Fat in the Media

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In feminist and other critical media studies, scholars have long been interested in the role that media imagery plays in deeming some bodies desirable, acceptable, or 'normal', others threatening, shameful, or excessive. Most bodies we see in the media are slim or normatively sized. Many classic studies on how gendered body norms and beauty ideals take shape and transform in and through the media have focused on just that, what we mostly see: norm-abiding, idealized, dieting, or eating disordered bodies (e.g. Bordo, 1993; Wolf, 1991). However, the categories of 'normal' or 'desirable' are at least as much produced through what constitutes their outside, what is understood as 'excessive', 'too much', or 'over' – all things that fat is claimed to be. When we examine images of fatness and fat people in the media, we are therefore not only analyzing fat but also the very boundaries of corporeality and 'normalcy' overall. Thus media images of fat unavoidably entangle with the production of gender, sexuality, class, race, and ability, while they also deserve to be a research focus in their own right.

Fat bodies are relatively invisible in the body-scape of popular culture (e.g. Kent, 2001; LeBesco, 2004). When fat bodies do appear, they tend to appear in rather specific contexts: in particular genres and modalities (Kyrölä, 2014). Why does fatness appear so often in comedy, reality television and so-called 'trash TV' (Raisborough, 2014), but much more rarely in televisual or cinematic drama? What characterizes news publicity around fatness, and what is fat's appeal in pornography? Even though the cultural limitation of fat bodies to certain genres rather than others is a testament to how fat people are still not seen capable of representing the whole spectrum of humanity, these genres are not without subversive potential to challenge, or even unravel, body normativities.

In scholarship about fat in the media, fat bodies' relationship to 'normalcy' has been a fraught one. On one hand, scholars and activists have called for a broader range of roles and characteristics for fat actors, so that they would not have to be limited to being defined first and foremost through their fatness, or to the roles of, for example, funny sidekicks or emotionally damaged binge-eaters (Jester, 2009; LeBesco, 2004). A call for 'normalcy' in fat representation in the media is, at the same time, a call for fat people to be seen as fully human, good as well as bad, complicated as well as superficial, sympathetic as well as annoying, exciting as well as boring (Cooper, 1996; Mosher, 2001.) On the other hand, fat studies scholars have also seen subversive, revolutionary potential in the excess and indeed the abjection that fat has come to signify in western culture (Braziel, 2001; Kent, 2001; Kyrölä, 2014; LeBesco, 2004). Why aim for normalcy, when the whole category of the 'normal' is already so oppressive? A better strategy might be to refuse and dismiss the notion of 'normalcy' altogether and embrace the excess and danger to bodily boundaries that fat has come to stand for, similarly as queer theory aims to do with the concept 'queer' (LeBesco, 2004, p. 5; Kent, 2001, pp. 136–137).

Media images furthermore participate in producing understandings of what counts as 'normal' or fat overall, how we are expected to feel about such definitions, and how other categories of difference, such as gender and race, intersect with fat. In contemporary Hollywood, actors are considered 'fat' at much lower sizes than in the surrounding world, and such standards easily seep into everyday lives. Sensationalistic celebrity journalism observes actors' bodies in minute detail, and weight-gain as well as weight-loss are targets of keen and fully normalized speculation. Actors' weight fluctuations for roles are praised as signs of dedication, but otherwise strictly condemned. For example, American actress Reneé Zellweger as Bridget Jones (*Bridget Jones's Diary*, 2001; and *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*, 2004) may have looked simply average-sized in the role, but her 'incredible' weight gain was still highlighted, as well as her difficulties losing the weight. Many celebrities, such as Oprah Winfrey, Britney Spears, and Monica Lewinsky, have also fluctuated in weight repeatedly, and have thus come to embody the fraught relationships between weight, wealth, race, sexuality and gender in the public eye (Farrell 2014, pp. 121–127).

