

Adults growing sideways:

Feederist pornography and fantasies of infantilism

FEEDING IS A term commonly used in connection to children, when they are still unable to provide nourishment for themselves. Mothers feed their young: it is a way of showing love, sustaining life and spurring growth; a relation based on need that our culture deems strictly non-sexual. Furthermore, a child's generous appetite is deemed healthy and innocent. But when an adult is fed or urged to eat by another adult over an extended period of time in order for them to grow bigger, the gesture of feeding gains suddenly a not only sexual but pornographic meaning, moving to the area of fetishism and cultural aversion. In this last case, we have arrived to a subgenre of fat pornography: feederist porn.

In this article, I will examine feederist pornography and documentary in relation to the figure of the child and cultural tendencies of adult infantilization. The "child" is, in this context, understood as a specific but changing, temporally organized and hierarchically structured position that can be occupied—albeit somewhat differently—by children or adults (see e.g. Stockton 2009). My interests, for the purposes of this article, lie within the latter option: the partial occupation of the figure of the

child (cf. Castañeda 2001) by adult bodies in a cultural context where some forms of adult infantilization are idealized and sexualized, while in other contexts infantilization is a form of not-so-subtle deprecation—which can also entail sexualization.

The media material I consider includes two documentary works on feederist sexual practices: the British, sensationalist and rather widely distributed *Big Love: Fat Girls and Feeders* (2003) which focuses on heterosexual scenarios, and the Canadian documentary video art work called *Hard Fat* (Frederic Moffet, 2002) exploring gay male weight-gain settings. In addition, I use some feederist Internet sites that I have followed for some years as points of comparison. In the online porn, the focus is almost completely on the feedee or gainer body, the fat and growing body, whereas in the documentaries the focus is also on feeders, those who take pleasure in someone else's weight gain. With the documentary examples, I explore how these adult sexual relationships are represented as multifaceted twists to gendered parent–child relationships, queer in various senses, and how viewers are invited to relate to them in conflicted ways largely due to their incestuous or infantilizing tendencies.

Feederist online pornography overlaps with the documentaries that also address such porn, but the explicit sexualization of bodies that are signifiers of simultaneously infantile and deady embodiment in contemporary culture, and the address of viewers as assumed appreciators, brings their allure close to pro-anorexia (i.e. pro-ana) websites and pornography—a connection I will consider further. Both of these porn genres are not something that one simply runs into: they have to be searched for specifically. However, feederist websites have not provoked anywhere near as much concern as pro-ana websites in terms of protecting susceptible young viewers. The reason for this difference in reception, I suggest, can be found in how these brands of porn are oriented towards the ideal of the slim and carefully controlled body: while pro-ana ideology glorifies a body

that goes “too far” but still in the direction of that ideal, feederist fantasies and practices aspire to the complete opposite direction, thus deemed less understandable. In both cases, the bodies engaged in “excessive” transformation are infantilized and victimized at the same time, their agency denied—a stance problematic from a feminist and queer perspective.

(Fat) adults infantilized: sideways growth, subjection and idealization

In studies of visual culture, infantilization has long been seen as one of the common tropes that produce and maintain subordination, belittlement and humiliation of marginalized groups. For instance, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam have identified infantilization as one of the key tropes of colonialism, where colonized people were seen to embody an earlier or arrested stage of human development. Examples of such infantilization abound in Hollywood cinema, for instance in the adult but child-like, simple-minded, child-befriending African American characters like Bill “Bojangles” Robinson. (Shohat and Stam 1994:139–140.) Women have also been seen as analogous to children, weaker “others” characterized by dependence and need for special care and protection, not having full access to subjectivity and agency in the history of western thought where the ideal individual subject has been traditionally defined as adult male (e.g. Thorne 1987, Castañeda 2001:31–32).

Fat, as it is habitually represented in western mainstream media, has become a readily available sign of adult regression into infantilism or inability to develop “past” it: fat signals assumed greed for immediate gratification, lack of autonomous and sustainable moderation, preference for narcissistic and oral autoerotic pleasure over “more mature” genital and partner-oriented pleasure (cf. Ulaby 2001:156–157). Incalculable newspaper and magazine articles claim that the growing average weight of western adult populations derives from an inability or unwillingness to act

like proper adults, in other words, to have control over their body and psyche and take responsibility not only for their own well-being but the well-being of the society. Subsequently, disciplinary actions are urgently called for.

Fat seems to thus blur the visual distinction between children and adults: fat children can break the most immediately recognizable sign of this distinction by growing “too fast” into adult size, but the most prominent cultural fears connected to fat involve the potential continuing growth of adults, when growth in size is culturally acceptable—although to a strictly moderated degree—only in children and pregnant women. Thus, this kind of growth is strictly marked as regression or pathology. Fat’s cultural connection to reproduction, its occasional physical appearance of pregnancy, furthermore obscures the representational coordinates of gender, according to which swelling bellies are expected only of women during a limited time period and soft flesh and bulges signify femininity, but a large size and taking space corporeally are understood as male characteristics (see e.g. Bordo 1993, Gieske 2000).

The blurring of age- and gender-related binaries becomes played up and sexualized in feederist imagery. Adult feeder men often act like obsessed mothers occupied by their “children’s” development, echoing the trainers of televisual dieting series, seemingly enjoying creationist sexual fantasies of growing another adult body into something beyond its present existence. The predominance of men as feeders also contributes to the fetishistic or pathological status of feederism, since it goes against gender expectations: it would be perfectly “normal” behavior from women to urge their male partners to eat and even put on weight, but when men are doing the same to women or other men, it becomes a fetish. Some of the fat and/or growing bodies, male or female, resemble maternal pregnant embodiment with protruding, tightly ballooning bellies, but some of them bring to mind the body of an infant, with layering fat, lack of clearly distinguish-

ble gendered features, and even very limited ability to move. The growing, however, does not happen vertically “up” like with children, nor with the purpose of “bulking up” like in bodybuilding, but literally sideways (see Stockton 2009:11, 20) into expanding fatness.

