

## Fat Fetishism and Feederism on Film

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### Abstract

*The development of queer theory has motivated a growing number of cinematic offerings to move beyond conservative, outdated representational strategies of the past by expanding the range of sexual orientations, sexual practices, and preferred ways of being that historically have remained largely concealed from viewers. Although various forms of 'kinky' sexual practices have increasingly been incorporated into films in recent years, the topic of fat fetishism has only incredibly rarely been explicitly represented and remains one of ignorance to many audience members. Accordingly, this article provides a representational analysis of intriguing twenty-first-century portrayals of fat fetishism in relation to the phenomenon of feederism as contained in the films *Feed* (Leonard, 2005) and *City Island* (De Felitta, 2009). In doing so, it incorporates a queer theoretical perspective in order to provide insight into real-world sexual phenomena that lie dramatically outside the mainstream status quo.*

**Key words:** *cinema, fat fetishism, feederism, kink, representation*

An intertitle in white lettering on a black background states "Although the events depicted in this film are fictional, they are based on actual behaviours that are happening between consenting adults right now". As the screen fades entirely to black, the song 'Cherish', in its version made famous by The Association in the mid-1960s, begins to play, immediately establishing a romantic, sentimental tone. Seconds later, a man is seen driving in his car at night, his face visible only in the vehicle's rear-view mirror. A quick close-up of his wedding band indicates his marital status.

The scene transforms to daylight; the song abruptly stops. Nearly a dozen hamburgers can be seen and heard sizzling on the grill of a fast-food restaurant; two baskets of French fries can be seen and heard frying nearby. As the man pulls up to the window of the establishment's drive-thru, he receives four large bags filled with these food items and drives off, his euphoria evident as he begins to sing along with 'Cherish', which has resurfaced on the film's soundtrack. Upon arrival at his ultimate destination, a seemingly

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deserted suburban home, he walks down a hallway and enters a bright red bedroom. A scantily clad, six-hundred-pound woman named Deidre (played by Gabby Millgate), lying on a bed in the middle of the room, awakens, refers to the man as 'baby' and 'sweetie', and moments later identifies him as Michael (played by Alex O'Loughlin).

When Michael heads into the adjacent kitchen, Deidre struggles to prop herself up on the bed and repositions her rolls of flesh. "Don't you come in here with your hot, greasy bags and tease me", she admonishes, adding that she loves him. Out of her view, Michael piles burgers and fries on a plate, strips naked, removes his wedding ring, and re-enters the bedroom, carrying Deidre's morning meal. "Say it", he commands, approaching her with her greasy treat. "Feed me", she replies longingly. He begins to masturbate momentarily. "Say it again", he orders. "Feed me", she begs, as he begins to cram the first burger into her mouth aggressively, masturbating occasionally as she eats.

Thus begins the 2005 film *Feed* (directed by Brett Leonard), one of the few cinematic offerings to date that explicitly explores the phenomena of fat fetishism and feederism. The film is particularly noteworthy because it boldly dares to represent unconventional sexual practices and ways of being that, until its creation, have historically been concealed from media audiences. As such, its representational approaches can be expected to be highly influential in shaping the images and perceptions of these phenomena among viewers who are exposed to them. For as communication scholar Larry Gross notes:

The contributions of the mass media are likely to be especially powerful in cultivating images of groups and phenomena about which there is little first-hand opportunity for learning, particularly when such images are not contradicted by other established beliefs and ideologies. By definition, portrayals of minority groups and 'deviants' will be relatively distant from the real lives of a majority of viewers (Gross 1994: 144).

Under such circumstances, films and other media offerings play a substantial role in moulding the images and perceptions held by society of these sorts of lesser known (or presumably 'deviant') phenomena (Gross 1994: 144; Hart, 2000: 7, 50). Given this film's ground-breaking status, therefore, the goals of this article are twofold: (1) to conduct a representational analysis of the overall contents of

*Feed* in order to identify the messages it communicates about these real-world sexual phenomena that lie dramatically outside the mainstream status quo, and (2) to compare and contrast *Feed*'s representational approaches with those of the same phenomena as contained in another ground-breaking media offering, the 2009 film *City Island* (directed by Raymond De Felitta).

### **Exploring fat fetishism, feederism, and *Feed***

Because fat fetishism and feederism have historically been excluded from both polite conversation and mainstream media offerings, brief definitions of both phenomena will be offered here before returning to the discussion of *Feed*.