Given the key role of media in defining and redefining fat, it is not surprising that many fat studies writers have addressed the media at least in passing. Academic writing on fat bodies in the media has become a rich field during the 2000s and 2010s, addressing images of

fatness in particular genres (for example, Hole, 2003; Kipnis, 1999; Kulick, 2005; Raisborough, 2016; Stukator, 2001); mediums such as television, magazines and zines, or digital media (e.g. Feuer, 1999; Mosher, 2001; Braziel, 2001; Snider, 2009; Pausé, 2016; Lupton, 2017), or the significance of fatness for the celebrity personas of fat actors (e.g. Rowe, 1995; Bernstein & St John, 2007; Moon & Sedgwick, 2001; Ulaby, 2001). At the time of writing this chapter, there are only two book-length studies about fat across genres in the media, Kathleen LeBesco's *Revolting Bodies? The Struggle to Redefine Fat Subjectivity* (2004), and my *The Weight of Images: Affect, Body Image, and Fat in the Media* (2014). Both draw on feminist and queer theories of the body and critiques of 'normalcy' in order to map out the jarring and revolutionary potential of mediated fat, while LeBesco's key framework is theorization of subjectivity, and my focus is on the affectivity, the emotional appeal of fatness in the media. The media sphere that attracts most research interest in fat media studies currently is digital media, blogs and social media as well as other online spaces, where the meanings and lived realities of fat are under constant renegotiation.

It's the appearance and disappearance, the persistence and transformability of fat that have made it into a highly emotional and charged bodily quality in the media. Questions of affect and emotion have also been at the forefront of many feminist studies about fat and its popular cultural representations, particularly how fat connects to shame (for example Farrell, 2011), disgust (for example Kent, 2001; LeBesco, 2004), and pride (for example Murray, 2008; Taylor, 2018). Although it may seem like media images of fat bodies largely tend to marginalize, induce anxiety around and represent fatness as undesirable, this is also a matter of where we look and how we look. In the contemporary media culture, radical fat activist politics are gaining more ground, even if this development is fraught with controversies. This chapter challenges fat studies scholarship to focus not only analyzing media representations, and how body normativities are constructed in and through them, but also on what their affective appeal is, what do they invite viewers and readers to feel – and what kind of (fat) politics they call for.

"Factual" Fat: news and reality television

Among the most powerful ways of making fat embodiment appear threatening and in need of urgent intervention are the so-called 'factual' discourses in the media. These tend to focus on fatness as a health problem – news, documentaries and reality television (which, of course, is

partly scripted, yet which involves people in real life). Many fat studies scholars have indeed studied and made important interventions in the discourses of the "war on fat" and the "obesity epidemic." They have shown that while these discourses claim to be factual and merely present 'neutral facts,' their neutrality can be contested – which is obvious in the popular metaphors of war, natural disasters and epidemics (e.g. Farrell, 2011; Herndon, 2005; Kyrölä, 2014, pp. 31–60; LeBesco, 2004; Saguy and Riley, 2005; Raisborough, 2016). One of the most obvious paradoxes is 'anti-obesity' campaigners' claim that fat has not been condemned strongly enough in the media, since people are not getting any slimmer statistically. At the same time, research in the US (Saguy & Riley, 2005), Finland (Kyrölä, 2014) and Sweden (Sandberg, 2004) has shown that the vast majority of all news addressing fat present it as a health problem, and that the amount of such news articles has multiplied from the 1990s to the 2000s.

Fat bodies become visible as problematic or dieting bodies not only in the news discourse, but also habitually on reality TV. While weight-gain and weight-loss stories and advertising as well as various kinds of makeovers have long been basic stuff of newspapers and magazines (Farrell, 2011), the upsurge of reality TV programming in the 2000s drew extensively on the cultural appeal of both dieting and the makeover. One of the most famous reality TV dieting makeover shows is *The Biggest Loser* (2004–2016), an American format show which has been broadcast worldwide and made into local versions in about 30 other countries, reaching hundreds of millions of people around the world.

Even if news discourse and reality TV shows both utilize fat bodies mainly to require their 'un-becoming' (Murray, 2008), as in the removal of fat, their narrative and visual representation of fat people is quite different. News representations tend to dehumanize and abstract fat. The most common visuals involve fat as statistics and numbers, not bodies, abstracting the lived experience of fat embodiment into something calculable, costly and threatening. Occasional images of fat people in news articles are most often example-like, nameless, only vaguely situated in place and time, and strikingly often headless – to the extent that fat activist Charlotte Cooper (2007) has coined the term 'headless fatty' to describe the phenomenon of literally cutting off the head of anonymous fat people illustrating the 'obesity epidemic'. Such images have ended up as the bulk of images of fatness in stock photo depositories such as Getty images which news agencies often use with little or no

criticism, and often the 'headless fatty' photos have been taken without the permission of people appearing in them.