Kathryn Bond Stockton introduces the term “growing sideways” to account for ways of growing that may not pertain to a certain age and defy the heteronormative expectation of “growing up” into full stature and then stop (ibid.:11). Her interests lie in re-imagining the figure of the queer child, or in queering of the figure of the child, not as epitomic of “arrested development” but rather as connection and extensions of a different kind that can illuminate lateral relations between “adults” and “children”. One materialization of the “child” growing sideways is the grown homosexual, which Stockton also briefly relates to fat as a metaphor of a failure to grow “up”—instead expanding sideways. (Ibid.:13, 20–22.) In the following, I aim to take this connection further and examine how the notion of growing sideways can shed light on the interconnections of sexualized adult infantilization, fat, and subjectivity. To begin with, the figures of the queer child and the infantilized fat adult certainly both seem to carry cultural fears of uncontrollable and improperly oriented desires and growth that threaten the ideal of the self-contained and clearly delineated (adult male) subject.

From not-yet-subject to no-longer-subject

Claudia Castañeda has interrogated the child as a figure in feminist, psychoanalytical and poststructuralist theorizations of the subject and subjectivity, again not as a position that would necessarily be occupied by specific kinds of bodies. To Castañeda, the child functions as the necessary ontological origin of the subject in these theorizations, the not-yet-subject but also not yet subjected and tied into structures of subordination like adults. The child thus becomes the adult’s Other in psychoanalytical terms, the

space that comes before the subject and the growth into willing compliance with gendered subjection (Castañeda 2001:45–46).

The cultural tendencies towards both idealization and pathologization of infantile adulthood can be read in light of Castañeda's discussion as adult fantasies of being free of societal constraints and as punishment when those constraints are broken. However, whether an adult is forcibly pushed into or voluntarily struggles towards occupation of the symbolic space of the child, such not-yet-subjectivity can never be reached, since subjectivity is not a choice that one can make or refuse at any point. If it is accepted that the *figure* of the child can be occupied by adult and child bodies, then the structure of not-yet-ness becomes questionable, since infantilized adults would rather fall into an area of no-longer-subjectivity, or even more accurately diminished subjectivity, approximation of not-yetness. The irreversibility of the time structure in the theoretical figure of the child that Castañeda examines cannot hold, if subjectivity is understood as a prerequisite to agency and thus something adult bodies have asymmetrical access to. Indeed, Castañeda argues that both children and adults should instead be theorized as “entities that are never entirely subjected”, not individuals in the sense of the “subject” or as human beings with or without agency (ibid.:48–49). Taking up this argument, I would add that when the “child” is understood more as a theoretical figuration than an actual child, then this not-yet-subject is always already gendered: its approximation (for it is out of reach, unknowable fully) is more available to female bodies in contemporary culture. Furthermore, this “child” should be specified to refer to a figuration of the infant, since to be not-yet-subject means that there is no clear differentiation between the self and the other.

Cultural tendencies of adult infantilization, like in the case of fat adults or adults engaged in feederist practices and porn, incorporate both sides of the aspirational not-yet-subjectivity: defiance to subjection and rejec-

tion from subjectivity. It is hardly a coincidence that it is at a time often characterized as postfeminist (see e.g. Gill 2007, McRobbie 2008), when feederist pornography has moved from being nearly unimaginable in public to hover on the fringes of “general knowledge” through an occasional sensationalist documentary and online availability. Today the child-like woman has been elevated into a sign of sexiness and empowerment rather than subordination. “Girlishness” or child-like qualities become easily recognized as heightened desirability, from the ideal of hairless pubic areas in pornography to finger-in-mouth poses and high-pitched voices of female pop stars, and “girly” fashion is marketed to older and older adults. Desirable childishness is however strictly reserved in mainstream sexual imagery to bodies that seem slim, young and heteronormative enough. When attached to fat bodies, and furthermore supersized fat bodies, the sexualization of infantility suddenly turns pathological or at the very least suspicious. Moreover, it is from the tension between pathologization and eroticization of infantility, between fatness as a sign of “wrongly directed” desire both intensely visible and intensely denied, that the dynamics of feederist pornography arise.

As Laura Kipnis has suggested, feederist porn imagery reverses the mainstream body ideals and norms, and derives its potential to both arouse and shock from its deviance from the realm of the “normal,” the accepted (cf. Kipnis 1999:94–95). This means that to make feederist porn work like porn, it is essential to make this reversal recognizable in feederist porn: the visual structures must appear familiar and strange enough. In a way, feederist porn holds a mirror up to the ethos of the adult body as a project that can and should be endlessly reshaped through continuous work—only in feederist images, the direction transformation is reversed from shrinking to expanding, from tightening to loosening. This brings us to a comparison between eroticized fantasies of the shrinking body and the expanding body, a comparison that also points towards the contradictory

gendered demands on what adult and infantile embodiment should consist of in contemporary western culture.

Desire and death: growing vs. shrinking sideways

Perhaps the most obvious mainstream reference point to feederist porn is the hugely popular industry of dieting and weight-loss focused media products. Whereas dieting imagery offers entry into the privileged world of “adult” control, containment and heteronormative desirability, feederist imagery draws on the naughtiness and regressive appeal of bodies and desires marked as infantile. Paradoxically, I argue, adulthood as autonomous subjectivity is signified visually by the sideways shrinking body, and infantility and diminished subjectivity by the sideways growing and expanding fat adult body, pushed to extreme in feederist porn – although growing “up” and bigger in childhood connotes potential entry into adult agency. Still, also in the sideways shrinking movement, the threshold of sliding from normative “adult” embodiment to “infantile” pre-subjectivity is slippery, which strikingly concretizes the leakiness of the category of the subject.

