

**Alison Winch**

**Author Final Version**

**‘I just think it’s dirty and lazy’: Fat Surveillance and Erotic Capital**

**Abstract**

Contextualised within the UK mediascape, this article discusses how fat signifies the classed failures of neoliberalism. Because class aspiration, entrepreneurialism and the myth of the competitive individual are pivotal to the political economy of neoliberalism, fat is increasingly and vehemently vilified as abject across media platforms. Fat-surveillance media, which are marketed specifically to women by their visuals, gendered community, language, and structures of feeling, participate in a ‘gynaeopticon’ where the controlling gaze is female, and the many women regulate the many women. Rather than being a top-down form of governance and discipline such as in the panopticon, control is affectively devolved among systems or networks of the policing gaze. As well as monitoring women along the lines of class, I argue that these media circumscribe the de-individualising possibilities and passions of the libido.

**Keywords**

postfeminism, neoliberalism, popular culture, digital networks, body image, affect

### **‘I just think it’s dirty and lazy’: Fat Surveillance and Erotic Capital**

‘I’d rather be dead than fat’ and ‘I’d rather be thin than happy’, confesses Liz Jones in her role as *MailOnline* journalist and fashion editor (Jones, 2011, 2009). *MailOnline* is the digital presence of the *Daily Mail*, a UK tabloid newspaper that relishes in abjectifying the disadvantaged in order to disturb and deepen systems of discrimination. It is also the most widely read website in the world (Audit Bureau of Circulations 2012). Jones’s reach, mainly to women who constitute the largest demographic, is extensive. A self-defined feminist, her journalistic voice resonates with hate and shock. Her labeling of fat as abject chimes with other fat-shaming female voices that proliferate in the mainstream media of the global North economies, even in the UK broadsheets. ‘Everybody wants to be thinner. Whatever they say. And now I am, and I love it’ declares Polly Vernon, journalist for *The Observer* (Vernon, 2003). Vernon confesses how thinness transforms her into social capital for affluent heterosexual women who work in the creative industries, and whose privilege is indexed by their skinniness: ‘excitingly, I was embraced by a fast and glam super-thin super-class’ (Vernon, 2007). In these contexts hyper-thinness is celebrated as a component of success and female approbation.

In this article I do not look at fat bodies but rather the ‘fear of fat’ as a cultural location in the UK mediascape. More specifically I look at some examples of media platforms that market female bodies to homosocial networks of heterosexual women. Fat in this context is not so much a material or embodied experience. Rather it is framed as an object of fear, even terror. It is cast as the Other, the enemy from within. Having or gaining fat is constructed as a disempowered state, and linked to the emotions of disgust, shame and failure. It is also linked to class and sexuality as I discuss below. In contrast, being seen to be in the process of erasing, fighting, combating, and controlling fat is privileged as an essential element of a woman’s labour in a neoliberal economy. Policing other women’s behaviours in relation to fat – as evidenced by Jones and Vernon – is a crucial component of this labour. Moreover, this control is partly enforced through discourses of intimacy, including confession and the emotional sharing of personal experience.

Rather than looking at the experience of sexuality, I examine the visual culture of heteronormative sexiness in media that police and monitor the female body against the threat of fat. This could include mainstream UK journalists who write for women like Jones and Vernon, digital networks such as Thinspiration memes, diet and fitness apps or women’s magazines like *Heat*, *Closer* and *Now*. Here, sexiness does not signify sex. Instead it marks the display of a woman’s entrepreneurial knowledge

about the marketing and branding of femininity. These media employ the sex positive rhetoric of neoliberal postfeminism. The normatively cultivated feminine body is admired for its erotic capital; women who have harnessed their sexuality for empowerment within a normative paradigm are privileged. Nevertheless, the atomised and competitive social networks that are enabled in order to achieve sexiness mean that relations (especially between women) are configured as strategic and calculating rather than libidinal. Indeed, cultivating sexiness is bound up with a strong (often punishing) work ethic which demonstrates a disavowal of sexual desire. In other words, fat-shaming is the acceptable postfeminist face of slut-shaming. Fat is the scapegoat for the menace of the libido, which is personified in the figure of the specifically classed and gendered slut.

Kathleen LeBesco (2003) develops Mary Douglas' understanding of 'matter out of place' in an otherwise ordered system. She demonstrates how disgust over these out of place bodies is a cultural effect. Le'a Kent argues that in the contemporary global North economy 'there is no such thing as a fat person'. The ubiquitous before-and-after scenarios that play a key part in, for example, makeover television or the Thinspiration memes discussed below, consign 'the fat body to an eternal past and makes it bear the full horror of embodiment, situating it as that which must be cast aside for the self to truly come into being' (2001, 135). What constitutes this horror?

Contextualised within the UK mediascape, this article discusses the ways fat is associated working class signifiers and therefore symbolizes the failure to adhere to neoliberal values. Fat also signifies the de-individualising possibilities and passions of the libido. Because class aspiration, entrepreneurialism and the competitive individual are so pivotal to the contemporary political economy, fat is increasingly and vehemently vilified as abject across media platforms.

