

The Pains of Sharing Pleasure

Imag(in)ing Motherhood on Pinterest

Contemporary experiences of motherhood take stage at the intersection between ideologies of intensive mothering, which demand an exclusive orientation towards the needs of the child, and new individualism, which prescribes a focus on the self, and a continuous need to re-invent self-identity physically, psychologically, and professionally. This essay argues that while Pinterest provides a forum for women to experiment with a variety of rapidly revisable self-representations, it simultaneously functions to reinforce compartmentalized idealizations of motherhood in the form of imagery from a regressive and repressive cultural archive. The ideal user is a post-feminist subject who celebrates the freedom to enjoy visual pleasure uncritically, thereby participating in the continued dissemination of unattainable ideals of motherly perfection. Thus, as a site where the conflict between different demands becomes tangible via the use of images, Pinterest offers an important window into the complexity of contemporary experiences of motherhood.

Currently the third most popular social networking site after Facebook and Twitter, Pinterest differs from the other two by its primarily pictorial content and its non-linear, mosaic structure. Initially invitation only, the image sharing website went fully public in July of 2012 and has continued to gain in popularity since: by July 2013, Pinterest had 70 million users worldwide, the vast majority being women (Smith). The website is structured like a virtual scrapbook that allows users to pin and re-pin images on different boards. Common threads or themes on these boards are fashion and style, food and diet, fitness, home décor, and crafts. The user may create his or her own themed boards, but also has access to more mixed boards, either on the home screen that shows recent pins by all the users one is following, or in a more general category that displays

a mixture of recent popular pins. Pinterest thus offers a potentially unlimited number of picture mosaics that combine images from various aspects of life.

According to a recent survey, 42 percent of mothers who use Pinterest claim that the social network has caused them anxiety (Dube). Nevertheless, many mothers continue to use the virtual pinboard to pin and re-pin visually pleasing images of foods, crafts, fashion, and bodies made fit by rigorous workout routines. In this essay, I consider a variety of popular discourses that lay claim to and structure contemporary experiences of motherhood and argue that Pinterest intensifies the complexity of these experiences, thereby causing so many maternal users anxiety. Contemporary experiences of motherhood are reflected in and shaped by ideologies of what Sharon Hays has termed “intensive mothering,” which demand an exclusive orientation towards the needs of the child. At the same time, as Anthony Elliott and Charles Lemert argue, contemporary culture promotes what they call “new individualism,” which prescribes a focus on the self, and a continuous need to re-invent one’s self physically, psychologically, and professionally. Pinterest offers an imaginative space in which the user can seemingly fulfill both of these conflicting demands. However, a brief consideration of image theory helps problematize this assumption by highlighting the conflicts between the pleasure of posting and sharing images and the anxiety these activities and the images themselves may cause. Juxtaposing different practices of viewing (images), I demonstrate how the tension between these viewing practices creates an ambiguous experience that may include both pleasure and pain. Contextualizing this tension within contemporary discourses of post-feminism, which oversimplify the complicated relationship between the different viewing practices, I outline a reading of contemporary social networking sites that moves beyond dichotomies of good vs. bad, feminist vs. anti-feminist.

Both in content and form, Pinterest embodies a technology of Elliot and Lemert’s “new individualism.” In their examination of the ways in which globalization affects concepts of identity and desire, they find that, “[w]hat all of us are increasingly called upon to do, in the frame of globalizing social processes, is reshape, reconstruct, reinvent and transfigure ourselves” (*New Individualism* 3). Pinterest allows users to add and subtract images of what they desire, thematically organized into categorized boards, instantaneously—at the click of the mouse. The virtual pin board thus becomes a twenty-first century version of what Foucault, in an essay of the same name, called a “technology of the self,” i.e., a practice “which permits individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their bodies, souls, thought, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (18). By way of their most common themes, Pinterest boards constitute a

representation of how one would like to appear (fashion and style boards) and what one would like to own (home décor) and accomplish (crafts, bodies), in other words, an idealized version of one's own imagined self. The possibility to rapidly alter images representing oneself and one's desires can be seen as an important technology to fulfill the imperative of Elliott and Lemert's "new individualism." Thus, the formal structure of the social network provides the basis for the public display of rapidly changing conceptions of self and functions as proof for the user's ability to reinvent herself continuously.