Numerous reality television series franchised around the world that aim for participants’ weight-loss, such as *You Are What You Eat* (originally UK, 2004–2007) and *The Biggest Loser* (originally USA, 2004–), treat fat adult participants as if they were undisciplined children. Through parental tough love of a male–female pair of extremely rip trainers, the soft, malleable participant bodies are punished, schooled and hardened until they finally earn entry into adult world by bodily approximating the “parents”. The questioning or rejection of these authorities is punished with belittlement, shaming and physical punishment in the form of strenuous exercise, reminiscent of harsh “old-fashioned” parenting strategies which would surely seem cruel if targeted at actual children but righteous when the space of the “child” is occupied by adult bodies. As fatness is marked as

always “one’s own fault”, self-inflicted infantilism, the “parental” authority figures cannot be too harsh. The project of dieting then becomes a mini coming-of-age narrative, where successful weight-loss means entry into the same adult world with the authorities and the reward of being treated as an equal. Moreover, the weight-loss makeover is often represented as entry to the world of conventionally organized heterosexual attractiveness, framed as an incredible privilege. The “infantile”, self-sufficient oral phase of fatness, visualized always by extreme close-ups to participants’ mouths eating and drinking forbidden goodies, has to be left behind.

Paradoxically enough, this very same discourse that denies fat people’s agency also demands agency from them in the form of enormous and sustained efforts and will-power that constitutes dieting—or more accurately life-long “weight management”—as the only culturally intelligible way to become full-fledged adult subjects. In a way, this goes exactly against what Benjamin R. Barber (2007) has termed the “infantilist ethos” of modern consumer culture, where the ideal adult consumer citizen is encouraged to be increasingly child-like and choose immediate gratification and narcissistic gain over long-term solutions and consideration of consequences. Contemporary body management consumer culture is not at the focus of Barber’s discussion, and understandably so, since it would pose serious complications to his argument. The forceful “encouragement” into life-long engagement in body shape and weight management regimes, i.e. “adult” solutions, also serves consumerist goals. As feminist theorists of the body such as Susan Bordo have pointed out, the messages to consume and indulge endlessly, while at the same time looking like having absolute mastery over bodily desires, coexist and build on each other (Bordo 1993:15), making infantilization of adults and early “maturing” of children (often materialized in entry to weight management regimes) two sides of the same coin. Nor does Barber consider the gendered dimensions of infantilization: how a certain infantile impulsivity and narcissism may

be idealized in men, but in women deemed more easily pathological (cf. Bordo 1993:199–212).

Considering this paradoxical duality, it is hardly surprising that the weight-gain process as a forbidden slide away from “adult” containment is imaged in *Big Love*, *Hard Fat* and feederist web porn in a very similar manner as in dieting narratives built on the “before” and “after” format. First of all, if dieting series were simply watched on rewind, they could easily pass as feederist porn, which further blurs the differentiation between adult embodiment as contained and shrinking and infantile embodiment as expanding. Extreme close-ups of eating fatty foods that are the basic stuff of the “before” moments in *You Are What You Eat* are shown in *Big Love* and *Hard Fat*, turn the programs explicitly pornographic. While in dieting narratives such images are expected to arouse disgust in the viewers, in feederist porn similar images are assumed to arouse viewers, period. Also both imageries of bodily transformation, whether signifying growth out of or into infantilized adult fatness, emphasize the scale of the transformation through juxtapositions, repeated moments of measurement as the height of excitement, postures, camera angles and clothing from which participants grow “out” of.

This is exemplified in an image of Rick from *Hard Fat* (Fig. 1), where his slim, flat-bellied pre-gain body is shown sideways, back to back to his later gaining body with a protruding belly and wider limbs. It is implied that this or similar images have been posted by Rick online at a website directed to gay men interested in feederist practices and fantasies. Also, feederist images imitate and draw on the obsessive and minutely executed measuring of weight so familiar from dieting narratives (see Fig. 2). Weighing the feedee’s body in a kind of a swing scale where she lies instead of stepping on a scale standing further accentuates the infantilization of her body. Both feederist porn and mainstream media dieting narratives also play into the not-yet-subjectivity of fat bodies by de-personalizing them th-

rough the visual structure known as the “headless fatty” among fat activists: in other words cutting off the head or the face of a fat person and including only the torso (Cooper 2007). In a way, the headless fatties phenomenon testifies to the pornographic significance of fat in today’s popular culture, even and perhaps particularly outside a pornographic context.

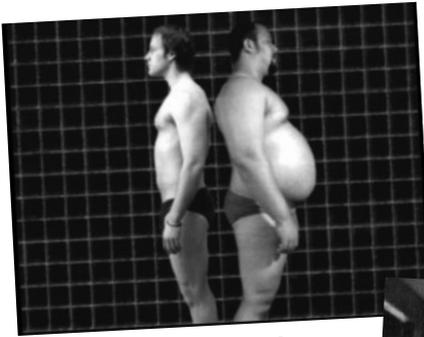


Fig. 1. Rick is gaining weight in Hard Fat.



Fig. 2. Feeder Mark shows a video where he films his wife Gina’s weighing in the documentary Big Love (2003).

Secondly, both dieting narratives and representations of feederism seem to involve a creationist fantasy of sorts, although in partially different ways in terms of who is understood as the agent and beneficiary of such creation. In dieting narratives, the fantasy involves autonomous self-recreation through the shrinking body: dieting is represented as empowering realization of one’s inner self, which can only emerge in a slim body (e.g. Heyes

2007:28–29). Still, the strict parent figures (trainers, experts, nutritionists, doctors) are essential “helpers” in this self-creation and constant reminders of what the acceptable embodied self should look like. As such, they can be seen as stand-in figures of the cultural body norm that functions so forcefully exactly through the discourse of offering subjectivity, agency and empowerment, obscuring the aspect of subjection.