### **The gynaeopticon**

‘I don’t believe there is a male gaze anymore. There used to be. But now I don’t dress for men, I dress for my friends’, maintains Jo, a third year English Literature student. She continues: ‘it’s a critical gaze [...] other girls look at each other...it’s a derogatory gaze’. Her friend, Kim, agrees:

It is more the female gaze. I’m more worried about what other girls think of me than what boys think of me. So, like, I might feel fat today and a boy will say ‘you don’t look any different from yesterday’, but girls might think ‘oh look at her belly.’

These students also feel this pressure in the workplace, and confess that they experience more stress from female bosses than their male counterparts. Clare worries that women have more expertise around the body – ‘I feel a lot more pressure from women’ – and so a female manager is ‘going to be expectant from you’. They also recognize their own complicity. Clare admits, that she judges the appearance of other women: ‘I would say “*what* is that person wearing?” ...I know that’s mean...’.<sup>1</sup> This conversation chimes with the research undertaken by Ariel Levy (2005), Leora Tanenbaum (2003), Terri Apter (2007), Jessica Ringrose (2013), as well other journalistic and online discussions throughout a media convergence popular culture. Although these articulations differ contextually and ideologically, they agree that women are represented and encouraged to police each other around body image and, moreover, position fat as the enemy from within.

Angela McRobbie (2009) maintains that young women are interpellated in the ‘new sexual contract’ where they are promised equal participation in education, employment and consumer culture, as long as they abandon critiques of patriarchy and political radicalism. In return for this recognition, they must adhere to the entrepreneurial, self-managing and individualizing logics of neoliberalism. Postfeminist culture frames feminism as no longer relevant, as a thing of the past, because ‘gender equality’ has become commonsense. Rosalind Gill (2007) identifies a

‘postfeminist sensibility’ that emphasizes self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline in the construction of feminine subjectivities. In a neoliberal postfeminist culture there is a shift from objectification to subjectification where the rhetoric of individualism, choice and empowerment is enabled.

The form of female sociality discussed by the students above evidences a neoliberal variation of Michel Foucault’s reconfiguration of Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon. In the panopticon the governing and controlling gaze is internalized to the point that citizens experience themselves as being under constant surveillance. Through this, they willingly subject themselves to governing forces. Fat-surveillance media, which are marketed specifically to women by their visuals, gendered community, language, and structures of feeling, participate in what I call a ‘gynaeopticon’ where the controlling gaze is female, and the many women watch the many women. Rather than being a top-down form of governance and discipline such as in the panopticon, control is devolved among systems or networks of the policing gaze. This could be the mirror-walled spaces of the gym, yoga centres, the public scales of Weight Watchers groups, interactive advertisements, the chatrooms of mumsnet, digital wedding media or apps like ‘CalorieKing’ or ‘FatSecret’s Calorie Counter’.



The desire for normativity and belonging in a neoliberal promotional culture means submitting oneself to regimes of looking within the gynaeopticon. Indeed, that is one method of being acculturated into an entrepreneurial subject. In this context, the feminine self is ‘never finished with anything’ as she is engaged in the ‘perpetual training’ of entrepreneurial citizenship (Deleuze, 1992, 5, 7). Being seen to contribute to the process of self-transformation, as well as participating in its attendant policing networks, is crucial. Moreover, these forms of control are psychosocial. In other words, the ‘perpetual training’ of the postfeminist control society governs externally and internally. Citizens are affectively governed, particularly through intimate peer networks. Kristen E. Van Vonderen (2012) argues that there is a connection between the media and what she calls ‘body dissatisfaction’, but she attributes the greatest indicators of body dissatisfaction as originating from peer attitudes. In the mediascape of the gynaeopticon female writers, bloggers, and female face of the beauty and health industries, function affectively as peers. The confessional and intimate writing of Vernon and Jones draws on and invokes friendship networks.

The technological capacities of the internet mean that networked communities produce systems of surveillance, and Mark Andrejevic theorizes this type of digital interactivity as ‘productive surveillance’ or ‘the work of being watched’ (Andrejevic, 2003). The self is intricately connected to networks of mutual regulation and, because

a user's data is made public, they can be named and shamed by their peers.

'FatSecret' promises that it does not have any affiliation to other brands but instead it depends on 'the feedback and collective experience of members to discover what really works [...] the community generates answers to all food, diet and exercise questions'. Users can join challenges such as '...because nothing tastes as good as skinny feels'. These challenges are set so that users engage in 'friendly competition' with others and this helps them participate in the appearance of perpetually being in the process of losing weight (fatsecret.com). Personal, domestic or social time is configured as purposeful, a time to work on the perfectly controlled self; it is a time to transform sexuality into erotic capital.