The constant demand for self-reinvention is particularly taxing for mothers whose identities are multiple and instantaneously irrevocably dismantled by the birth of a child. As Elliot and Lemert argue, identities are products of social relationships, negotiated in interactions with others. In fact, they claim, "fashionings of the self cannot be performed outside of relations with others.... [And if] the individual is somehow a product of his relations with others, then it stands to reason that whichever others in whatever kind of social combinations makes all the difference in the world as to whom we might be or become" (*New Individualism* 20). Entering the mother-child relationship complicates pre-existing social relationships, not simply because there is now another human being depending on one for survival (although that in and of itself introduces a fundamental change to a woman's sense of self and identity). It also alters the relationship with one's partner (if there is one), whose offspring one is now in charge of protecting, as well as the outside world in front of which one has to negotiate these different demands, and which also places certain demands on mother and child, monitoring behaviors as soon as one enters others' fields of vision. Mothering in an ideological context that presumes a baby's mother to be the "central caregiver," and which demands that "mothers ... selflessly nurture their children" by "lavishing copious amounts of time, energy, and material resources on the child" provides a context in which maternal identity derives not only out of the relationship with the child, but also with an unlimited number of bystanders who—seemingly or not—hold the mother accountable to the ideological standards of intensive mothering (Hays 3, 8). The ideology of intensive mothering thus contradicts not only the demand for a focus on the self, but it also offers a very limited range of acceptable maternal behaviors, thereby obstructing the possibility for perpetual self-reinvention.

Much of the image material on Pinterest related to maternal activity and desire reinforces this limited set of ideals. Images of home décor refer to the mother's responsibility to create a comfortable home, birthday party ideas remind the mother of her duty to spend inordinate amounts of time on an event that may not even be remembered by her child, and recipes for healthy foods instate the mother as the provider of both physical and mental health.

All the while, images of fashion and worked-out bodies reinforce mother's duty to accomplish all of this while fulfilling the highest beauty standards. The categorization on boards with specific themes based on the care of oneself or one's family and children compartmentalizes virtual experience. By organizing mothers' lives into different categories, the boards offer seemingly manageable facets of ideal identities, which may produce anxiety once they are mentally and ideologically combined into a larger mosaic of perfection. While harmless on its own, the board containing images of beautified living spaces might become more daunting in combination with images of healthy foods etc., all implying the mother as responsible for achieving a state of perfection in all these different domains of her life at once.

On the surface, the social network thus appears to offer an important tool to fulfill the demands of new individualism. However, as Elliott and Lemert add, the new individualism in connection with an increased withdrawal into private worlds also has the effect of isolating the individual. This is particularly true for the users of social networks, whose engagements with others is every bit as imagined as is the virtual consumption of goods. The authors assert that, "on the level of day-to-day behavior such 'new individualisms' set the stage for a unique cultural constellation of anguish, anxiety, fear, disappointment and dread" ("Global New" 61–62). In the case of Pinterest, the content of the images not only represents unattainable ideals of consumption, but also of femininity, and more specifically, of motherhood. In 2012, the website became the subject of a brief internet debate regarding its image content and its relationship with contemporary feminisms. In a much-debated buzzfeed article called "How Pinterest is Killing Feminism," author Amy Odell discusses the content of much of the pinned material and likens it to the imagery disseminated by twentieth century American women's magazine culture. According to Odell, "Pinterest's user-generated content ... feels like a reminder that women still seek out the retrograde, materialistic content that women's magazines have been hawking for decades." For Odell, the image content represents images of femininity from the past that somehow make a re-appearance in this specific social network.

Taking a closer look, Odell finds that it is precisely the structure of the network and its emphasis on images that enables such a recurrence of traditional concepts of femininity. Although knowledge of the misogynistic content of gender stereotypes has become commonplace, Pinterest exemplifies that a cognitive rejection of gender stereotypes can easily be undermined by impulsive positive responses to the same stereotypes. Odell writes, "even with the rising popularity of feminist content online, adult women are still conditioned to think about diet and exercise and looking beautiful, so it makes sense that they'd pin these things, impulsively or not" (Odell). In other words, when using

networks such as Pinterest, the trained consumer, embodied by the clicking hand that likes and re-pins, might act faster than cognitive feminist arguments can prevent her from taking such action. In this manner, culturally repressive content continues to be perpetuated and disseminated, with women being the primary consumers and (re)producers of the generated content.