In feederist imagery, creationist agency depends much on the gender of the parties involved, emphasizing the gendered power structures of such fantasies more generally. In the documentary *Big Love*, feedee women are portrayed as growing sideways first and foremost because of their male partners’ desires and suffering for it, although also getting pleasure from it. Interviewee Gina tells that as a young fat girl growing “up” in Hollywood she was treated “as less than human [...] like a monster, a mutant”—in other words, she could never even approximate the realm of adult subjectivity which marked her growth rather as sideways than “up”. Mark was Gina’s first boyfriend and made her feel desirable for the first time in her life. When the couple got married, Mark began to encourage Gina to gain weight, photographing and filming the process and posting the material online, eventually charging for its viewing. Gina talks of Mark in contradictory terms: the documentary is careful to depict her as an intelligent, reflective person who is not simply a victim without agency, but also suggests that her sense of self is inextricably entangled with Mark’s desire.

In the documentary, Mark repeats over and over that fattening Gina and feederism overall involves first and foremost fantasy. He does not seem to comprehend that although it might be “just” a fantasy for him, Gina carries the concrete consequences of it in her material body. Eventually she became immobile and dependent on Mark for all basic functions from personal hygiene to eating, emotional intimacy to human contact overall—an infantilized bodily state in all respects. Gina points out that when she was at the height of desirability in Mark’s eyes, sex in a genital

sense was impossible—care-taking took its place entirely. She tells: “Well I think it was tremendously kind of me to help Mark live out his fantasy. I did it, not without some sacrifice.” Mark, in his part, tells how much work it was to take care of Gina: he left his day job and made their living with the videos he filmed of Gina’s weight gain. Gina says she does not share Mark’s attraction to fat and fattening, but she profoundly enjoyed Mark’s adoring attention and the popularity of her gaining pictures on the Internet. There is acknowledged pleasure received from being seen as desirable and submitting one’s body to serve one’s partner’s fantasies, but in retrospect, Gina is not sure if it was worth the extreme risks. After losing her ability to move independently, Gina confides she became seriously afraid of dying. She had a gastric bypass operation and lost weight from 375 to 190 kilograms. This, it is told in the documentary, drove their marriage into a crisis. Mark comments with alternating distraught and warmth: “I miss the care-giving [...] If I could’ve paid the bills somehow [...] and stayed home all the time to take care of her, we probably would still be there.” To which Gina says in a high-pitched, frustrated voice: “No—‘cause you know what, the reality is that I probably would be dead.” And Mark quickly replies with a tuneless voice: “Yes that’s true.”

Mark, then, becomes a caricature of a monstrous, suffocating lover-mother who only sees his “offspring” as his own creation and an appendix of himself, refusing to allow the other to grow “up” into separate subjectivity. This subsuming mother is a figure more often embodied by actual women in popular culture (e.g. Creed 1993), but its horror is even more crucially the horror of non-differentiation, where the borders between the self and other, life and death become blurred (Stacey 1997:91, 95). Such non-differentiation is, at least to some extent, culturally acceptable when the space of the “child” is occupied by an actual infant, but when that space is occupied by an infantilized adult, the attempted suffocation of subjectivity appears all the more monstrous. In *Big Love*, the offspring is

simultaneously “grown” into eroticized maternity: one of the essential elements of Mark’s fantasy is maternal embrace expansive enough for an adult man to sink into. The size difference obvious in Mark and Gina’s embrace along with the implied hierarchy (Mark as having the “upper hand”) indeed brings to mind a mother and a child in complexly tangled ways (Fig. 3). The line between admiration and appropriation, being a lover and being a parent, seems thin or non-existent. Such extreme and concrete infantilization, to the point of early infantile lack of mobility and dependence on the care-taker, deems the adult sideways-growing fat body as first and foremost an extension of someone else that plays the role of the “parent”, not having autonomous agency. The symbolic parent-child romance connects the feederist heterosexual but non-heteronormative couple further to traditions of representing homosexual romance, where lesbian lovers as mother and child is a clichéd trope (Stockton 2009:93).



Fig. 3. Mark provides nurture to the infantilized wife/offspring/mother.

In *Hard Fat*, interviewee Rick's voiceover tells a quite different story from Gina: according to his words, his weight-gain desires began from his own interest in building more mass, first through body-building. He noticed he really enjoyed that in addition to muscles, his belly was growing, and he uploaded pictures of his growth on the Internet. He received lots of positive feedback, and his partner liked the way he was changing, so Rick explains he set out to gain more and more weight.

The difference in whether sideways expansion is represented as self-originating, autonomous agency or submission of one's whole embodied self to another person's fantasy could be explained as a difference between individuals, or a difference between sensationalist mainstream documentary and independent video art work. These factors undoubtedly play important parts, but I would claim that gendered structures and expectations are at least as crucial. When the sideways-growing gainer body is male, the gaining process does not appear as easily regressive or infantilizing, as opposed to gaining women: for example, Rick's slim "before" body looks boyish in comparison to his larger (and more hairy) "after" body, and a similar pattern is repeated in gay male feederist online porn. Rather than youth or infantilism, mature middle-age becomes sexualized: the ideal body of gay male feederism is simultaneously hypermasculine and feminized, resembling pregnant embodiment, although this growth still hardly signifies growing "up" into heteronormative reproductive maturity. Gaining women become much more easily interpreted as regressive and tragic, since entry into adult femininity demands learning not to take too much space—but the reading as regressive can also be another way of keeping that space confined. Gainer men do not move against gendered norms but take the idealization of adult men's bigger size to the extreme. It may also be easier for the viewer to believe that gay male gainers are willing actors and self-creators of their own growth due to the masculine norm of the autonomous subject, whereas heterosexual feedee women fall more to