### **Abjection, class and the neoliberal citizen**

Fat bodies are often synonymous with media depictions and imaginings of the working class and people of colour. Therefore the framing of fat as a menace – 'I would rather be dead than fat' – functions as a scapegoat for loss power under neoliberalism. Across the promotional cultures, fat is associated with 'losers'. At a time of social decomposition where working class power and solidarities are attacked, and social inequalities deepen, so socioeconomic disadvantage is redefined as a breakdown in personal responsibility. This could be represented by the image of the

fat body as in reality television shows like *Secret Eaters* (Channel 4, 2013-) or by online advertising campaigns, or by the strenuous abjectification of fat in promotional industries sponsored by the beauty complexes. The abjectified working classes are also signified by fat in the governmental promotional material warning against ‘benefit scroungers’ or ‘unhealthy’ habits. The stigmatised ‘losers’ of the neoliberal market game are blamed for their failure, and this failure is corporeally marked. In contrast, being seen to be in the process of controlling fat – appearing to labour – is to be a successful neoliberal subject. Policing the body against the threat of fat becomes synonymous with maintaining the borders of one’s power and economic capital.

Subjectivity comes ‘to matter’ (Butler, 1993) through an ‘ongoing process of bordering that make and unmake both psychological and material boundaries of the subject’ (Tyler, 2013, 28). Julia Kristeva conceptualises abjection to denote ‘the border of my condition as a living being’ (Kristeva, 1982, 3). Through the process of abjection, the border of the body ‘becomes an object’, and the subject then manages this border (Kristeva, 1982, 4). The construction of the self is therefore dependent on being in the constant process of managing this border. When Liz Jones complains about women who do not work hard enough she is alluding to their relaxed approach to this border control. Indeed, in a neoliberal context where the sexy female body – as it is promoted and shared among a homosocial market of heterosexual women – is

hyper-thin. And much of its sexiness is leveraged through the way that control is marked on the body.

Judith Butler argues that ‘the abject designates those “unlivable” and “unhabitable” zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the “unlivable” is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject’ (Butler, 1993, 3). In many popular culture contexts fat is one of the markers of these ‘unlivable’ zones. Imogen Tyler also develops Kristeva’s psychoanalytic position to contextualise abjection ‘as a lived social process’ within specific social and cultural locales. In particular she focuses on the people who are ‘abjectified’ under neoliberalism, specifically travelers, asylum seekers, refugees, the working class. She argues that stigmatization is a form of governance and therefore abjectified figures do the ‘dirty work of neoliberal governmentality’ (Tyler, 2013, 9); they become ‘the waste’ of neoliberal political economies. Fat is also stigmatised as a signifier of ‘waste’ and through its stigmatization, bodies are controlled.

Rather than focusing on subjects who are abjectified under neoliberalism, (as Tyler so forcefully and persuasively does) this article examines interpersonal female networks and its spaces of privilege. I suggest that these networks function to interpellate users

into normativity as they enable the perpetual policing of the entrepreneurial self's boundaries. Moreover, this normative subject comes 'to matter' precisely because it conceives itself as polarised from 'the waste' of neoliberal states of being. This process of othering – of demarcating oneself from the so-called failures of contemporary culture – is partly executed through mobilising networked communities around the fear of fat. As Sara Ahmed identifies, the border that is transformed into an object through abjection always functions as a substitute threat. In other words the border becomes the scapegoat rather than being the menace itself (Ahmed, 2004). In this case the fat body is the scapegoat.

Fat – as a cultural marker – is framed as threatening the stability of the neoliberal citizen's subjectivity. Jones is adamant that she is pro-women not dieting, 'but I still look down on people who eat too much. I just think that it's dirty and lazy [...] I can't help, despite my beliefs, but regard women who are fat, who don't exercise, who gorge on things like Galaxy, as somehow lazy. They just don't try hard enough' (Jones, 2009). Jones reiterates the contemporary affects of hate directed at the imagined bodies of fat women. What is especially pertinent here is the way in which she makes links between dirt, fat and a poor work ethic; women who eat for pleasure 'don't try hard enough'. It is significant that she chooses to vilify Galaxy as its brand identity is constituted out of the markers of autoerotic indulgence. According to Jones,

women who cave into their sensual appetites – who experience their body’s eroticism in a context outside the promotional industries – are abject. Indeed, in the context of the media that I discuss below, the threat of fat is what drives the entrepreneurial subject, as neoliberal citizens must appear to be continually working on themselves.

This article identifies digital networks, more specifically Thinspiration memes, as participating in this process of controlling the body and, by extension, maintaining privilege and cultivating erotic capital. Indeed, these social networks support the consolidation of heteronormative bodies by situating themselves against that which they define as abject: fat. Sianne Ngai identifies how expressions of disgust (common in fat-surveillance media) seek ‘to include or to draw others into [their] exclusion of [their] object, enabling a strange kind of sociability’ (Ngai, 2005, 336). Through these social policing networks, those who are not striving for the erasure of fat are cast out as abject. The producers of fat-surveillance media evoke and express fear over fat, and this fear is then re-directed by users at their own bodies. Nevertheless, this judgment also extends to others. Through harnessing contemporary fears over fat as slutty, repulsive, filthy, dirty, and lazy in order to establish distinctions, users demarcate themselves against the abject other who ‘is not me’ (Cohen, 2005, x). In this way, fat-surveillance networks participate in the mechanisms ‘through which

subjects come to collude with those political and social forces that curtail freedom and reproduce inequalities' (Tyler, 2013, 10).