Fat fetishism, sometimes referred to alternately as fat admiration, refers to individuals who find themselves overwhelmingly (and frequently exclusively) sexually attracted to clinically overweight individuals (typically) of the opposite sex (Griffiths 2013). This fetish may primarily involve erotically charged appreciation of bloated bellies and other body parts, or it can be linked to the process of assisting other individuals in packing on additional pounds, with the corresponding journey to obesity generating tremendous sexual pleasure (Weisman 2014).

Feederism, therefore, refers to the acquisition of sexual arousal and gratification through the process of one individual (referred to as the 'feeder' or 'encourager') encouraging the gaining of body fat in another individual (referred to as the 'gainer' or 'feedee') through direct participation involving excessive food eating (Griffiths 2013; Weisman 2014). The vast majority of feedees tend to be female (and are frequently referred to as 'big beautiful women') and most feeders tend to be male, although naturally there are exceptions to such patterns. Nevertheless, in these regards, sexual gratification is typically

facilitated and/or enhanced [by] the eating behaviour itself, and/or from the feedee becoming fatter – known as 'gaining.' This may not only involve eating more food but also engaging in sedentary activities that leave the feedee immobile. Some fat admirers may also derive pleasure from very specific parts of the body becoming fatter. Feedees are individuals who become sexually aroused by eating, being fed [or forced to eat], and the idea or act of gaining weight (Griffiths 2013).

A bit more succinctly, feederism has been defined in a *Scientific American* blog post, subtitled 'Getting Off by Getting Fat', as a "bustling fetish subculture in which one's most intense sexual pleasure involves eating, gaining weight, or being fed. [Its] not-so-subtle power dynamic suggests that feederism is a variant of more "traditional" sadomasochism" (Bering 2013). Some gainers particularly enjoy being referred to as gluttonous, or being called 'fatty' or 'piggy' and commanded to oink (Bering 2013; Weisman 2014). Furthermore, there exists within this subculture a distinct subgroup of participants known as 'submissive gainers', which are feedees who allow a dominant feeder to exclusively determine which and how much food they will ingest, how much weight they will ultimately gain, and sometimes even whether they will ultimately become immobile and largely or entirely dependent on their encourager (Weisman 2014).

Clearly, both of these erotically charged phenomena serve as the primary subject matter of *Feed*. However, the relationship between Michael and Deidre in the film is not as innocent and sincere as he has led her to believe, and the film represents their various interactions in a highly exploitative manner. Early on, during a scene in which Michael sponge-bathes the immobilized Deidre while feeding her chocolates and commenting that her skin is soft and silky like crushed velvet, it appears that they are involved in a truly loving relationship. This impression is further strengthened when Michael refers to her body as being 'delicious' and adds, "I could lose myself in your body and never be found"; Deidre responds, smiling broadly, "You make me so happy". However, the video camera positioned at the foot of the bed, which is actively capturing their entire interaction, provides the first hint that something more nefarious may be going on. This initial perception is confirmed minutes later in the film, as Phillip Jackson (played by Patrick Thompson), a cyber-crime investigator in Australia who specializes in online perversion, stumbles upon FeederX.com, a members-only feederism website that he eventually determines is operated by Michael in Toledo, Ohio. It is at this site that Phillip first views video footage of Deidre – who is identified online as the 'latest attraction' – as well as some of Michael's previous gainers.

As the film continues, Michael's encounters with Deidre become increasingly dominant and abusive. In one scene, he covers her face and body with gooey food, whipped cream, and chocolate sauce before standing over her and masturbating, commanding her to

“shut the fuck up” when Deidre says that she loves him. In another, after he has moved Deidre to a more isolated location and instructs her to eat her special treat of piggy-shaped cookies (which she refuses), he becomes emotionally manipulative, threatening to abandon Deidre for another woman who will appreciate having the whole world dropped at her feet and thereby coercing her to eat. To keep Deidre’s weight increasing, despite her expressed resistance and fear, Michael proceeds over time to begin force-feeding her liquefied food by inserting a tube down her throat, remaining unconcerned as she gags and slaps at his hand in protest.

Continuing his investigation in the United States, Phillip discovers that Michael monitors and posts heart rate, blood pressure, cholesterol, and related data about his various gainers online. Glimpsing a ‘latest odds’ link on FeederX.com, he further discovers that Michael’s true motive is to feed his gainers to death, and that his site is actually a gambling website at which members place bets about precisely when each of his latest attractions will perish. “He’s leading them willingly to their slaughter”, Phillip expresses to one of his crime-fighting colleagues. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that all of Michael’s gainers prior to Deidre have mysteriously gone missing (and are presumed to be dead), strongly suggesting that this man is a unique type of serial killer. What is far more surprising, however, is Phillip’s discovery that the liquefied food Michael is force-feeding Deidre contains the remains of his previous victims.