the area of infantile neediness and necessary submission to an authority figure. This is not however by any means a rule without exception but more a tendency that unavoidably produces also the sexualization of its reversal. For instance, one blogger, heterosexual-identified Teddy Bear declares on *The Biggest Fattest Blog*: “We are super obese men who wish to take on a more effeminate or even infantile appearance through our ever increasing obesity. We are super obese men who are proud to be sissified, timid, and docile wimps!” Such statements certainly testify to the sexual infantilization (and feminization) of fat and growing male bodies, but also claim agency in refusing ideals of dominant adult heteromascularity.

The pornography of extreme bodies

These infantilized and sexualized representations of bodies involved in feederism thus both maintain and resist traditional gendered preconceptions of what constitutes adult subjectivity or submission. As such, they bear many striking similarities to pro-ana online porn images, as Juulia Jyränki (2007: 249–260) has examined them. In both, adult bodies can be seen to represent a flight from adulthood, symbolic childhood of a kind, through lack of conventional bodily markers of gender difference and as signs of diminished or no-longer-subjectivity (approximation of not-yet-subject). Both become defined as fetish porn because of the assumed mainstream marginality and invisibility of the bodies they display, and the fetish status also makes them “hardcore” (Williams 1989:6–7; Jyränki 2007:256). Both would be rather effortlessly readable as queer, if one chooses to use “queer” as an adjective defined as “against the normal, rather than the heterosexual” (Warner 1993:xxvi). These porn genres almost never show genitalia or sexual acts in the conventional sense. Partners are usually absent from the images. Typical feederist porn, as it is also depicted in the documentaries in focus of this article, entails close-ups of supersized fat bodies or body parts such as bellies, unidentifiable folds of

flesh, and mouths (Cf. Jyränki 2007:255–259).

Furthermore, feederist online porn resembles pro ana sites in displaying forbidden and marginalized bodies without recognizable sexual acts but still deemed clearly pornographic. Feederist porn, just as pro-ana images, and representations of nude children, becomes understood as porn due to the cultural denial of sexuality from actual and symbolic child bodies (Ibid.: 250, 254.). In feederist porn (if the face of the person is included at all), the bodies depicted often appear childlike in the sense that they tend to simply sit or lie down and smile at the camera as if innocently. One part of the obscene effect comes from the cultural assumption that a fat person still cannot be innocent, as their bodies are deemed always already “their won fault”: rude impositions onto others’ space, signs of marginalization they brought upon themselves, results of voluntarily diminished agency. Another even more crucial part of the assumed obscenity derives from the way in which extremely fat (and growing) bodies have come to simultaneously signify infantile asexuality and death, again much like the anorexic body. According to strict cultural prohibitions, bodies that remind viewers both of death and infantility should not be set as objects or subjects of sexual desire – which they nevertheless are in these cases (Cf. *ibid*:250–251.). Swelling adult bodies connote imminent self-destruction in mainstream contemporary media, and fat is ritually seen as a force exploding from the inside, if something is not urgently done for its containment (Kyrölä 2010:121–149). This tendency makes fat bodies often appear distant if not absent as persons, but overly close as matter without depth: dehumanized fetish objects.

However, what differentiates infantilized adult bodies on feederist porn sites from pro-ana sites and actual child pornography is that no wider concerns have been expressed on the former’s potential effects. Just as pro-ana imagery, feederist imagery can be seen to promote potentially deadly practices and lifestyles. But whereas the anorexic strives to the general

direction of the cultural ideal and the normalized process of shrinking, only takes it “too far”, the gainer transforms to the opposite direction. Due to the rareness of even much smaller fat bodies represented as objects of sexual desire, the few representations that do exist and circulate do not seem to raise much worry for being “bad examples” amongst the endless plethora of images with quite oppositional messages. Even those voices that seem obsessed with protecting children from the threats of fat do not dare to make the claim that fat would be represented in a “too positive” light in the media.

From the body to desire and pleasure

Although not explicitly pornography themselves, the documentaries *Big Love* and *Hard Fat* include lots of examination of feederist porn images and could therefore be indeed used as feederist pornography. In that sense, they continue the tradition of “scientia sexualis,” visual “scientific documentation” of male and female sexuality and corporeality which, according to Linda Williams, forms the background to hard-core pornography’s obsession with visual evidence of pleasure (Williams 1989/1999:34–36). A crucial element of hard-core porn is thus male ejaculation, the “money shot,” but the real “problem” is female pleasure and orgasm which cannot be measured or proved in the same sense. Pornography, like documentaries on sexuality, involves the masculine will to knowledge on sexuality through visually exposing and exploring that which is usually hidden from the viewpoint of male norms. Therefore, popular plot lines include women’s “growth” into finding the key to their pleasure, and their involuntary submission to it as the proof of its genuineness. (Ibid:50, 53.) Feederist porn, however, cannot involve moments of “truth” that prove pleasure in a similar sense, since what is most eroticized is the temporally unlimited process of sideways growth. The sexual focus on the whole body, its surfaces and openings, along with orality, relates also to the Freud’s notion

of polymorphous perversity: a child in the pregenital phase, before the organization and subordination of sexuality into a genital and reproductive form, derives pleasure from any part of its body, however focusing first on oral pleasure (Freud 1904–1905/2000; see also Ulaby 2001:156). In this sense, feederist imagery could be seen to exemplify a radical, even utopian return to pleasure without confinement, a time without subjection, desire as free-flowing agency before differentiation into subjects and objects. But whose pleasures and desires are at stake and what could their politics be?