In contrast, even though weight-loss makeover shows such as *The Biggest Loser* also portray fat as unequivocally unhealthy, they enable fat individuals to become visible as people with depth and complexity, making space for identification and empathy with fat experience in a sizeist society, as Jayne Raisborough (2014, 2016) argues. Furthermore, even though the shows themselves end in the predictable moment of (happily ever) "after" – claims of health and happiness through weight-loss – the contestants' stories have often continued in other media, including social media, revealing their "after the after" struggles with eating disorders, weight re-gain, and the whole ideology of dieting after the show (Hass, 2017). In news discourse, there is little space or interest for fat experience (Raisborough, 2014, p. 156) – the focus on 'facts' does not consider experiential knowledge 'real' knowledge, with potentially devastating consequences (Kyrölä & Harjunen, 2017).

In my own research (Kyrölä, 2014, pp. 31–60) about the representation of fatness in public health policies and the largest Finnish newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat*, I found four interrelated strategies of constructing fat as a 'factual' threat. The first of the strategies is the massive repetition of one-sided views from expert authorities, often white, slim, middle-aged men that represent either government agencies or the medical community. Second, the threatening entity, fat, is made into an abstract, floating, measurable but vague entity in the visual language of news, represented either as graphs or as 'headless fatties,' utterly separated from living and feeling fat bodies with personhood. Third, the 'factual' threat functions through temporality, an orientation towards the threatening future presented as knowable, more ill and heavier than the present, even if there is no evidence of increase in people's experience of illness now. This temporal orientation towards the future concretizes also in the language of 'weight management' which, although meant as a more subtle alternative to dieting, expands the threat into a potentiality that concerns all bodies, not only those visually or measurably marked as fat in the now (see also Coleman, 2012).

April Herndon (2005) connects the policing of fat bodies in the news to policing of racialized and national boundaries, linking the on-going "war on terror" to the "war on obesity" in America. The "war on obesity" was officially launched by the government and declared by the Surgeon General during the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in late 2001. Herndon

sees the temporal and linguistic overlaps between these two 'wars' as yet another sign of a nationalistic project propelling moral, even religious, policing of corporeal boundaries, managing race through fat and fat through race (Herndon 2005, p. 130–131). Furthermore, the very same discourse which declares fat people powerless targets of warlike action demands them to change themselves – a task often referred to as "easy" and "simple." Herndon argues that, like in the war against AIDS and in the war against poverty, it is impossible to separate the problem from the people who suffer from it or have come to embody it in public (Herndon 2005, p. 129). Jeannine Gailey (2014) has reflected on the consequences of the metaphors of wars and epidemics particularly for fat women by using the concept of 'hyper(in)visibility': fat women become hypervisible as objects of concern and intervention within the 'obesity epidemic' discourse, while their subjectivities, experiences and bodies remain largely invisible.

In contrast, the general atmosphere of reality TV dieting shows builds on promise, not explicitly on threat. (Kyrölä, 2014, p. 69–84). The structure of promise builds on a linear narrative which moves from a body and a life marked by shame and disgust into a body marked by pride and happiness. The structure of before and after, of emergence from shame to pride, is massively repeated and normalized in reality TV series such as *The Biggest Loser* – even though the affective appeal of the promise of weight-loss has also been contested and complicated, as contestants have told their "after the after" stories of regaining the weight or being propelled into eating disorders (Hass, 2017). Reality TV dieting shows also enable great visibility for fat bodies, otherwise relatively invisible in the media, although fatness tends to be made into a visual and affective spectacle through images of eating in close-up, crying, laughing, shivering, grinning, and sweating, stomachs bouncing in slow motion, hidden skin exposed for measuring, flesh changing shape. Audience research shows, however, that these shows invoke widely varying responses from their viewers, from empathy towards fat individuals and anger towards the shows' humiliating structures to complicity with their broader weight-loss ideology (Holland et al., 2010).

