Internet pages of size acceptance organisations and publications, one runs into a heated discussion on a phenomenon called feederism, which is not only a preference for a fat partner, but a preference for a partner who continuously and actively gains weight. It is something that I was completely unaware of and, to be frank, could not even imagine to exist, until I began doing my research. One party, usually called the feeder or encourager, almost always a man, takes pleasure in feeding his partner, almost always a fat woman, or encouraging her to eat more, and seeing her gain weight in massive amounts. The feedee may supposedly take pleasure in gaining weight and being fed. This phenomenon has been invisible in public in Finland, until last winter TV channel 4 (Nelonen in Finnish) showed a disturbing document on feederism called *4D: Big Love* (4D: Iso rakkaus). The document shocked me profoundly, but I was also interested in the phenomenon, since it does turn upside down the contemporary Western hierarchy between fatness and slimness. I wanted to find out more about it, and the only place to do so was on the Internet.

I should not have been surprised, given the vast amount of all kinds of sexually explicit and exploitative materials on the Internet, but I found deeply disturbing images. Some pictures were actually a bit similar to the "before" picture discussed above: they had very fat women posing in home photographs, nude or in underwear, but not showing genitals, and not involved in sexual activity in the common sense of the word. Looking at these images made me feel completely at loss and eventually physically sick.⁹

Some of the extremely large female bodies in the pictures become shocking by seemingly stretching the possible limits of the *human* body altogether, much in the same manner as the skeleton-like body of the anorexic. They are visualizations of excessive, abject embodiment which wavers between the living and the dead. It is interesting that the only role that this kind of bodies are given in the popular media, although those occasions are rare, is the role of the alien monster.

On a little more processed level, there is no doubt that the images are evidence of brutal, sexualized violence against women. Actually, some feeders/photographers even process the photographs further by adding fat digitally. Apparently this is done because it is difficult, if not impossible, to reach the level of fatness that would be ideal in feederism¹⁰. The morphed pictures look almost ridiculous in their horrifying excessiveness. But what if we compare the morphed pictures of fat women to the very common practice of "polishing" photographs of skinny models in advertisements etc.? The latter practice is usually not considered revolting although perhaps misleading and unrealistic, although it might be just as strenuous or

impossible to reach the ideal body of Western culture as it is to reach the ideal body of feederism.

Regardless of the doubtful reality value of some porn images of fat women, I believe that most people agree with me in seeing feederism as a violent and condemnable practice. But why is it completely "normal" and accepted to take pleasure and be aroused by women's bodies getting thinner and tighter, whereas it is considered monstrous to enjoy the continuous growth of women's bodies? What else is feederism, if not a reversed version of the gendered Western compulsion to diet continuously in order to be considered sexually attractive? A comparison between eroticized images of weight-loss and weight-gain points out the naturalized and culturally accepted gendered violence in the promotion of life-style dieting.

It is quite problematic to feel worse, when seeing fat women portrayed as sexy, than when seeing fat women portrayed as miserable and desperate to change. On the other hand, after decades of feminist struggle to deconstruct the female body as an eroticized visual object, why *should* there be anything different about objectification of *fat* female bodies instead of slim ones? **Jane Feuer** suggests that even if objectification is not liberating to slim women, it may be that for fat women, since it is not even possible to struggle against objectification without ever having been an object, let alone the subject of the gaze. Feuer does also note that fat women may gain access to popular media products as non-repulsive *only* if they conform to the norms of conventional femininity in other ways: dress, pose, passivity etc.¹¹

Feuer's points may be true up to a certain extent, but there is a limit to what kind of fat bodies can conform to the norms. Some bodies are beyond conforming, thus becoming repulsive, even if they were wearing traditional signs of femininity, such as sexy underwear and long hair. Perhaps it is so difficult for me to process my reactions to the porn images of extremely fat women, because the difference feels too great to begin with, both in terms of size and gender, co-dependently. The recognition of "same" gender depends sometimes on pointedly constructed qualities in these images. Traditional bodily signs of gender, such as breasts, hips and genitals, disappear into the folds of flesh, and the only marks of "womanhood" are make-up, hair and clothes -- much in a similar manner as with female bodybuilders. Although I find this one of the most theoretically appealing points with fat embodiment, the bodily instability and incomprehensibility of the images makes them difficult to grasp.