The film’s climax features the final showdown between Philip and Michael on the outskirts of Toledo, in the home where he served as the feeder to his deceased obese mother (whom he intentionally killed) when he was a young boy. As Michael performs a silly dance on Deidre’s bed, his ebullience reveals that this is the day he plans to force-feed Deidre to death. Playfully pouncing on Deidre’s exposed flesh, he kisses down the length of her left breast before callously biting her stomach. Her positive spirits now soured, Deidre scolds him, adding that she does not understand what has gotten into him lately. Holding a large plastic funnel and feeding tube in front of her, Michael instructs her to beg for it. She complies by telling him what he wants to hear: that she is hungry and wants to grow to be a thousand pounds. Seconds later, she starts to scream as he harshly forces the tube down her throat. He then begins to pour her corpse-laced, liquefied meal into the tube, jamming it in further when Deidre tries to resist. Michael remains unfazed as Deidre expresses that she

is feeling unwell, having trouble breathing, and experiencing heart palpitations.

Brandishing a pistol, Phillip enters the bedroom suddenly and unexpectedly, startling Deidre as he commands Michael to move away from her. Deidre immediately defends Michael verbally, telling Phillip to leave her 'baby' alone and not to hurt him. She refuses to believe the investigator when he says that Michael is trying to kill her, even after Michael burns Phillip with the boiling liquefied remains of his most recent victim, beats the man repeatedly, and drags him into the bed beside her. Although Phillip reveals the fact that Michael currently has a thin, beautiful wife and the horrific details about what Michael has been feeding her, Deidre still clings to the belief that her feeder is an innocent man. She attempts to comfort Michael, telling him that everything is okay – that is, until Michael confirms that he intentionally killed his own mother before carving all the fat off her body in order to make her thin and beautiful. Michael begins to experience a psychotic episode; he points Phillip's gun at Deidre's head and pretends to pull the trigger, terrifying her. "This is power", Michael turns and says proudly to Phillip, as he begins to smother Deidre with a pillow. In a surprising turn of events, Phillip emerges the victor in a struggle with Michael to reclaim his pistol. However, rather than shooting Michael after he insults the investigator's manhood, Phillip instead turns away abruptly and shoots Deidre in the head after she calls him a 'pervert' and a 'pig' and proceeds to spit at him, killing her instantly. After Phillip aims the pistol once again at Michael, two additional shots are heard being fired after the screen fades to black.

With the possible exception of a few moments early on, everything about the representation of fat fetishism and feederism in *Feed* communicates a clear message that both of these subcultural sexual phenomena are to be regarded as being extremely deviant in nature. Although that is already quite evident from the various scenes described above, this message is further reinforced by juxtapositions of several of these same scenes with noteworthy others as the narrative unfolds. Early in the film, for example, viewers watch as Phillip travels to Hamburg, Germany, to investigate a horrifying cannibalism case and discovers one man, whom Phillip explicitly refers to as a 'freak', feeding the severed body parts of another man (which include his severed penis) back to that same man. To film buffs, this scene is readily reminiscent of the brain-feeding scene featured in *Hannibal* (Scott, 2001) – during which Hannibal Lecter

(played by Anthony Hopkins) serves fried pieces of the brain of Paul Krendler (played by Ray Liotta) to Krendler himself – and it implies that Phillip only works cases involving the most extreme sexual deviants. In addition, the aforementioned scenes of Michael engaging in acts of feederism with Deidre are regularly juxtaposed, and frequently intercut, with scenes of Phillip engaging in increasingly rough, borderline abusive sexual acts with his girlfriend Abbey (played by Rose Ashton) as the film progresses – which suggests that the deviant sexual activities he is being exposed to regularly in his work life are changing him in unexpected and undesirable ways in his personal life – to the point that she writes the word ‘pig’ in large letters on his chest and leaves him in the middle of the night. In this regard, *Feed’s* representational strategies pertaining to ‘deviant’ individuals who engage in fat fetishism and feederism in the early 2000s are akin to director William Friedkin’s representational strategies pertaining to ‘deviant’ gay men in the early 1980s in his controversial film *Cruising*, a similarly sordid, exploitation-filled crime thriller which readily suggests that those who are exposed to so-called deviant subcultures and sexual activities will be unable to resist the lure of those same phenomena and will one day soon begin engaging in them themselves. (It should be noted here that, during *Feed’s* denouement, it is revealed that Phillip actually allowed Michael to live and is now holding him hostage in the home where he once imprisoned Deidre, and that he derives extreme pleasure from making the man beg for food in order to survive.)