What kind of relationship between the body and the self, then, is at stake in such 'factual' representations? The procession from the 'before' to the 'after' and the pain-staking journey in between involve a shift from lived, subjective corporeality to suddenly seeing one's body as an object, something one inhabits, owns, and molds, not something one is. In news articles on the threat of fat, treating bodies as objects is a key part of producing and distributing

supposedly neutral information which has nothing to do with fat people or their stigmatization. In dieting narratives, the spotlight is on the very relation that is hidden in news articles: on the self's relation to the body, on the body's relation the world, and on the transformation of both. The 'true' and 'healthy' self, however, is always slim in factual media discourses.

In the quest of peeling out the 'true self' in reality TV fat appears to exist in an impossible space of being concretely under one's skin but socially and culturally forbidden from the material self and the core of one's being. This paradox is manifested in a representation of fatness as a shell from which to hatch or which needs to be peeled off to find the core self underneath (Kent, 2001, p. 134–135). Fat is thus only 'surface,' not an identity, and dieting is seen more as a revelation of the 'true' self in all its glory, slimness, and moral redemption. The rhetoric, or indeed imperative, of personal and individual-driven transformation obscures how societal and cultural power structures nevertheless condition people's lives and bodies in asymmetrical ways. As Cheryl Thompson (2015) points out, such an individualistic approach to fatness and self-transformation does a particularly apt job in hiding racialized, classed and gendered power structures. Thompson analyzes media images of dieting or dieted Black women in Hollywood – Oprah Winfrey, Queen Latifah, Jennifer Hudson and Octavia Spencer, who all have appeared in advertisements for dieting programs such as the Weight Watchers and Jenny Craig – arguing that they are emblematic of how middle-class Black women now have access to and success as self-disciplined and moral subjects, but only through distancing themselves from working class, presumably 'out of control' Black women (Thompson, 2015, p. 805–807).

The 'hatching' of a slim body out of a fat body can further be compared to 'coming out as fat:' both involve something previously hidden becoming visible, but they are each other's polar opposites in terms of the fat body's relationship to visibility. Queer theorists Michael Moon and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick ([1991] 2001, p. 305) famously draw a parallel between the closet of sexuality for gay men to the closet of size for fat women, looking at levels of secrecy: fatness can be downplayed with clothes and posture, but it can never be hidden. The stigma of fatness is simply the stigma of visibility. Epistemologically, the problem is not that the one inside the closet of size knows more than the outside world, as in the case of closeted gay people, but that other people think they know something about a fat woman she presumably does not. Surely if she knew, she would have done something about her fatness.

According to the logic of the closet of size, her body proves a certain 'self-delusion' which reality TV dieting shows, of course, promise to heal. But to Moon and Sedgwick, coming out as fat means instead expressing one's knowingness about one's fatness, embracing it and rejecting others' derogatory views. The 'factual' media discourses around fat do not offer any possibilities for coming out *as* fat, only coming out *from* fat. But in other genres and modalities, such as comedy, there are more possibilities for coming out as fat, unruly, unashamed and unapologetic.

Funny Fat (Suits): film and television comedy

Comedy is perhaps the only popular cultural arena where fat women and men not only have made notable appearances but also have had continuing and widespread success and fame. Anne Hole, in her research on fat female comedians, has even claimed that the fat body is so common to comedy that it is considered almost innately funny (Hole, 2003, p. 315). Successful fat comedians span from early classical Hollywood slapstick star Oliver Hardy (1892–1957) of the Laurel and Hardy thin man / fat man pair; to the 1970s and 1980s American camp sensation, drag queen Divine; from the American 'everyman' Drew Carey, who starred as a beer-drinking office worker in his own TV sitcom, *The Drew Carey Show* (1995–2004); to loud-mouthed American comedian Roseanne Barr, whose fat working-class femininity has been a source of outrage for conservative commentators and celebration for feminist researchers until rather recently (Bernstein & St. John, 2009; Rowe, 1995); and to contemporary women of color comedians such as Mo'nique and Margaret Cho who have explored the intersections of size, race and gender. Today's perhaps biggest fat comedy star is American actress Melissa McCarthy (1970–) who was Hollywood's third best paid actress in 2016 and 2017 (Elkins, 2018). She came to fame by starring in the TV sitcom *Mike and Molly* (2010–2016) and the film *Bridesmaids* (2011), in the latter as a crude-talking but kindhearted friend of the bride. From *Bridesmaids* to *Tammy* (2014) – the latter of which was a big box-office success but slammed by critics – most of McCarthy's characters have been unstylishly dressed, white, lower-class women whose sexual appetites, ability to push through tough situations, and confidence have nevertheless been rather intact (see Meeuf, 2016).