In these competitive and policing social networks, fat-shaming is emotional labour for many female celebrities, journalists, and powerful women. As is evident in the work of Vernon and Jones, it is an effective way to maintain and consolidate socioeconomic power by constructing bodies that disavow those who are associated with the classed and raced 'waste' of neoliberalism. These homosocial spaces control women, not only to spread the political economy of neoliberalism (especially its classed aspirations), but also to protect against overt misogyny. By evoking and courting the emotions of hate, disgust and repulsion – and creating a cultural consensus around this – not controlling the borders of the body against the threat of fat is pathologised. By enforcing mutual control and regulation, these networks are a means to pre-empt and self-armour against being branded a slut.

### **Thinspiration**

Thinspiration memes participate in the gynaeoptic surveillance network. For example, the *Thinspiration* blog is an intimate, friendly, woman-centred site where the ideal of the perfect body is trafficked among a homosocial group of women. It showcases

photographs of ‘real girls, models, and celebrities’ and has 8659 members at the time of writing (<http://thinspiration-pictures.blogspot.co.uk>). Run by Erin, a young Australian, it motivates women to lose weight by posting images of ‘super skinny girls’. Erin made the site ‘for girls who were like me that needed something to motivate them’; endorsing the affirmation, ‘I’d rather say “I did it!” than say “I gave up”.’ Erin confesses that previously, ‘I thought I was curvy and looked like any other “healthy girl”’, but the images of these women inspired her to become thinner (<http://thinspiration-pictures.blogspot.co.uk/2011/08/faq.html>). Fat is a sign of weakness. Erin advises her users:

Stay positive! In moments of weakness remember everyone who has lost weight has had the same weak moments as you they just didn’t give in to the negative thoughts, tell yourself you can do it and believe in it. I hope this helps you guys! Stay strong. Xx

(<http://thinspiration-pictures.blogspot.co.uk/2011/09/how-i-lost-weight.html>)

Erin is keen to demarcate *Thinspiration* from pro-anorexia sites and she does so by comparing her rhetoric with that of comparable pro-an and pro-mia blogs. She reveals that her aspirational quotes are normative in a culture that promotes neoliberal values.



But when does thinspiration move from a lifestyle choice to a mental health issue or eating disorder? Bodies of women with eating disorders are normative in the mainstream media, and the visual culture of bodies functions affectively in the networks of the gynaeopticon. Moreover, Liz Jones is a self-confessed anorexic. Disordered eating is normative in a mediascape dominated by health and beauty industries that profit from body anxiety and confusion around food. There are often confessional stories by fashion models – the icons of UK style as showcased in high-end fashion magazines – as anorexic; their extreme and fetishized skinniness conveying success in a competitive industry. So-called lifestyle choices are constructed out of socioeconomic realities and modes of governance. Nevertheless, I am not arguing that the media *cause* eating disorders, which would be incredibly reductive. Neither am I saying that eating disorders are a result of anxiety over body image as this would not take into the complex links between eating disorders, gender, sexuality, and other social and environmental factors (Burkitt 2001). I am suggesting, however, that participating in the visual culture of thin bodies is crucial to the peer-driven policing networks being discussed in this article.

The bodies are framed in the Thinspiration memes, not as starved, but as sexy. The bodies in Thinspiration memes are eroticised within a heteronormative paradigm as the women pose in hotpants, bikinis or skinny jeans – signs of their postfeminist

power. Their poses mimic a soft porn aesthetic: protruding posteriors, hips jutting forward. Some of the bodies recline sensually on a bed, and the pleasure gained by the perfectly achieved vision of the self is evident. The flow of images – mainly ‘selfies’ (self-portraits taken with smartphones) – zoom in and cut up the bodies into hips, thighs, abdomen, bum, crotch, pelvis, in order to highlight the heroism of controlling the sexual sites where fat is typically found. In a neoliberal political economy, control is erotic. The ubiquitous spectacular bodies of women in the Thinspiration memes are perfect; they are powerful in their success in the war against let-go and lack of discipline. Their near-nakedness reveals the inscription of self-control on the body. What eroticises the *Thinspiration* bodies is that they mark the success of self-governance over sluttiness. All signs of genitalia are erased; these bodies are barbie-like in their sexiness. Fat, fluids, sexuality, are abject. And in opposing abjection, these non-fat sexy bodies distance themselves from the traditional territories of the erotic, and are protected against class-hatred.

Slicing the body up in this way mimics the conventional objectification and fetishisation of the female body for a male gaze, specifically in mainstream still-image porn. However, these are images taken by women for women and what is eroticised is the pleasure of successful border patrol. Instead of eroticising the bodies’ ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ as objects of sexual desire (Mulvey, 1975), the bodies in the

*Thinspiration* blog are situated within an aspirational body-control network so that the gaze is conditioned ‘to-be-like’ or ‘to-become’. Indeed, the blog’s mantras, such as ‘If you can imagine it, you can achieve it. If you dream it, you can become it. Discipline is the bridge between goals and accomplishments’, direct and hone the gaze as entrepreneurial (<http://thinspiration-pictures.blogspot.co.uk/search/label/Thinspo%20quotes>). The blog functions through gynaeoptic networks where looking at sexy bodies becomes a means to transform one’s own body into an ideal. The success of the blog functions by harnessing the affects of competition. The body is a project to be worked upon, dividing the self into brand manager and body as component of the self-brand.