Odell's post was met with fierce resistance. The main point of contention is the fact that with Pinterest, as with all other social networks, the users are generating their own content. In her response titled, "If You Believe Pinterest Is Killing Feminism, Then You Must Also Believe That Women Are Killing Feminism," social media commentator and blogger Terri Ciccone takes issue with what she considers this main oversight in Odell's argument: the fact that the women themselves select and distribute the content, as though that in and of itself made anti-feminist content impossible.¹ "Isn't Pinterest all user-generated content?" Ciccone asks. "If women are selecting and supporting the content that gets pinned and re-pinned, and if you subscribe to Odell's argument, then Pinterest isn't killing feminism — women are" (Ciccone). For Ciccone, this is inconceivable. Instead, she argues,

I believe that women are ... attracted to Pinterest not because they want to find the perfect fireplace tchotchkes, but because they enjoy the design innovation, and interacting with the platform is simply attractive and fun. In a day in which some of us (ahem!) are inundated with spreadsheets, memos and meetings, at the end of the day it feels good to have some visual stimulation and engage with big, bright photos. It's important to remember that if we don't like something we see on Pinterest, we should remember that it was put there by a fellow user. It isn't bombarding us like a billboard or an ad in the subway; women are curating their own experience on the site. They're not victims; they're actors. And that's a positive thing.

By asserting that using Pinterest is "simply attractive and fun," Ciccone attempts to construct the act of sharing images as innocent and harmless. Her readers are invited to view the posting of beautiful images as a reward for hard-working women, something to enjoy and a way to relax from the stressful workday. What is more, according to Ciccone, because women are actively involved in posting and reposting images of content they like, they are actively involved in creating the network, and choosing what they wish to see there.

The debate between Ciccone and Odell is reminiscent of and can be contextualized within the rhetorical framework of post-feminism. According to Angela McRobbie, discourses embedding this rhetoric rely heavily on "tropes of freedom and choice," by which "feminism is ... made to seem redundant"

(11). As McRobbie describes, this rhetoric is particularly prominent in popular culture, as evidenced by Ciccone's blog post circulated via social networks and other new media apparatuses. Ciccone's arguments build on an underlying assumption that is pivotal to McRobbie's description of post-feminist discourses, namely the idea that feminism's goals of women's freedom and equality have been achieved, and that to further insist on pointing out misogynist tendencies in media culture is anachronistic pedantry. Instead, the newly liberated female subject is expected to "withhold critique," and her freedom is thus predicated on her willingness to accept the post-feminist paradigm. This new ideal subject thus displays "an uncritical relation to dominant commercially produced sexual representations which actively invoke hostility to assumed feminist positions from the past, in order to endorse a new regime of sexual meanings based on female consent, equality, participation and pleasure" (18). By emphasizing that women turn to Pinterest merely for the pleasure of experiencing the "big, bright photos," the "design innovation" in this "platform [which] is simply attractive and fun," Ciccone depicts the average female Pinterest user as a post-feminist consumerist subject who merely follows her desire for fun, beauty, and pleasure.

In addition, Ciccone underestimates how antifeminist ideologies are disseminated. Her claim that Pinterest is not like a "billboard or an ad on the subway," but instead that "women are curating their own experience" displays a naïve and limited understanding of ideological pathways. In his seminal essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Louis Althusser emphasizes that ideology depends on the characteristics of the channels through which it is disseminated. According to Althusser, "an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices. This existence is material" (112). The common practices structuring the use of Pinterest thus determine both form and content of the disseminated ideology. The fact that 80 percent of image content is re-pinned somewhat qualifies Ciccone's claim that "women are curating their own experience" (Moore). Pinterest is rarely about introducing new content and rather about liking or re-pinning something someone else already shared. The innovative feminist potential of the website identified by Ciccone is thus undermined by the actual practices that structure the Pinterest experience. The images that are disseminated mostly come from a cultural archive most users are already familiar with. In her sociolinguistic analysis of the network, Katherine Gantz finds the rhetorical structure of the website to be in support of positivity and affirmation, discouraging and sanctioning articulations of dissent or critical commentary. Gantz writes, "[i]n this way, the site often functions as a repressive mechanism, recycling hegemonic notions of feminine politeness and capitalist-constructed heteronormativity that prevent women from articulating individual or critical thought" (28). While one might argue,

as one user does, that this also leads “feminist content on Pinterest to be more respected than on other social networking sites” (Hodge), this participation practice nonetheless presupposes an uncritical, polite user. The ideal Pinterest user is a post-feminist female subject.