Feminist scholars of media and popular culture have passionately examined the relationship between fat women and laughter for over two decades (for example, Feuer, 1999; Hole, 2003; Kyrölä, 2014; Meeuf, 2016; Rowe, 1995). While many renowned fat comedians have turned

their fat bodies into an asset and a trademark, comedy is also a field in which size norms are reinforced. Fat jokes abound, and non-normative bodies regularly become laughingstocks. How to judge when fat and otherwise non-normative bodies are displayed only for cheap laughs versus when they pose a threat to ideas around 'normalcy' overall? Under what circumstances can laughter become a revolutionary force, and when is it also a powerful tool of policing bodily boundaries?

Particularly in mainstream Hollywood films of the 1990s and early 2000s, fat comedic roles were most commonly played by slim people in fat suits, as in body prosthetics and makeup that make one appear fat. In the 2010s, fat suits seemed to have lost some of their popularity – possibly due to the critique that they have received. However, fat suits have been and are still regularly used on TV, especially to indicate former fatness and temporary fatness, such in the Netflix series *Insatiable* (2018–), where a slim actress (Debby Ryan) plays a former fat girl who loses weight and decides to get back at her bullies, in *Friends* (1994–2004) in flashbacks to Monica's (Courteney Cox) youth as a fat girl, and in *Mad Men* (2007–2015) for Betty Draper's (January Jones) temporary weight gain. Earlier popular fat suit characters in films include Mrs. Doubtfire (Robin Williams) in *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993); Sherman Klump (Eddie Murphy) in *The Nutty Professor* (1996) and its sequels; Big Momma (Martin Lawrence) in *Big Momma's House* (2000) and its sequels; Fat Bastard (Mike Myers) in *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me* (1999) and *Austin Powers in Goldmember* (2002); and Rosemary (Gwyneth Paltrow) in *Shallow Hal* (2001) (see also Mendoza, 2009; Wykes, 2012). In contrast, melodramatic content, for example films *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* (1993), *Precious: Based on the Novel Push by Sapphire* (2009), have featured actual fat performers (Darlene Cates and Gabourey Sidibe). Why aren't fat characters always played by fat actors? Why are fat suits so popular in comedies? Do fat suits give permission to joke more viciously about fatness than if a real fat person were playing the role, or do they perhaps unwittingly protect actual fat persons from the potential harm of being laughed at? Whatever the case, fat suits have become an established way for popular comedy actors to show their 'range' without actual weight fluctuation.

The situation with fat suits, however, can be compared to the tradition of white people acting in blackface, redface, brownface, and yellowface (LeBesco, 2005; Mendoza, 2009). Whites have been perceived as generically representing 'people,' capable of performing a wider range of roles than non-white actors, since whiteness is usually not understood as a race or an

ethnicity. Similarly, slim or even thin people represent just 'people' whose dressing up as marginalized is coded comedic. Protests against fat suits may not differ greatly from earlier protests against blackface, which argued that it is degrading not to consider a social group worthy, capable, or powerful enough to represent itself (compare to Shohat & Stam, 1994, p. 190). On the other hand, fat suit comedies have also shed light on fat oppression and provided images of fat people as resourceful, successful, and valid love interests.

Fat suits relate to the common comedic film theme of cross-dressing or passing for someone else. The theme of switching gender has been particularly popular, but its comic effect seems to work mostly one way: men playing women, the dominant playing the marginalized, is funny; but women playing men rarely provokes laughter. A similar logic applies to fat and slim. Fat-to-slim dieting narratives are romantic and dramatic stories about self-transformation, but slim actors posing as fat are comedic. This often does little to unravel the gender binary or size hierarchies. Thus it makes sense that so many slim, male comedians (such as Robin Williams, Mike Myers, Eddie Murphy, Martin Lawrence, and Tyler Perry) have been so successful in double-drag of slim-to-fat and male-to-female playing fat, older women. The Black older female characters played by Black slim men have been seen as 'neo-mammies' (Mason, 2017), continuations of the Black mammy stereotype – loud, poor, fat, caretakers of white people's kids – which bloomed in the golden era of Hollywood from the 1930s to the 1950s.