When thinking of feederist desire instead of bodily markers of feederist practices, the feeder begins to appear all of a sudden as infantile instead of the literally sideways-growing bodies, instead of representing the incestuous symbolic “parent”. For example, during the first minutes of *Big Love*, the camera wanders on a fat woman’s body, ending on her drowsy face, lips slightly parted. A female voice-over speaks softly: “They touch me like I’m made of some plush material,” while classical piano music plays in the background. A little later, Mark is shown watching a video of Gina at her fattest and commenting longingly: “In my opinion, she is still the most beautiful woman there has ever been. Gina is an entire landscape of very beautiful, soft girl...” While he speaks, the camera slides in close-up over Gina’s body, breasts, stomach, chin, which do indeed look like landscape. Mark’s interests lie in this landscape of non-hierarchical body parts that he had hoped could spread out over an indefinable period of time.

These images invite also the viewer to look and feel the desirability of supersize fat feminine bodies—only to later “expose” those desires as pathological. The revelation that these images and videos were made by Mark for his own arousal at the expense of Gina’s well-being makes looking at them feel like having “accidentally” participated in abuse. However, this way the documentary itself refuses the sexual subjectivity of the women who are portrayed as innocent, infantilized victims who are paying a high price for just wanting to be loved.

Like in the case of snuff videos depicting “real death” with the aim of viewer arousal, there can never be certain knowledge of whether the feederist pornographic images are of real bodies or if they are products of image manipulation (cf. Sobchack 2004:242), since modern photograph manipulation technology enables endless visualizations of feederist fantasies. Bodies in photographs can be morphed to basically any degree of fatness, fatter than would even be humanly possible. The uncertainty of whether one should be ethically concerned or not, and the knowledge that desire exists towards bodies infantilized to the point of a “return” to immobility, utter dependency and even non-existence, can make watching feederist porn a very troubling experience. There will be no culmination, no “purification” into normativity that the viewer is so used to when looking at images of fatness in the reversed narratives of the mainstream. There can be, however, a specific scopophilia, a curious pleasure in looking at bodies and shapes so rarely seen in the media: these images, while so culturally forbidden they almost force the look away, also command the look by the virtue of their very deviance.

Parler enfant?

Fat or feederist pornography especially in a lesbian or gay context has been seen subversive by many scholars in redefining fat corporeality as a site of shameless, open pleasure, and pointing to ways of imagining non-phallic, feminine, non-heteronormative sexualities (Kent 2001:142–145; Kipnis 1999:114–115; Kulick 2005:91–92; LeBesco 2004:48–49; cf. Bunzl 2005:200, 210)—in other words, sexuality not yet subjected to the process of “growing up” into heteronormatively gendered subjects. Some scholars argue that fat is, in fact, necessarily queer, since fat sexuality is culturally understood as “deviant” (LeBesco 2004:88–89). Don Kulick (2005:89–92) suggests fat pornography (he uses the term to refer to similar images I discuss as feederist porn) can be seen to challenge both the socially san-

ctioned forms of pleasurable body zones and the expected temporality of sex, much like in Freud's formulation of polymorphous perversity of the child. Kulick proposes feederist imagery could allow imagining non-phallic female pleasure, *parler femme* in the terms of Luce Irigaray, which is utterly disinterested in the male phallus. But could and should it rather be seen as *parler enfant*, to rephrase?

Feederism could well be placed in the same continuum with other consensual adult sexual practices based on refusal to lead a socially accepted "healthy" life, like "bare-backing" or "bug-chasing" (see e.g. Bestard 2008:3–4). Still, looking at feederist imageries as queer may entail problems: Elizabeth Grosz sees "queer" as too inclusive for productive political action, partly because it can be used and abused to pursue the rights of suspicious or unacceptable sexual practices, such as pedophilia (Grosz 1995:249–250, note 1; Dale 1999:4–6). Feederism can be and has been included in the group of suspicious sexualities, not least due to its implicit sexualization of adult infantilism, which may remind of pedophilia. But the question of what queer should or should not include is off the point in my view. To Catherine Mary Dale (1999), queer strives to produce positive, unexpected and life-enhancing affective connections between and within bodies. Like Grosz, Dale takes the Spinozist-Deleuzian understanding of bodies as sums of their affective capabilities as her starting point. Unlike Grosz however, Dale emphasizes that queer should not be understood as an "umbrella" identity, but as relations, ever-expanding connections to others. In this sense, Dale's understanding of queer is exactly what Kathryn Bond Stockton (2009) refers to by growing sideways.

I am wary of using the terms "sideways growth" and "queer" for only expansive and enabling connections, for both non-normative ways of connecting can surely still find new repetitive and limiting routes. However, both notions can offer a way to rethink of agency, when understood as affective corporeal connections that move rather between bodies rather

than originate from a specific subject and target a specific object. If infantilization of supersize fat bodies is in many cases, and to a large extent in feederist images, a forceful symbol and enforcement of diminishing or even disappearing subjectivity, then how can we account for forms of agency that exist even when subjectivity is denied and the body reduced to an appendix of another “self”?

Agency beside adult subjectivity

An example of this kind of denied but persistent agency is found in the image of Gina in *Big Love*. Her body’s possibilities to act autonomously were reduced radically by her willing participation in Mark’s fantasy, which put her very existence at stake. Still she managed to make an unexpected change of direction and pull herself out of the destructive routing of “sideways growth”, although she was immobile. In this sense, it does not matter whether feederist practices are explicitly consensual or coerced: a relationship where one body carries all the risks gives the other body disproportionate possibilities. On the other hand, harnessing another body into voluntary infantile dependence may pull along the body that seems to profit. Mark’s existence became a one-dimensional vacuum perhaps more so than Gina’s: he obsessively watches his videos of Gina at her heaviest, brings her fast food and even builds a house with extra-wide doorways in case Gina starts gaining again. He does not want to or cannot distance himself from his “fantasies” which consume his energy. If anyone, he indeed appears stuck in a symbolic infantile space of non-differentiation, a space made monstrous by his actual adulthood, unable to grow sideways or “up”.

