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# Food, Gender and Media – the Trinity of Bad Taste:

– A Conversation with  
Karen Klitgaard Povlsen

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## ABSTRACT

*Food, Gender and Media – the Trinity of Bad Taste*

Since she began working in the field in the mid-1980s, associate professor in media studies at Aarhus University Karen Klitgaard Povlsen has been one of most important scholars in the field of cultural food studies in Denmark. She is particularly interested in food in relation to gender and media, and has published widely on the subject. In this interview, she provides a Danish perspective on the study of food and gender, including a brief history of the area and her thoughts on its current status and potentials. Povlsen argues that while gender studies do not enjoy the same prominence today as they did in the 1970s and 1980s, food studies has gained terrain and offers new ways of doing innovative, intersectional analyses of identity and everyday life in contemporary mediatized societies.

## KEYWORDS

*Gender, food, cultural studies, taste, academia/  
Køn, mad, kulturstudier, smag, akademi*

Karen Klitgaard Povlsen is associate professor of media studies at Aarhus University. She has published numerous articles on food, gender and media. Her early work included gender and food in women's magazines in Denmark and Germany (*Blikfang* [Eye Catcher] 1986). More recently she has also worked with anorexia and bulimia (2010) and has published, on a range of themes, such as niche food magazines (2007), food television and the new Nordic kitchen (2008). Currently she is working on trust in food labels and organic food (2015), and children, media and food practices (2015). She is the co-editor of the anthology *Food and Media: Practices, Distinctions and Heterotopias* to appear in Ashgate's *Critical Food Studies*-series 2016.

We met Karen Klitgaard Povlsen on a rainy day in September 2015 in the foyer of the City Hall of Aarhus for a conversation about her work in the field and her view on the development of food and gender studies in a Danish context. The text that follows presents an extraction of that tête-à-tête.

*Jonatan Leer and Katrine Meldgaard Kjer: Thank you for accepting this invitation. You were one of the first to study gender and food in a Danish context from a cultural perspective. This was in the 1980s. What initially sparked your interest in the field in those early days?*

Karen Klitgaard Povlsen: In the 1970s, I was mainly working with women's literature at Aarhus University, but this was not something that you could make a career out of back then. So, instead, I applied for a PhD at Aalborg University with a project about mass media and gender where the Danish Women's magazine *Alt for Damerne* was my main object of interest. Inspired by the German and English wave of interest in gaze theory (Berger 1972, Laermann and Schneider 1977, Gombrich 1982) and research on weeklies and mass media my project focused on fashion and "women's aesthetics". Along the way, I became fascinated by the food pages of the magazines. One of my first pieces on food was called "Men's Gazes, Women's Mouths" (1985). In this, I described how food in the media was feminized and sexualized and arranged to be consumed and penetrated by a male gaze – much like the famous essay by the film theorist Laura Mulvey (1975). Such an analysis – or anything like it – had never been done in relation to food in a Danish context. Several of my colleagues clearly expressed their disdain; they found it ridiculous, completely ridiculous. They were agitated by my work with not just one, but

three things commonly considered "bad taste" and "low status" in academia: gender, mass media *and* food! Eventually, I also came to the conclusion that if I wanted to pursue an academic career, I could not continue with this trinity of bad taste. So in the following years, I toned down my interest in food – which probably was the least accepted element of the three – and favored media studies and cultural analysis in my profile.

*JL/KMK: In Denmark the interest in and status of food studies and gender studies have changed radically since your first articles on the subject. How has your own work in the intersection between food and gender evolved during this time, and what are your thoughts of the changing landscapes of the fields?*

KKP: In the 1990s, there was an obsession with the body in both academia and the general cultural landscape. This obsession allowed me to work with food and gender through a focus on the body. Back then we did a themed issue on Women, Gender & Research entitled *The Body as Metaphor* where we translated a text by Susan Bordo (1993/2004). Inspired by Bordo, I wrote several articles on bulimia, anorexia and obesity, and it was by talking about these issues that I addressed gender and food in those days. Also, throughout the 1990s I worked on *Beverly Hills 90210* (Povlsen 1999), and considered the ways in which meals were a central and highly gendered part of the series. I read them as a core element of body formation training that was essential to the show. There were a lot of meals in the series, and in all of them, the boys consumed enormous amounts of burgers and soft drinks while the girls picked at their salads and always left food on their plates. The only exceptions to this were the reconciliation scenes. Here, a boy and a girl could eat ice cream of the same jug.