Fat male bodies as sites of comedy can also be understood in terms of fear of femininity or gender non-conformity. A fat male body is coded as dangerously bordering on femininity, with visible breasts and a protruding belly. The loss of rigid bodily boundaries would mean the loss of rigid, naturalized gender differences—in other words, the fat male body in some ways represents gender instability. However, a fat male actor's fatness does not have to be a central issue in his comedy films or television shows – a privilege that fat women rarely have. Male fatness still tends to support and add to other defining features of the character, most poignantly his 'ordinariness' or 'realism', especially in television (Mosher, 2001, pp. 167–173).

In comedic images of fat women in mainstream television and film, there has been another recurring character since the mid-1990s: the deluded fat woman. This refers to an idea that fat female characters see themselves differently from how others see them. Other people's

perspectives are usually presented as the 'objective' view, while the woman's own perspective is 'deluded,' excessive, or too positive. This figure of the deluded fat woman exceeds expectations not only about body size but about properly demure sexual desires, dresses in exuberant style, and/or who speaks too loudly or too much. Typically, this character type thinks she is strikingly gorgeous; perhaps parades in flashy, scanty, or body-accentuating clothing; or acts in a sexually forthcoming way. Examples of the deluded fat woman have include, for instance, the regular supporting character Mimi Bobeck (American actress Kathy Kinney) in the TV sitcom *The Drew Carey Show* (1995–2004) who is a fat white woman who wears glaring, drag-queenish makeup and extravagant costume-like clothes: a woman always-in-excess. Another example is the character Rasputia (played by Eddie Murphy) in *Norbit* (2007) – a super-sized Black fat woman who is voraciously sexual and not shy about showing her body at all.

Even if these female characters are deemed 'delusional' and laughable, they can nevertheless also suggest a sort of a coming out as fat (Moon & Swedwick, [1991]2001) where fat people refuse to see or hear the potential disapproval around them, and focus on flaunting their bodies and selves without shame or fear. That might be mediated fantasy, but it is a very attractive one.

Sexy Fat: pornography and gender

Until the late 2000s, before the rise of social media, there was only scarce material in the media representing fatness in an explicitly 'positive' light. Several scholars of television, film, and printed press have noted that the little that there was focused almost exclusively on fat femininity as beautiful or sexy, to a degree where positivity was often collapsed with sexual desirability to others (Feuer, 1999; Hole, 2003; Kyrölä, 2014, pp. 158–165; LeBesco, 2004, pp. 50–52; Murray, 2008). I find the way in which 'positivity' and 'sexiness' tend to be equated, when it comes to fat in the media, symptomatic of at least three things. First, the rejection from the realm of attractiveness and sexuality has had devastating effects on many fat women and men's images of themselves, and entry into that realm seems all the more attractive due to this denial. As Jane Feuer (1999) has pointed out, it is hard to struggle against sexual objectification without ever having been a sexual object. Second, becoming the willing object of sexually charged looks is habitually and increasingly portrayed as not only pleasurable but empowering for all women (Heyes, 2007; Gill & Elias, 2014), and this

promise of empowerment through sexiness is unsurprisingly applied also to fat women. Finally, feminist criticism of too narrowly defined beauty ideals has become mainstream to a large extent, but with ambiguous results. The demands are directed at the narrowness and uniformity of beauty standards, while their gendered, class-related, and racialized structures are not necessarily perceived problematic as such.

An example of commercial appropriation of feminist critique of beauty ideals is the well-known advertisement series *The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty*. The campaign aimed to broaden the range of bodies understood as beautiful, but utilized models who differed only slightly in terms of size, age, gender expression, shape, or race from contemporary body norms, and did nothing to undermine the equation of beauty with women's worth (for example, Johnston & Taylor, 2008; Murray, 2013). Another example is the existence of beauty pageants for fat women in different parts of the world, such as the American Beauties Plus Pageant, Finnish Miss XL, the Thai Miss Jumbo Queen, and Miss Fat South Africa, which critique thin privilege and beauty standards but ignore feminist critique of the beauty pageant institution (Kyrölä, 2014, pp. 165–173; see also LeBesco, 2004, p. 51; Murray, 2008, pp. 117–120).