In the event that *Feed’s* negative attitudes toward fat fetishism and feederism somehow still remain a bit unclear to audience members, the film makes them entirely explicit through three particularly insightful exchanges of dialogue. First, Phillip explains to a colleague:

They [feeders] want to control them [gainers]. Get ‘em as fat as they can so they can’t even leave the house. Can’t even take a shit without the feeder. It’s the ultimate in sub/dom relationships. It’s not your run-of-the-mill lick my boots, drink my piss kind of relationship.

A bit later, as he attempts to dissuade Phillip from pursuing Michael’s case, Phillip’s supervisor states, “If these women are as fat as you say they are, they’re going to die of a stroke or a heart attack or downright fuckin’ ugliness anyway”. Then, the representational icing on the cake comes in the form of the revelation that the priest who adopted

Michael following his mother's death is no longer willing to even speak of Michael because he is so evil. It is perhaps little surprise, therefore, that *Feed* has been characterized by critics as an 'intentionally nauseating' (Weinberg 2006) creation centring on a 'preening nutcase [who] pampers overweight girls by shoving fattening foods down their cakeholes while taking Internet bets on how long they'll live' (Newman n. d.) which is filled with disturbing themes pertaining to "co-dependence, consumerism, the ripple effects of bad parenting, [and] even the difficulty of trusting someone" (Cline 2005) and devolves into "gross, sadistic exploitation" (Time Out 2006).

### **Toward more positive representation: fat fetishism, feederism, and *City Island***

Arguably, the only positive aspect of the representation of fat fetishism and feederism in *Feed*, besides the reality that the film opts to represent these phenomena at all, occurs when Michael explains to Phillip that his actions may have some positive benefits for his gainers. He notes that his behaviours liberate his gainers by fostering true beauty in them, rather than forcing them to adhere to fashion, culture, and Madison Avenue's anorexic version of contemporary femininity: skinny, androgynous women with small breasts, bony backsides, and no hips or curves who resemble boys and would crack their pelvises if they ever attempted to give birth. He adds:

The truth is that men like their women big and soft, not constipated and waifish with halitosis from malnourishment. Nourishing a woman, honouring her, caring for her, accepting her the way she is – that is what it means to love a woman. It's about respecting my queen, and putting her needs before anything else.

According to real-life individuals who participate in these sorts of relationships, this is the kind of positive state of affairs that they typically enjoy.

The *Moral Feederism Handbook* contains an article about the leading myths and stereotypes pertaining to feeders and feederism. It explains that widespread negative perceptions of such individuals and activities stem from occasional news stories and other media offerings (such as *Feed*) that only feature feederistic relationships having gone horribly awry, coupled with the reality that

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happy, successful, safe, and loving feederistic couples (which form the vast majority of all pairings) are fairly successful at minding their own business and being quirky but not outright newsworthy. So we wind up being judged by our worst and most despicable examples. Can you imagine if the same standard applied to something as harmless as foot fetishism? If anyone who thought feet were pretty were assumed to want to chop them off at the ankles? (Moralfeeder 2011)

The article further emphasizes that, although there may indeed be a small percentage of feeders who are emotionally manipulative and/or abusive to their gainers, most feederist participants are actually just regular people who are involved in “normal, equal relationships, with the slight twist that one of us is gaining weight and the other is helping” . To drive these points home, it states:

Feeders aren't usually calculating, ruthless [beings determined] to take advantage of others. There are certainly a few, but as I keep saying, they're the exception and not the rule. Feeders are human beings with feelings. They fall in love. Most of us are people first – husbands, wives, boyfriends, girlfriends – and feeders or feedees second. That's the proper prioritization of life versus fetish. The majority of feeders and feedees are responsible, sober adults exercising their right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness in whatever way that they deem inoffensive and sane (Moralfeeder 2011).

Certainly, the pictures of fat fetishism and feederism that are painted in *The Moral Feederism Handbook* differ substantially from those that are painted in *Feed*, despite the fact that the handbook does explicitly acknowledge that abusive feeder–feedee relationships occasionally do actually exist. It is fortuitous, therefore, that 2009's *City Island* offers very different representations of these same phenomena in a mainstream-appealing film that can more realistically introduce audience members to their existence and typical realities.