Rick too points out the uneven division of risks: a feeder can walk out of the door after a feeding session without visible marks on his body, but a gainer’s weight-gain will surely be noticed by his environment. The potential problems caused by rapid weight-gain, binge-eating, possible extreme

heaviness and limitations of mobility are carried completely by the feedee/gainer body. This is made explicit in both *Big Love* and *Hard Fat*, but in dieting narratives the physical risks and potential problems of weight-loss are almost never mentioned. Dieting often takes over participants' lives, becoming the most important activity they are involved in, limiting the scope of what their bodies can or cannot do, but also enabling new skills and new ways of relating to themselves. While this is seen as a demonstration of self-disciplined adulthood, devotion to weight-gain is easily seen as simply monstrous and regressive.

The comparison between mainstream weight-loss narratives and sub-cultural weight-gain imagery may help recognize how visual structures and their affective logics naturalize the desirability of certain directions of growth over others. Furthermore, the comparison shows that norm-abiding transformation is effortlessly portrayed as an autonomous series of acts by an adult(like) subject, an enactment of free will, but norm-reversing transformation is easier to see as infantile, irrational and arrested development despite being named voluntary. The contradictory nature of agency, desire and "free will" becomes pressingly visible in such juxtapositions, as they force viewing bodies to face the limits of acceptance and ask: why is bodily transformation to one direction so automatically desirable and to another direction pathologized? Why is it completely understandable to treat adults as children who are expected to submit when the goal is to squeeze them into the boundaries of normative embodiment, but monstrous when their bodies and desires refuse to comply with those boundaries?

Hard Fat ends in a scene that has a similar loving, dwelling feel to it as the scene of Mark watching his video in *Big Love*, but does not induce the feeling of unwilling participation in possible abuse. The scene appears set up in the home of a fat, middle-aged white man who the camera has been following "secretly" earlier in the video. The image of the same man flashed on the screen when some Internet profiles of gay men interested in

feeder–gainer relationships were shown: the man’s user name is CMBigDog, which links him clearly to bear subculture. In this scene, the man poses and rubs his belly slowly while approaching the camera in one lengthy, silent shot. The man obviously has an additional pillow underneath his white shirt, which is almost bursting at its seams (Fig. 4). Even though I might not be the ideal or addressed viewer of such a scene, it still feels hypnotic. The man seems in complete control of the situation as the active creator of his body and his pleasurable fantasy. Several norms and binaries are in movement at once: the trope of infantilization of the fat body gets mixed with playing out a fantasy of male pretense pregnancy; whoever the feederist fantasy is performed for must be less of an authority than the supposedly “submissive” gainer on screen. The scene appears definitely naughty, but also “safe” in a way *Big Love* and heterosexual feederist internet porn did not feel: there seems to be no possibility of this man being pressured into anything, and he is definitely not about to die. The idea of being aroused by looking at such images or getting involved in such practices seems suddenly quite fathomable.



Fig. 4. CMBigDog rubs his belly (or a pillow) in the end of Hard Fat (2002), performing hypermasculinity that commands space and looks, sexualizing simulated male pregnancy, and breaking the infantilization of the fat (male) body.

Earlier I referred to Barber's (2007) view of today's consumer culture as imposing an infantilist ethos on citizens, disastrously idealizing child-like qualities. His arguments, although in many ways important and agreeable, seem however to construct a premise according to which the qualities named as infantile or childish are always already pathological when enacted by adults. Although infantilization is most certainly a tool and an interpretative frame that marks and maintains structures of subordination, I do not wish to suggest that infantilization equals removal of agency, power or mobility.

Infantilism as adult "regression" into diminished subjectivity can also shed light onto the impossibility of claiming that any body, child, adult, or on the verge of livable, would completely lack agency (Castañeda 2001). The not-yet-subjectivity of the figure of the child, gains a different meaning when projected on an adult body than when occupied by an actual child: the literal and metaphorical sideways growth of the fat adult body, or the feedee/gainer body at its extreme, speaks of both the fragile nature of subjectivity (it can always be denied and "lost") but also of its persistence. Feederist imagery shows how agency is indeed possible even in a situation where subjectivity seems utterly denied or diminished, although it may be agency that our culture would rather see as compliance with oppression. Compliance it may be, but that is only one side of it: feederist pornography can also be seen as a space where autoerotic, sideways growing and temporally expansive queer desires resist the cultural pressure to grow "up".

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ABSTRACT

KATARIINA KYRÖLÄ

Adults growing sideways: feederist pornography and fantasies of infantilism

The article examines images of feederism, the practice of sexualized weight-gain, in online pornography and two documentaries: the British *Big Love: Fat Girls and Feeders* (2003) which focuses on heterosexual scenarios, and the Canadian *Hard Fat* (Frederic Moffet, 2002) exploring gay male weight-gain settings. Feederist imagery is argued to draw its ability to arouse as well as shock from its eroticization of infantilism in adult bodies, and from the challenges it poses to gendered norms pertaining to body size, subjectivity and adult-child binaries. Contemporary western tendencies towards both idealization and pathologization of adult infantilism, along with the cultural fear of fatness and its threat to clearly distinguishable age and gender categories, are explored as key dynamics to feederist porn. Furthermore, the notion of "growing sideways" as opposed to growing up is used to illuminate lateral and queering connections between

“adults” and “children” (Stockton 2009:11–13, 20–22). If the child has traditionally represented the not-yet-subject, the infantilized adult growing sideways in feederist pornography can be seen as an aspirational no-longer-subject: simultaneously defiant to subjection and rejected from subjectivity.

