

New Media and Post-feminist Critical Pathways Maureen Ryan

Work and Play: the Pleasure Politics of Food Blogging

As an emergent field, the study of new media has thus far been rather predictably dominated by patriarchal interests and concerns. The blogosphere has been considered almost exclusively for its status as a public sphere and the implications of that sphere for democracy and traditional journalism. While a valuable inquiry, this singular focus on journalistic and political blogging by communications scholars marginalizes other kinds of blogs that are perhaps equally widely read. Personal blogs, largely ignored by scholars, have been especially maligned as uninteresting and trivial. Like other forms and genres that have historically suffered from scholarly neglect, these blogs are suspiciously feminized: they are affective, thrive on readerly attachment, and run in installments with no end in sight, just like the feminine genre par excellence, the television soap opera. As was the case with the soap opera, it requires a feminist perspective to bring this gender-biased omission to light.

Moreover, what communications scholars fail to address in studies of blogging and the public sphere is that all blogs, even political blogs, are inevitably “personal.” The very form of the blog conduces individual reflection and a sense of temporality that is intimately bound up in the writer's daily experiences. The labor of blogging falls into a shadowy genre of half-work, half-play; half-public, half intimate. This is especially true of food blogs, which have become a highly visible contingent of personal blogs. Authored by culinary professionals, semi-professionals, and enthusiasts, food blogs feature stories and careful photography of everyday culinary production. At popular blogs like *Smitten Kitchen*, *101 Cookbooks*, and *Chocolate and Zucchini*, the author posts stories and photos of cookery, usually with a recipe, and a section for comments that allows readers to participate in discussion that is often about how enticing the dish sounds, or about the success of their own attempts at the recipe.

It must be emphasized that food blogging, as opposed to other kinds of food media which are largely consumed via spectatorship, is resolutely tied to the practice of cooking. Indeed, despite being seen as the epitome of female domestic drudgery, today it is being revitalized as a source of affective engagement, nowhere more visibly than through blogs. Yet, like much post-feminist media, it is a complicated engagement; in the food blogosphere, the romanticization of femininity and female domestic labor and an emphasis on traditional gender roles are as equally propagated as are more progressive gender politics. Many female food bloggers emphasize not their own pleasure in cooking but the satisfactions of serving their husbands and families. Reverence for the domestic goddesses who 'make it look easy' like Martha Stewart and Nigella Lawson is as strong as ever in the digital sphere. Where the everyday takes on the sheen of a magazine, as it often does on food blogs, sometimes the pleasure of good food is impossible to parse from the spectacularization and indeed commodification of daily life. This is an imminent concern for food blogs, which feature high-quality photography of candid moments and carefully narrativized events. The degree to which the events and photos have been staged isn't always apparent to the reader.

As such, food blogs foreground the home as a complex site of pleasure and labor—labor to make the home pleasurable, and pleasure in the labor of home-making. Food blogs charge their readers with taking pleasure in everyday home-making, yet they largely absent the true drudgery of culinary labor: dirty pans, spills on the floor, other chores left undone. An economy of labor (and indeed, an economy of wages—home cooks aren't paid for their work) is supplanted entirely by an economy of pleasure, and in this respect, food blogs are squarely post-feminist. As is the case with many other post-feminist texts, positions of racial, ethnic, and class privilege tend to underlie the ability to make culinary production spectacularly pleasurable.

So as we go forward we need to ask: What are the politics of this mix of pleasure and labor? How do cooking and/or blogging offer subjective gratifications in previously marginalized arenas of labor? How, conversely, do they merely shunt old politics onto new platforms? Lastly, how does the production and spectacularization of intimate everydayness, via media platforms, change our relationship to (and expectations of) media? As the field of new media expands, theories of the everyday are increasingly relevant to the study of digital media, as it has become part of the fine-grained experience of daily life. In particular, attunement to the daily, the mundane, and the affective can provide valuable insight into the way blogging is integrated into the practice of post-feminist life.