The terror of fat (of failing under neoliberalism) unites these women in a safe and mutually supportive environment. In overtly misogynist and class-hating times these social networks are friendly spaces where fat is contained, understood and controlled. Because neoliberalism privileges the uncertainty of the market, so the contemporary is marked through precarity, crisis, threat, and risk. The intensity of precarity is affectively – emotionally, viscerally, intimately – experienced. The obsession with fat is one way in which this assemblage is understood and vicariously controlled; it is a way that women can regulate the volatile forces that impact psychosocially. Being in the process of abjection, the process of casting out, is perpetually being – and

enforcing – control. To opt out of the self-policing networks is to put oneself in the at-risk category. Indeed, the media industries constantly warn that women are in danger of losing their erotic capital and class status. In this context, to devalue one's sexiness by not being vigilant about fat is framed as naïve and slutty.

The gaze in this context is made up of a complex affective assemblage. It is constituted out of a scaffolding of simultaneous feelings, intentions and desires: pleasure, competition, strategy, envy, eroticism, friendliness, understanding, inclusivity, among others. Emotions of hate and shame circulate in order to motivate, and envy is mobilized as a self-branding tool. They are an essential part of the loop of comparison and feedback necessary for normative success. Because the bodies are eroticised by their fetishisation as ideal objects among a homosocial surveillance network, desire is evoked and the potential for a queer spectatorial position is potentially enabled. However, in this blog – and in the gynaeoptic visual regime – the desiring gaze is contoured differently and the potentially queer gaze is also circumscribed. This network is a component of postfeminist social capital, where the gaze is honed as analytical and strategic. It is also a site where intensities, passions, discounted emotions and desires can be contained and constrained. Libidinal flows are channeled into the war against fat.

## **Sexiness as capital**

To be sexy is to appear to be in control of one's sexuality as capital. According to the promotional industries the entrepreneurial postfeminist knows how to market sexuality as sexiness. Her knowledge and empowerment are visually inscribed onto the sexy body as an integral component of its thin perfection. Examples of successful self-branding as sexy spectacle are essential to the celebrity industry. They are also available as part of the self-branding processes that inform the promotional labour of some women in the global North economies, as outlined and discussed by Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012). These women rely on networks of feedback, comparison and commentary in order to cultivate their public look in a digital context. This means not giving away one's sexuality too easily in order to retain its value.

Capital – cultural, social and symbolic – is grounded in an individual's (inherited or generated) economic position, but it is expended or reinvested to establish social advantage and disadvantage (Bourdieu, 1984). For Pierre Bourdieu, it is women's role to convert economic capital into symbolic capital for their families through the markers of taste. In this way women are capital-bearing objects whose value accrues to the family and its patriarchal structures, rather than capital-accumulating subjects. Through this paradigm, women are conceived as repositories (Lovell, 2000; Skeggs,

2004). This analysis has been challenged, but what is pertinent here is the way in which heteronormative femininity is visually produced in branded cultures as erotic capital. That is, a woman can accumulate value from both the commodification of her hypervisible body but also through being the entrepreneurial manager of her own representability. In a postfeminist context, the activity of cultivating and promoting the sexy thin body is recognised to be a form of accumulating capital, and therefore empowerment.

Nevertheless, erotic capital is a precarious form of accumulation because success in a celebrity culture is volatile and often short term. For example, the way that celebrities market thin sexiness as part of their brand appeal is disempowering for those who do not have the resources to achieve the same standards of visibility; sexiness is lucrative for some, but fragile and transitory for others. In addition, the sustainability of capital accumulated in the visual culture of sexiness is limited, not least because it is bound up with the fetishisation of youth. Moreover, the self-branding processes of digital participatory networks where the spectacularly achieved neoliberal body is shared across the internet lacks longevity. A woman's sexiness lasts only for the instant that her image is captured; the menace of the body – the body out of place – is in the shadows. The consensus is that the users must be perpetually fighting the threat of fat

– the threat of being one of neoliberalism’s classed ‘losers’. Consequently a woman’s erotic capital is in constant crisis.

### **Slut-shaming**

Slut-shaming is a concept recently theorized to account for how women’s sexuality is regulated by evoking the emotion of shame. More specifically, this regulation is enforced and inflicted by women and girls on to the bodies of other women and girls (Lamb 2002; Kehily 2002 & 2004). Within the context of her ethnographic research on groups of British school girls, Jessica Ringrose maintains that ‘slut-shaming’ is ‘a socially acceptable form of social critique of girls’ sexual expression’ (Ringrose, 2013, 93). Legitimated by the dominant symbolic, slut-shaming is a powerful means by which women reinforce patriarchy (in order to pre-empt its abuse). One slut-shaming meme is constructed out of four images that display a young woman in a t-shirt gesturing: ‘Hey girl, did you know that ...your boobs go *inside* your shirt’. Others include ‘Hey girl, did you know that ...you spread Nutella, not your legs’. The meme that runs the caption ‘Hey girl, did you know that...’ is now a Facebook page.