It was not until the 2000s that it became legitimate to work directly on food within academia again. In my case, it was maybe a consequence of the closing of gender studies department at the faculty of humanities at Aarhus University. After this, gender studies became dominated by the social sciences, and focused mostly on legislation and gender equality policies. From the media studies department, however, I could still work on food from a media perspective, notably in women's magazines. So food then eventually became the lens through which I could touch on gender! I think that it's fair to say that the status of food studies has changed for the better in a Danish context, but that this is not the case for gender studies.

For many years, I had the food-gender studies field pretty much to myself. There were a few cultural historical works on food, but they presented themselves as a kind *con amore* or "after hours" research. In the last decade, this has changed. Today, it is even possible to get a Ph.d.-scholarship with a project about food within the humanities. That would have been unthinkable in the 1990s.

*JL/KMK: You are an associate professor at media studies department at Aarhus University, to which you have been connected for many years now. How has the media angle contributed to the study of food and gender both in your own work and more generally in a Nordic context?*

KKP: In the Nordic context, media studies have been very empirically oriented. We have a long tradition of documenting what is going on in the media and relating it to people's everyday lives. It is a very sociological kind of media studies and as food has a more prominent position in sociology than in the humanities, food could relatively easily become a legitimate object for research. Also, through media studies, I have moved from studies of representation to

studies of practices, and to considering how we use food media text in everyday practices. These practices also involve complex negotiations of ideals for class, gender, age, as I discuss in a forthcoming book chapter on food and media (Leer & Povlsen, 2016)

*JL/KMK: The intersectional perspective has been prominent in your work, especially the intersection between gender and class. Several of the articles in this volume also focus on this connection. Why does class keep popping up in relation to gender and food?*

KKP: Media has since at least the 18<sup>th</sup> century been segmented according to perceived audiences' class and gender status. So media studies – and the media industry – are born with an interest in both gender and class. In relation to food, it comes quite automatically for a media scholar to think and talk about class and gender. In some of the more traditional food studies from the humanities, the class dimension is forgotten or toned down. This is maybe also one of the ways that media studies differ from the more aesthetically-oriented disciplines in the humanities.

*JL/KMK: In recent years, food studies appear to have gained interest and respect within academia. How do you see the future of the study of food and gender? Are there in your opinion any issues that demand particular attention as the disciplines move forward?*

KKP: The increased interest in food studies will continue for some time, and I think it is crucial that the humanities and the social sciences continue to challenge the health sciences and the natural sciences, who have "owned" the study of food for many years. There is so much culture in food. Food is so much more than functionalism, health or nutrition. A cultural and social perspective is crucial, even more so because we in the social sciences and the humanities do

not profit from our studies of food. Both the natural sciences and the health science have enormous economic interest invested in food, and often have strong ties to the food industry. For instance ARLA, the largest producer of dairy products in Scandinavia, is taking over food studies at Aarhus University, and Novo Nordisk, the well-known global pharmaceutical company, is funding much of the work being done in health and natural sciences at the University of Copenhagen.

Furthermore, I think we will see stronger alliances between scholars in the humanities and social science-based anthropologists, “soft” sociologists and ethnographers of everyday life. Such alliances will also be important and necessary to develop the field. An area of research that I find particularly important is the question of accessibility to food. We have plenty of food deserts in Denmark outside of the big cities. In these food deserts,<sup>2</sup> we also find the most traditional understandings of gender in Denmark. So social categories such as class, gender and, importantly, age do still play an important role in relation to accessibility and availability of food.

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## NOTES

1. Written and edited with Karen Klitgaard Povlsen
2. Reisig and Hobbiss (2000) define food deserts as “areas of relative exclusion where people experience physical and economic barriers to accessing healthy foods” (ibid: 138).