The article compares popular weight-loss imagery, such as reality TV dieting series, to images of feederist weight-gain. Despite many visual similarities, weight-loss imagery relies on desirability of “adult” self-control whereas weight-gain imagery draws on the forbidden sexualization of infantilism and fetishized parent-child dynamics. Moreover, links between pro-anorexia and feederist porn are analyzed, as both sexualize extreme and culturally hidden bodies that have come to connote both infantilism and death. Feederist desire and pleasure can be seen as queer in a similar sense as pro-ana imagery: the distribution of sexual focus over the whole body and theoretically unlimited temporality suggest polymorphous, infantile freedom from (hetero)normative “adult” sexuality. But watching feederist imagery raises also ethical dilemmas: the images often reduce the sideways growing adult body, especially female, into a fetish object infantilized to the point of disappearing subjectivity. Still no body can completely lack agency, when agency and subjectivity are understood as not necessarily tied to each other. Feederist imagery as eroticized adult infantilism concretizes the leakiness of the category of the subject by blurring boundaries between normative adult embodiment and infantile pre-subjectivity, while it also maintains some starkly gendered and sexualized power structures.

SAMMANFATTNING

KATARIINA KYRÖLÄ

Vuxna som växer på bredden. ”Feederistisk” pornografi och fantasier om infantilism

Denna artikel undersöker bilder av *feederism*, praktiserandet av sexualiserad viktökning, i pornografi på nätet och i två dokumentärer: den brittiska *Big love*:

Fat girls and feeders (2003), som behandlar heterosexuella scenarion, och det kanadensiska, dokumentära videokonstverket kallat *Hard fat* (Frederic Moffet, 2002), som studerar viktökningsmiljöer bland bögar. Feederistiska bilder tycks få sin förmåga att såväl hetsa upp som chockera från erotikserandet av infantilism hos vuxna kroppar och från utmaningen den utgör mot genuskodade normer för kroppsstorlek, subjektivitet och binariteter vuxen-barn. Samtida västerländska tendenser att idealisera, patologisera och sexualisera vuxen infantilism, ihop med den kulturella rädslan för fetma och dess hot mot tydligt åtskiljbara ålders- och genuskategorier, utforskas som nyckeldynamiken i feederistisk porr. Dessutom används begreppet att "växa på bredden", i motsats till att växa upp, för att illustrera laterala och queera samband mellan "vuxna" och "barn" (Stockton 2009:11-13, 20-22). Om barnet traditionellt sett representerar ännu inte-subjektet, kan de infantiliserade vuxna som växer på bredden i feederistisk pornografi förstås som strävande efter att bli ett inte-längre-subjekt: på samma gång trotsande subjektion genom genuskodade kroppsnormer och bortstötta från subjektiviteten genom att växa och begära "felaktigt".

Feederistisk porr och dokumentärer om feederism återkastar den populära fantasin om kroppen som ett projekt som ständigt bör bearbetas och nyskapas – bara att i feederistiska bilder är det erotiserade omskapandet omkastat från krympande till expanderande, till skillnad från i vanliga medias kropps-förvandlingsnarrationer. Artikeln jämför sålunda populära framställningar av viktminskning, närmare bestämt bantningsserier i reality-TV, med bilder av feederistisk viktökning, och ställer frågan varför vissa riktningar på förändringar av vuxna och på verklig eller symbolisk växt anses självklart mera önskvärda än andra. Trots sina likheter utgår framställningar av viktminskning från erotiserad "vuxen" självkontroll, medan framställningar av avsiktlig viktökning däremot stödjer sig på den förbjudna sexualiseringen av infantilism och fetisherad förälder-barnodynamik. Feederistiska begär och njutningar kan ses som queera på ett liknade sätt som pro-ana bilder: spridandet av den sexuella fokusen över hela kroppen och teoretiskt sett obegränsad temporalitet pekar mot

polymorf, infantil frihet från (hetero)normativ ”vuxen” sexualitet. Ingen av de två typerna av porr innehåller vad som traditionellt sett uppfattas som sexuella handlingar, och de blir sålunda igenkännbara som porr enbart på grund av förnekandet och osynliggörandet av sådana kroppar i vanliga media. Feederistiska bilder har emellertid inte uppkommit som en uttalad protest mot pro-anorexia websidor, båda framställer dock potentiellt dödliga praktiker som önskvärda. Men medan pro-ana gå ”för långt” i normens riktning, går feederistiska bildframställningar åt motsatt håll – sålunda tycks dess kulturella obegriplighet minimera eller omintetgöra dess möjliga potential att locka betraktarna som pro-ana bildframställningar anses göra.

Slutligen diskuteras det feederistiskas begärets och njutningens queera potentialer. Att betrakta feederistiska bildframställningar skapar också svåra etiska dilemman: bilderna reducerar ofta den på bredden växande vuxna kroppen till ett immobiliserat fetischobjekt, ett bihang till en annan persons fantasi, infantiliserad i betydelsen av förminskad eller till och med försvinnande subjektivitet. En noggrannare undersökning av exemplen visar emellertid att inte ens den mest drastiskt infantiliserade vuxna kropp kan helt sakna aktörskap, även om subjektivitetens tycks förnekad, om aktörskap och subjektivitet inte förstås som med nödvändighet kopplade till varandra. Feederistiska bildframställningar som erotiserad vuxen infantilism konkretiserar läckaget hos subjektsskategorin genom att suddas ut gränserna mellan normativt vuxet förkroppsligande och infantil presubjektivitet.