A slut lacks control. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* the term *slut* was used to describe ‘a woman of dirty, slovenly, or untidy habits or appearance’.

Etymologically, therefore, it is associated with porous borders, abjection and lack of control. Set against a history of misogyny, the leaky vessels that typified the female body of the early modern period became the filthy nymphs of Jonathan Swift's scatological poetry. And, by the Victorian period, it denoted a woman who took lascivious pleasure in multiple sexual partners. The slut, as Feona Attwood identifies, also carries a particular class significance: 'It is the lowly, dirty, sleazy quality of the slut that marks her out, a quality that suggests that overt sexuality in women is precisely not "classy"' (Attwood, 2007, 238-239). Policing the body is also a means to guard against being branded a slut. Sluttishness, in this article, is linked to both the slovenly, classed and sexual senses of the word; a slut is a woman who lets herself go and who takes pleasure in crossing the threshold of the self into filth, repulsion, and sexuality. She is not marketing the control over her sexuality as part of her aspirational self-brand.

Part of the reason why I chose Vernon and Jones to begin this article is not only because of their aspirational classed status indexed by working in the creative industries, but because they promote themselves as feminists. Their particular style of writing – and the personae that they market – reveals the contradictions that are glossed over in a postfeminist popular culture. Significantly, they both frame the link between fat and sex as a feminist one. Contextualised within a heterosexual paradigm,



they both celebrate how their policing of fat makes them more attractive to heteronormative women, and less so to men. For Jones, anorexia is about controlling the libido: 'For me, being super-thin has never been about being attractive to men. It's about being invisible' (Jones, 2013). By cultivating this homosocial space, these writers argue that they are less victimised by patriarchy. The implication is that being relaxed around the borders of the body – to be sexual – is to be enslaved by male control and therefore vulnerable to attack. In this way, misogyny is rebranded as patriarchal values are internalized through homosocial networks that express a fear over the subversive potential of libidinal energies.

Catherine Hakim is another pertinent example of a cultural commentator who advocates femininity as erotic capital and yet denounces female libidinal energies. She maintains that men have a higher sex drive than women and so suffer from a 'sex deficit' (Hakim, 2011, 6). She argues for a positive recognition of the power of femininity, which she defines as erotic capital. Hakim asks: 'Why not champion femininity rather than abolish it? Why does no one encourage women to exploit men whenever they can?' (Hakim, 2011, 3). She criticizes patriarchy and radical feminists for devaluing erotic capital, and argues that women should put their energies into its cultivation in order to benefit society and themselves. Nevertheless, we can see that women are already being encouraged to make this investment through refining

themselves into self-brands. Creating erotic capital involves promoting a normative sexual self who is in control of her sexuality and who appears not too slutty and not too dowdy. Indeed, it is about promoting the ideal of a woman who has a smaller libido than her male counterpart, but who gains advantage through her higher visibility. Needless to say, Hakim's envisioning of ideal femininity marginalizes fat bodies.

Sex positive discourses are used by the promotional industries to equate liberation from patriarchal oppression, as well as class aspiration, with the labour of sexiness. The power of sexiness is configured through a heteronormative paradigm, and is troped through the behaviours of assertiveness and control. It disavows those subjects who do not fit into this heteronormative framework, and equates sex with confidence, strategy and will to power. By doing so, it casts the experience of vulnerability in a sexual context as unstrategic. In the dominant symbolic, sexuality is sublimated, regulated and cultivated as sexiness, whereas the uncontrolled and de-individualised energies of the libido are illegitimate or slutty; they index the fat body and its abjectified classed connotations. The rational processes and the business logic that inform the sexy self-brand privilege the assertive, atomised, efficient and competitive individual. These values are inscribed on the sexy body that reveals its class status and power through its labour, which itself is signified by thinness.

## **Libido**

Women's bodies are traditionally repositories for anxieties over sexual energy, desire and appetite. In a postfeminist digital context the incorrectly controlled female libido is displayed within a surveillance culture as shameful, degraded and slutty. Fat-surveillance media function – among other things – to police and restrict the female libido. It suppresses women's sexual desire and life-energy through directing hate at sites of sexuality: bellies, hips, thighs, pelvis, diaphragm. Letting go into the relaxation of border control is framed as a weakness, whereas regulation of the body is pleasurable. What is pertinent about these images of sexiness is that the body is to be enjoyed only insofar as its control – its armour – has been successfully approbated by other women. Pleasure is accumulated through the visual culture of the body's control. The fragmented and fragile bodies of *Thinspiration* reveal the successful erasure of libidinal let-go, so that the pelvis, belly, crotch, thighs are spectacular in their doll-like aesthetic.