Advertisements, fat beauty pageants and other mainstream media images where fat bodies are celebrated as "sexy" and "desirable" often exclude very large or supersize fat bodies. Such bodies tend to appear more often in the contexts of tragedy, sensationalism, and the 'obesity epidemic' (see also Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013). In the current media culture, images of supersize desirability cannot expect acceptance from mainstream audiences, but they do however exist – particularly in the realm of pornography. Once fat is imaged in an explicitly sexual context with the aim of arousal, the images stop seeking mainstream acceptance and fat suddenly becomes a quality catering to fetishists, viewers with 'deviant' desires. Fat porn appears in the fetish section of pornography websites, while fat activists tend to see the fetish status as insulting, preferring the normalization of sexual desire towards and by fat people. At the same time, it is the very denial and rejection of fat by the mainstream media that easily lends fat a pornographic significance and arouses. (Kipnis, 1999, pp. 94–96.) As Jerry Mosher (2001, pp. 171, 187) notes, the simultaneous impulse to play up the over-visibility of fat embodiment and hide its sexual connotations easily contributes to seeing fat as pornographic, even if it is not presented in a pornographic context.

Fat pornography, especially in LGBTQ contexts, has been seen subversive by many scholars in redefining fat corporeality as a site of shameless, open pleasure, and pointing to ways of re-imagining non-heteronormative sexualities (Kent, 2001, pp. 142–145; Kipnis, 1999, pp. 114–115; Kulick, 2005, pp. 91–92; LeBesco, 2004, pp. 48–49). Some scholars argue that fat is, in fact, necessarily queer, since fat sexuality is culturally understood as deviant (LeBesco, 2004, pp. 88–89). Don Kulick (2005, pp. 89–92) suggests fat pornography can be seen to challenge both the socially sanctioned forms of pleasurable body zones and the expected temporality of sex, especially when the porn involves practices of feeding, being fed, and gaining weight over time (see also Kyrölä, 2014, pp. 178–189).

In mainstream media culture, fat women tend to be either desexualized or hypersexualized, portrayed as pseudomasculine or ultrafeminine, or both at the same time (see Gailey, 2014). Therefore the strategy of normalizing desire towards fat bodies, and fat people as desiring subjects, is an important one. However, in pornography the denial and pathologization of fat desire and sexuality is not downplayed but emphasized as the very engine of 'forbidden' arousal – with controversial results.

Virtual Fat: fat activism and online communities

Today, blogs, discussion groups and social media sites abound online exploring alternative ideas about what kind of bodies are valuable, capable and attractive. A key area of this online world has been called the "Fatosphere" which focuses on content by and for self-identified fat people and fat activists (Lupton, 2017; Pausé, 2016). The legacy of the fatosphere can be traced back to the mid-1990s, and American discussion groups such as *FD*, a discussion group for pro-fats, and *FAS*, a bulletin list for fat lesbians specifically. In both groups, discussions varied from where to find right clothes sizes to how to relate to sex as a fat individual, and to struggles against sizeism. (LeBesco, 2004, pp. 99–101.) The fatosphere is still rather compartmentalized into the more heterosexually oriented and the queer subsections.

The emphasis on straight or queer fat femininity describes the vast majority of the Fatosphere (Taylor, 2018). Blogs or communities that focus on fat masculinity or queer fat masculinity center on the gay bear subculture – men attracted to and/or identifying as fat or chubby men. These online communities revolve mostly around sex and dating rather than activism –

although they can also be seen as political (e.g. Monaghan, 2005). Most of current fatosphere content is created by and focused on white bodies, even though there is an increasing Black and people of color multi-platform activist presence and following (compare to Murray, 2008, p. 118).