*City Island* is a film about family secrets that ultimately get revealed. For starters, Andy Garcia plays the patriarch Vince Rizzo, a working-class prison guard who has been concealing two big secrets from his loved ones: he is secretly taking acting classes in order to pursue his dream of becoming an actor, and the handsome parolee that he brings home to live in a shed in the family's backyard in the Bronx fishing village of City Island, New York, is actually his grown son from a previous relationship. His wife of twenty years, Joyce

(played by Julianna Margulies), is remaining silent about her attempted seduction of the parolee in an attempt to get back at her husband, whom she incorrectly believes is having an affair with another woman (Vince tells her that he is out playing poker whenever he heads to his acting classes and she is suspicious of his secretive whereabouts). Their college-aged daughter Vivian (played by Dominik Garcia-Lorido) hides the fact that she is now working as a stripper in order to generate much-needed funds after losing her scholarship. Their high school-aged son Vince Jr. (played by Ezra Miller), or Vinnie, is keeping mum about his burgeoning sexual attraction to large women and his desire to feed them in order to derive mutual pleasure, "which results in him spending a lot of time in his room trolling the Internet and gazing wistfully out the window at the plus-sized neighbour" (Kendrick 2010). All four of these family members are also secret smokers, actively concealing their smoking behaviour from the others at every turn. As such, the film stems from "a fundamental chicken-and-egg scenario: Do we lie to our loved ones because we fear their responses, or are their responses a result of our lies?" (Kendrick 2010)

The fat fetishism and feederism storyline in *City Island* begins during the film's opening sequence, as Vinnie admires his big beautiful neighbour Denise (played by Carrie Baker Reynolds) entering her vehicle before he departs for school. Once on campus, he runs into Cheryl (played by Hope Glendon-Ross), an overweight girl his own age that he is interested in, and offers to skip class with her so that he can feed her donuts. Visibly offended, Cheryl storms off, wrongly convinced that he was making a fat joke at her expense. As he begins to come to terms with his newly discovered sexual proclivities, Vinnie stumbles upon a website called 'Feeding Denise', operated by a "proud BBW" who is 5'8" tall and weighs 350 pounds, which makes money by providing subscribers with round-the-clock access to images of the woman in her kitchen, where she spends the majority of her free time. It doesn't take him long to realize that this woman is his next-door neighbour. Unsatisfied by simply watching the woman seductively baking food items in her kitchen on his computer screen, Vinnie climbs atop some trash cans and peers directly into her kitchen window, running away just moments before his presence is discovered. Shortly thereafter, the boy's knowledge of Denise's secret password lets her know that he is one of her fans, and she invites him to go shopping with her. While doing so, they run into Cheryl at the supermarket, who seems jealous when she glimpses

Vinnie with another woman. Once inside Denise's kitchen with the groceries, Vinnie expresses aloud for the first time what he has recently been discovering about himself: "It's my thing – I need to feed a girl, like a lot of food". He seems relieved when Denise responds in a positive, non-judgemental way to this declaration by stating that he is a classic feeder who obtains pleasure by giving pleasure, and also happy when the woman says that he should invite Cheryl over to spend time with them.

Through the inclusion of such scenes, *City Island* acknowledges the reality that "gaining is something that many feedees [such as Denise] do on their own in the beginning, perhaps with some encouragement from people in the online feeder community" (Eaton 2015). Subsequent scenes show the trio sharing a huge meal together – Vinnie is encouraged when Cheryl reveals that she doesn't mind him touching her food with his bare hands – and enjoying snack foods together on Denise's living room sofa while they watch food-related television programming. In addition, the film concludes with everyone's secrets having finally been revealed, followed by an outdoor family meal that warmly embraces Vince's newfound son (played by Steven Strait) and the newfound trio of friends composed of Vinnie, Cheryl, and Denise.

### **Concluding observations**

Until media representations of fat fetishism and feederism become more numerous and common, the ones contained in the films *Feed* and *City Island* can be highly influential in moulding audience member perceptions. Although both communicate some truths about these sexually charged real-world phenomena, the latter does a far more effective job of normalizing them with regard to the ways they appear to be most commonly experienced. In contrast, extreme and sensationalistic representations such as those featured in *Feed* serve primarily to give these relatively unknown ways of being a bad name.

To date, little empirical research has yet been conducted on fat fetishists and individuals who engage in feederist relations (Griffiths 2013). Some researchers believe this is due to the misperception that it is inconceivable for individuals to be attracted to obese others, and that anti-fat prejudice renders sexual subcultures such as these to remain in the closet (Clark-Flory 2010; Griffiths 2013). The same sorts of logic likely explain the dearth of representations of fat fetishism and feederism in films and other forms of popular culture. However,

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representing these phenomena more frequently will provide greater insight into the true variety of sexual proclivities that exist. It will also enable currently closeted fat fetishists, feeders, and gainers to more readily identify role models, accept themselves and others like them, and reduce the secrecy they frequently feel with regard to their preferred sexual activities and personal lives (Moralfeeder 2015).

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