Indeed, the threat of fat disguises a deeper menace: the de-individualizing process of the libido. For Deleuze, the libidinal assemblage is everywhere, and it is life-affirming, uncontained, anti-individual. The libido – as a facet of subjectivity –

mobilizes sexual desire. However, as we have seen, anti-individual libidinal flows are restricted within the systems of gynaeoptic control. In Michael Hardt's essay on Pasolini's *Passion of Christ*, he discusses how Pasolini is excited by the eroticism of Christ's naked body as life-assenting. For Hardt, eroticism 'breaks down or dissolves the separateness, the self-possession, the discontinuity that exists among individual entities and things. It strips them naked, empties them, and puts them in common.' In this context, the libido is unrestricted and free-flowing between bodies; it strives 'toward a possible continuity of being, beyond the prison of the self.' Through the libido, the boundaries of the individual 'become open thresholds' for the flows and intensities of affect (Hardt, 2002, 80).

This configuration of the libido troubles the ideal neoliberal entrepreneurial subject who is configured as competitive, individualised and imbued with an all-encompassing work ethic. It troubles a strategic approach to interpersonal relations, which is based on class aspiration and the disavowal of 'failure'. According to Herbert Marcuse, advanced capitalism – or what I call in this article neoliberalism (a particularly aggressive period in the capitalist economy of the global North) – is predicated on the repression of the libido. The ideal citizen is the worker and in order to fulfill his or her work principle – or entrepreneurial self – the body must become reified. The body is 'a full-time instrument of labour' where the libido is repressed.

Indeed, this sublimation of the libido by the intensity of affective labour is inscribed on the body, which wears its libidinal suppression as sexiness.

## **Conclusion**

Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* is useful in thinking about the affective assemblage that is invoked in relation to fat-surveillance media, including the ways in which they harness envy as a promotional strategy. Ngai uses the film *Single White Female* (1992) to delve into the productive possibilities of envy. She argues that is a constructive emotion if it is employed as a vehicle through which 'to critically negotiate' certain models of femininity that we have been acculturated into admiring. In her words, a fruitful reflection on envy could 'facilitate a transition from desire to antagonism that might enable me to articulate what I have been trained to admire as something threatening or harmful to me' (Ngai, 2005, 163). Experiencing envy can be a signpost to inequality and injustice, and consequently offers 'an ability to recognize and antagonistically respond to, potentially real and institutionalized forms of inequality' (Ngai, 2005, 129). The complex affective assemblage that makes up gynaeoptic systems can therefore be generative. In other words, if critically negotiating a feeling like envy means that one can move from desire to antagonism, then there is the possibility to dis-identify with – and trouble – the object provoking

envy, as well as the enmeshing networks. It can be a means to identify and disrupt the class hostility that pervades popular media, and the ways in which this hostility is linked to the fat body.

The promotional industries are dependent on affective assemblages in order to hook consumers into relationships with brands. Feelings, intensities and emotions like envy, comparison, aspiration, are crucial to this assemblage. In addition social networks like Thinspiration are dependent upon cultivating affective relationships so that users remain engaged in the process of posting photographs as part of the loop of comparison and feedback. They tap into early experiences of friendships and mutual shaming. Nevertheless, because these bonds are forged through multiply experienced intensities – including love, joy, humour, sensuality, recklessness – so they also provide the means to be disentangled from their surveillance networks. The volatility and flow of the affective assemblage can also be its unlocking.

Neoliberal elites maintain their power through alliances and partnerships. Their privilege is also upheld by endorsing competition as entrepreneurial and motivational. Because competitiveness drives the market, it supposedly leverages the appeal of the self-brand. In this way, sociality is increasingly financialised and configured through a business logic. Class-inflected competition between people is framed as favourable

because it promotes aspirations that are achieved through the abjectification of neoliberalism's 'failures'. Indeed, this atomized and strategic framing of relating also hinders alliances and solidarities. It blocks the flow of libidinal energies. It prevents sexual energies crossing the thresholds of subject borders. In this context, envy or the feeling of competition can be a useful indicator of the process of atomization or the block of libidinal flow. It can act as a gauge, marking the instances when the political economy of the neoliberal work ethic is being processed through and on the body. According to Marcuse, the spread of the libido manifests itself 'in a reactivation of all erotogenic zones'. The body becomes 'an object of cathexis, a thing to be enjoyed - an instrument of pleasure.' He imagines a site where the libido is no longer sublimated by a work ethic. In this context, 'the value and scope of libidinal relations would lead to a disintegration of the institutions in which the private interpersonal relations have been organized, particularly the monogamic and patriarchal family' (Marcuse, 1969 [1955], 163-164). Feelings such as envy could be a means to unpack or queer the straightness of the gynaeopticon. To think creatively about its affective assemblage could enable the recognition of discounted or condemned desires underpinning sociality, and be a means to counteract the power of fat-surveillance media; it can be a gateway to sluttiness.

<sup>1</sup> This material was gathered from an interview with students aged between 21-23. They were white and from working class through to lower middle and middle class backgrounds. They were informed about the processes and consent was given for anonymous use of data.

## **References**

Ahmed, S. 2004. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Ahmed, S. 2007. 'Editorial: The Happiness Turn', *New Formations* 63, pp. 7–14.



Andrejevic, M. 2003. *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.

Apter, T. 2007. *Sisterknot: Why We Fight, Why We're Jealous, and Why We'll Love Each Other No Matter What*. New York and London: Norton.