Therefore, I would reformulate Feuer by suggesting that objectification may be liberating to moderately fat women, but not to more sizable fat women. The latter group has access to the popular media only as monsters or freaks, but displaying their bodies as sexual spectacles reduces them even further into unanimated flesh with no inner life and no boundaries. The context makes it difficult to keep in mind, that these are real, feeling, thinking women -- which probably derives in part from the experience of looking at "just" an image, not having a real-life encounter.

Conclusion

For an unpleasant encounter to change its nature, there needs to be more than the acknowledgement of shame. There has to be a will, a desire to change the nature of the encounter, a desire to approach the other, a desire to be able to look in a different way. Both the "before" image in the dieting story and the fat porn images seem to give no space for subjectivity of fat women. Fat embodiment is reduced into a dead surface, which is either always already left behind, or produced through sexual objectification. In the latter case, I have not been able to desire to see differently. I probably do not want to even try. But in the case of the "before" picture, pausing to think through the hierarchical structures behind it gave me a possibility to see it differently. I can now think of the image as a happy, sunny holiday picture of a woman enjoying herself with her child. The immediate aversion was pushed to the background because of shame and transformed into a partial, tolerated presence that produces acceptance.

My approaches to these two different, but in many ways similar, types of images can only be explained on the affective, "gut feeling" level. But my inability to transform my encounter with the porn images of fat women could be turned into something useful through the comparison with more normative images. Therefore, I would stress that the important issue is not to *force* a transformation in the affective encounter between the researcher and the material, but to explore that *possibility* and pause to give it a chance, even if it fails.

In conclusion: it may be better to openly portray excessively fat bodies, even at the

risk of being shocking and irritating to many of viewers (like me), than to downplay fatness and refuse negative emotions. Intense feelings force the viewer to pause and process her/his reactions and their backgrounds, to think through the potential effects of those feelings. This is not to say that any provocative image of a fat person is a "good thing", but if we wish to transform body norms towards a more flexible and tolerant direction, nothing can be gained by keeping fat bodies hidden.

- 1. Sara Ahmed, "Communities that Feel: Intensity, Difference and Attachment". In Anu Koivunen and Susanna Paasonen (eds.), *Conference proceedings for affective encounters*, <http://www.utu.fi/hum/mediatutkimus/affective/ahmed.pdf>. University of Turku 2001, 10-12.
- 2. See Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess". *Film Quarterly* Vol. 44, No. 4 (Summer 1991), 2-13.
- 3. Finnish Weight Watchers, http://gcms.weightwatchers.com/WWI_Wrapper.aspx?SiteId=11&Page=1013712.
- 4. Elspeth Probyn, *Carnal Appetites. FoodSexIdentities*. London: Routledge 2000, 126-130.
- 5. *Ibid.*, 125-143.
- 6. Mary Ann Doane, "Caught and Rebecca: The Inscription of Femininity as Absence" (1981). In Sue Thornham (ed.), *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*. New York: New York University Press 1999.
- 7. Jerry Mosher, "Setting Free the Bears. Refiguring Fat Men on Television". In Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (eds.), *Bodies Out of Bounds. Fatness and Transgression*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001, 171.
- 8. Marcia Millman, *Such a Pretty Face: Being Fat in America*. New York: Berkley Books 1980, 101-128, 157-179.
- 9. See for example www.feeder.co.uk -> BBW -> betsy.
- 10. See www.feeder.co.uk -> Morphing -> betsy, for digitally "enhanced" pictures of the same woman as in the BBW section referred to above.
- 11. Jane Feuer, "Averting the Male Gaze: Visual Pleasure and Images of Fat Women." In Mary Beth Haralovich and Lauren Rabinowitz (eds.), *Television, History, and American Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press 1999, 184-198.