Fat activist and 'body positive' online spheres have attracted ample attention from feminist media scholars during the 2010s (for example, Afful & Ricciardelli, 2015; Gill & Elias, 2014; Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013; Hynnä & Kyrölä, 2019; Murray, 2013; Sastre, 2014). While the 'body positive' movement has its roots in fat activism, many fat activists see its contemporary forms as depoliticized, since 'body positivity' tends to center normative or only slightly larger than the norm bodies, while fat activism stands up for fat, non-white, disabled, and otherwise marginalized bodies (for example Dionne, 2017). One critique, however, that is relevant to both 'body positivity' and some forms of fat activism, concerns the way in which discourses of pride and self-love can transfer the cultural demand to change one's body into a demand to change one's affective relationship to one's body (Johnston & Taylor, 2008). Has the imperative to have the right body become an imperative to feel right about one's body? What if in addition to failing to attain a normative-sized body, you might also fail to feel positive about your non-normative body?

While taking these important critiques into consideration, it is nevertheless also important to think about why 'body positivity' and the Fatosphere have gained such widespread popularity online, how people engage with them, and how they make people feel (Hynnä & Kyrölä,2019). Online communities and sites which focus on fat activism or body positivity should not be dismissed too quickly as a new form of consumerism, or forced 'positivity'. In actual practice, many blogs, social media accounts and groups offer opportunities to support, community and practical solutions to issues such as dealing with discrimination and body anxiety, finding stylish clothes as well as romantic partners, and navigating through various everyday activities in a world that often excludes fat people.

The Fatosphere changes shape continuously, as media technologies and preferred platforms develop and vary. For example, in the late 2000s, it was still easier for individual fat activists to stand out and make a name for themselves through active blogging only. By the late 2010s, fact activist blogging has lost much of its popularity and status to other social media forms,

such as posting on Instagram and vlogging on YouTube. New exciting work is constantly emerging around this cultural arena.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined some key analytical frameworks for fat in various genres of media, from news to reality TV, from comedy to pornography and social media. The rise of social media, where content is not only created from top down but essentially by followers, commentators, and community members, highlights how there is in fact no media representation that would unequivocally carry only one meaning, or feeling. When it comes to fat in the media, more research is needed on how audience members, as well as content co-creators, actually relate to and engage with images of fatness. Comparisons between fat experience and fat media representation are still rather sparse, although studies imply that there are important connections. For example, the ways in which fat women often experience their bodies as 'liminal,' or stuck-in-waiting, and the ways in which fat in the media is habitually depicted as matter-on-its-way-to-disappear, yet persistently there (see Kyrölä & Harjunen, 2017). The very existence and popularity of the Fatosphere and the body positive movement online imply that at least large portions of the contemporary audiences, fat or not, are getting tired of how humiliation-based reality TV, 'obesity epidemic' rhetoric, and fat suit comedies make them feel about their bodies as well as bodies of others. They are looking for something more joyful and unapologetic, and welcoming a broader range of bodies into the mainstream in a broader range of roles.

By looking at fat in the media, we can see how the broader cultural boundaries of 'normalcy' and acceptability have shifted within the last few decades not only in terms of body size, but also in terms of gender expression, race, and sexuality. Cultural and mediated anxieties around and calls to manage fat may often function as a (thin) veil for managing something else, such as 'normal' sexuality, or class and race antagonisms. Today, we also see bodies in mainstream media that were almost unthinkable to see – and thus to consider existing and valid subjects – twenty or thirty years ago. Supersize bodies exist in contemporary media, whereas there were only a handful of scattered examples up until the 2000s. Until Gabourey Sidibe played Claireece 'Precious' Jones in *Precious: Based on the Novel Push by Sapphire* (2009, USA), there were virtually no Black, fat teenage girls in lead roles in western media.

As I underlined in the beginning of this chapter, however, visibility does not necessarily equal power. Increased visibility can also entail ever more complex and insidious forms of marginalization and management, such as how successful Black women can have some access to white middle class privilege through dieting (Thompson, 2015), and how body positivity can take forms that are stripped of its radical fat activist past and address and feature mainly normative-sized people (Johnston & Taylor, 2009). Fat in the media is never only about fat, but about how contemporary culture deals more broadly with bodily vulnerability and transformability. Through the construction of fatness as a somehow 'exceptional' and dangerous bodily quality, when it is in fact a very common way of inhabiting one's body, bodies deemed 'normal' can perhaps hold on to the illusion of safety a little bit longer, as if all our bodies were not vulnerable and in constant change. Media images of fat bodies make audiences confront that vulnerability, for better or for worse.

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