Attwood, F. 2007. 'Sluts and Riot Grrrls: Female Identity and Sexual Agency' *Journal of Gender Studies*, 16, 3, pp. 233-247.

Banet-Weiser, S. 2012. *Authentic: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture*. New York: New York University Press.

Bourdieu, P. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. trans. Richard Nice, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

Brazier, J.E. and LeBesco, K. 2001. *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Butler, J. 1993. *Bodies That Matter :On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. New York and London: Routledge.

Cohen, W. 2005. 'Introduction: Locating filth', in W. Cohen and R. Johnson, eds., *Filth: Dirt, Disgust, and Modern Life*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. v.ii-xxxxvii.

Deleuze, G. 1992. 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', *October*, 59. pp. 3–7

Douglas, M. 1966. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. New York: Routledge.

Gill, R. 2007. 'Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10, 2: 147-166.

Gill, R. and C. Scharff, eds. 2011. *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Hakim, C. 2011. *Honey Money: The Power of Erotic Capital*. London: Allen Lane.

Hardt, M. 2002. 'Exposure: Pasolini in the Flesh' in B. Massumi ed. *A Shock to Thought: Expression after Deleuze and Guattari*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 77-84.

Jones, L. 2009. 'what happened when I had to eat normally for three weeks?' *Daily Mail*, 8 June 2008 [dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1191429/Fatten-What-happened-anorexic-Liz-Jones-eat-normally-weeks.html#ixzz2ctZoVXCf](http://dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1191429/Fatten-What-happened-anorexic-Liz-Jones-eat-normally-weeks.html#ixzz2ctZoVXCf)

Jones, L. 2011. 'My shoulders are so bony I look ill. But I'd still rather be dead than fat', *Daily Mail*, 16 May 2011 [dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1387364/Anorexia-nervosa-My-shoulders-bony-I-look-ill-Id-dead-fat.html#ixzz2ctZDc0JJ](http://dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1387364/Anorexia-nervosa-My-shoulders-bony-I-look-ill-Id-dead-fat.html#ixzz2ctZDc0JJ)

Jones, L. 2013. 'Interview' in *The Stylist*, July 2013. [stylist.co.uk/people/the-liz-jones-interview#image-rotator-1](http://stylist.co.uk/people/the-liz-jones-interview#image-rotator-1)

Kehily, M. J., Mac anGhail, M., Epstein, D. & Redman, P. 2002. 'Private girls and public worlds: producing femininities in the primary school', *Discourse*, 23 (2), 167-177.

Kehily, M. J. 2004. 'Gender and sexuality: continuities and change for girls in school,' in A. Harris ed. *All about the girl: culture power and identity*. London: Routledge.

Kent, L. 2001. 'Fighting Abjection: Representing Fat Women' in J.E. Braziel and K. LeBesco, eds. *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 130-50.

Kristeva, J. 1982. *The Powers of Horror: An essay on abjection*, trans. L.S. Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press.

LeBesco, K. 2003. *Revolting Bodies: The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity*. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press.

Lamb, S. 2002. *The Secret Lives of Girls: What Good Girls Really Do – Sex Play, Aggression, and their Guilt*. New York: Free Press.

Levy, A. [2003] 2005. *Female Chauvinist Pigs: The Rise of Raunch Culture*. 2nd ed. New York: FreePress.

Lovell, T. 2000. 'Thinking Feminism With and Against Bourdieu', *Feminist*

*Theory*, 1 (1), pp. 11-32.

McRobbie, A. 2009. *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*. London: Sage.

Mulvey, L. 1975. 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, 16 (3), pp. 6–18.

Ngai, S. 2005, *Ugly Feelings*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press.

Ringrose, J. 2013. *Postfeminist Education? Girls and the Sexual Politics of Schooling*. London and New York: Routledge.

Rothblum, E. and Solovay, S. eds. 2009. *The Fat Studies Reader*. New York and London: New York University Press.

*Secret Eaters*. TV Programme. Channel 4, 2013-.

*Single White Female*. 1992. Film. Dir. Barbet Schroeder.

Skeggs, B. 2004. 'Context and Background: Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of class, gender and sexuality', in L. Adkins and B. Skeggs eds. *Feminism after Bourdieu*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 19-33.

Tanenbaum, L. 2003. *Catfight: Rivalries Among Women, From Diets to Dating, From the Boardroom to the Delivery Room*. New York: Perennial.

*Thinspiration*, online, available at <http://thinspiration-pictures.blogspot.co.uk>, accessed 14 May 2013.

Tyler, I. 2013. *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain*, London: Zed Books.

Vonderen, K.E. 2012. 'Media Effects on Body Image: Examining Media Exposure in the Broader Context of Internal and Other Social Factors' *American Communication Journal*. 14, 2: 41-57.

Vernon, P. 'Admit it. You hate me because I'm thin.' *The Observer*, 14 September 2003. [theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2003/sep/14/foodanddrink.features](http://theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2003/sep/14/foodanddrink.features)

Vernon, P. 2007. 'Fat girl thin' *The Observer*, 14 January 2007.

[theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2007/jan/14/healthandwellbeing.features](http://theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2007/jan/14/healthandwellbeing.features)

---