Ciccone’s argument fundamentally hinges on the underlying assumption that Pinterest users engage only superficially with their images. She argues that the pleasures are primarily “visual,” neglecting to consider the cultural semiotics associated with each image. In order to explore the tension between aesthetic pleasure and critical engagement, I turn to German phenomenologist and image theorist Lambert Wiesing, who distinguishes between seeing images and reading them: whereas in the first case, the viewer’s engagement with the images is primarily motivated by the aesthetic pleasure they provoke, the second approach focuses on what the image re-presents, i.e. what it refers to in the “real world.” In his book *Artificial Presence: Philosophical Studies in Image Theory*, Wiesing examines the way in which images make things visible, and most importantly, he argues, “the image opens up a view on reality liberated from the constraints of physics” (17). For instance, what is depicted does not age, even though the image carrier might. To this, I might add, an image also shows something that does not have a history. An image of a beautiful birthday cake thus displays no evidence of the investment of time, money, and energy that went into creating it. We might admire the cake’s shapes and colors, but the image does not give away its history. Similarly, if images of well-trained bodies display the sweat that lead to them, they do so to aestheticize the body rather than to trace time. Images of well-designed nurseries show no signs of the life that is supposed to take stage in them. The cake, the body, the nursery—they simply *are*.

Departing from this conceptualization of the image as “pure visibility,” Wiesing distinguishes between a semiotic approach to images, which insists on reading images like signs, i.e. with regards to what they re-present, and one based on perception, which is interested in what the image presents, i.e. makes present or visible. Wiesing shows that in a perception-based approach, one has to distinguish between “image carrier,” that is the material on which the image appears—here the computer screen, the phone, or the tablet,—the “image subject” which is the real object to which an image can refer, and the “image object,” i.e. the depiction that visibly appears in the image. What is important is the clarification that “the image object is not a real object,” instead it is what Wiesing calls a visibility construct. Wiesing claims that “pure visibility is a description of the particular kind of being-an-object ... that distinguishes the image object: it is necessarily an object that is exclusively visible” (19, 20). It is this approach to images that illustrates the point taken by Terri Ciccone in the above-cited debate regarding Pinterest and feminism: one might very

well be aware of cultural constructions of femininity and yet enjoy the visual stimulation provided by the Pinterest imagery, if one regards the images as presenting rather than representing something.

The post-feminist's approach to re-pinning retrograde content on Pinterest is thus to emphasize the image's surface over its depth. By this account, it is therefore the image surface—what it presents—which triggers a user to like or re-pin the image. When posting the image of a nursery, for instance, the user might appreciate the way the light falls into the room through the window, or the color composition, or the arrangement of geometric shapes. The initial moment of responding to the image surface, and of liking or re-pinning the image, in this approach looks at the image itself as the object, rather than viewing the nursery as a space that exists somewhere else in “real” time and space. What is more, post-feminist arguments like Ciccone's emphasize that women are perfectly capable of delighting in the presence of the image while being aware of its antifeminist content. In fact, their ability to laugh off the layer of representation and focus merely on the aesthetic pleasure provided by the image surface exemplifies another aspect of the ideal postfeminist subject, what cultural critic Ariel Levy has termed the “female chauvinist pig.” Like Raunch culture, which Levy explores in her book *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, Pinterest contains much material that has “traditionally ... offended women, so producing or participating in it is a way both to flaunt your coolness and to mark yourself as a different, tougher, looser, funnier—a new sort of loophole woman” (96). This new woman—the post-feminist subject—can participate in the dissemination of visual ideals of motherhood because she is aware of its implications and thus assumed to be immune to them.

This way of seeing images in terms of what they present is categorically different from the semiotic approach, which views images as signs, and thus “reads” them. Looking at the image as a sign allows the viewer “to refer to a concrete object in the physical world” (Wiesing 18). The image of the nursery suddenly refers to something else: a real room somewhere, in which a baby will one day sleep, a room which was designed and thought out by someone who had to consume goods, that is to spend money to purchase the items within it, and energy to arrange them as they are in the image. It represents a peaceful space, implying the mother's role in creating this kind of environment. Reading the image as a sign fills the nursery with a past and a future. That there is often a large gap between the ideal presented in an image and its attainability is addressed in the frequent “How-to” manuals shared on the website. These manuals explicitly acknowledge the history of specific image content and emphasize an interest in what is represented over what is presented, i.e., the depth of the image over its surface. A large subgroup of these are the so-called

“upcycles”: users take old or discarded items, give them a makeover by cleaning and painting them, removing or adding certain elements, and thus turn it into something new, quite often a new toy for their children. Thus, these manuals allow women to demonstrate their capabilities for reinvention, while at the same time instilling the crafty arts as a central ideal of contemporary motherhood. In these cases, images are taken seriously as signs, as possessing a history and as referring to something that is present in everyday life. However, Wiesing warns us, an image does not have to be a sign: “An object indeed becomes a sign only when it is assigned a content, a sense, or a meaning” (18). Wiesing holds that there is a difference between looking at an image out of curiosity about what the image object looks like, and turning it into a sign by assigning meaning to it. Thus, Wiesing might support Ciccone’s claim that Pinterest users might very well look to the images merely for the pleasure they derive from the image surface.

However, as the 42 percent of anxiety-ridden maternal Pinterest users attest to, matters are much more complicated. While the two approaches to image perception might be categorically different in nature, they do not necessarily have to occur separately, and it is precisely their concomitance that makes the Pinterest experience so fraught, especially for mothers. Pinterest users experience a double conflict: first, the visual surface of the social network suggests a detachment from what the images represent that, in the face of the omnipresence of ideologies of intensive mothering, is difficult to uphold; and second, the Pinterest interface promises the opportunity for the continuous and rapid reinvention of selves as demanded by the culture of new individualism, while the actual image content on the network, reflecting the restricted content of mothering ideology, in fact provides a very limited range of images in support of a reinvention of self. Pinterest users thus might find themselves in what Lauren Berlant has called a “relation of cruel optimism.” Berlant defines such a relation as one which “exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project. It might rest on something simpler, too, like a new habit that promises to induce in you an improved way of being” (1). According to Ciccone, Pinterest offers an experience of purely visual pleasure, one where women, after a hard day of work, can come home and relax by virtually consuming a variety of harmless images. However, as Berlant emphasizes, investments in certain objects or ideas and what they promise become cruel “when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially” (1). While many women might approach Pinterest from a post-feminist standpoint, with an interest in innocent pleasure, a substantial number of users, mothers in particular, find their own ability to use the website as a tool for relaxation impeded by

the images of perfection that refuse simply to present, but instead represent the cultural demands perpetuated by the contemporary ideology of intensive mothering. At times, this conflict between the idealized image object and its attainability is addressed and reflected upon by Pinterest users. For instance, Jenna Anderson, photographer and blogger at the Pinterest spoof page Pinterest Fail, calls the network, “largely a site of unrealized dreams” (qtd. in Dube). The images of toppled cakes, messy manicures, and misshaped crafts function as a significant counterhegemonic effort to ridicule the idealistic versions of motherhood disseminated in the social network. Nonetheless, the cognitive awareness of the unattainability of idealized visual versions of motherhood fails to eliminate the anxiety experienced by so many maternal users. Ultimately, while the rhetoric of choice and empowerment that dominates so many contemporary debates, including those about the state of feminism, might make sense if one assumed a viewing practice that is exclusively focused on seeing image objects, it is difficult to envision such a pure viewing practice in the context of contemporary images of motherhood which simply cannot be separated from the omnipresence of discourses of intensive mothering. In fact, one might argue, this rhetoric of choice and empowerment can be detrimental to the experiences of contemporary women as they become unwittingly involved in the dissemination of particular images, all under the guise of a so-called freedom of choice.

Therefore, the question of whether Pinterest users engage in feminist or anti-feminist behavior oversimplifies the complexity involved in contemporary negotiations of identity. As a number of different discourses place a variety of conflicting demands on contemporary mothers, a monolithic understanding of feminism obstructs any nuanced consideration of the variety of feelings and desires that accompany mothers’ behaviors and processes of decision-making. Considering both the pleasure experienced in light of the aesthetic surface and the painful anxiety provoked by the image’s content—as well as the possibility of the images’ allegedly retrograde content causing pleasure—allows us to move past simple dichotomies that evaluate popular culture artifacts based simply on whether their content is feminist or anti-feminist. It is unhelpful to patronize those mothers who experience a sense of agency when using Pinterest by declaring them marionettes in the patriarchal system, but it is nonetheless important to shed critical light on what the cultural archive present in Pinterest imagery may imply once one considers them as representations rather than mere presence.

¹Ciccone’s post appeared in the context of the website *The Jane Dough*, which has been taken down since I first began drafting this paper. Nonetheless, her

position is worth engaging with since it is representative of the larger discourse of post-feminism.

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