



Current Contents

Past Issues

□ Attwood, Feona:

'Other' or 'One of Us?': The Porn User in Public & Academic Discourse'

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## 'Other' or 'One of Us?': The Porn User in Public Academic Discourse

### Abstract

The consumption of sexually explicit media has long been a matter of public and political concern. It has also been a topic of academic interest. In both these arenas a predominantly behaviourist model of effects and regulation has worked to cast the examination of sexually explicit texts and their consumption as a debate about harm. The broader area of investigation remains extraordinarily undeveloped.

Sexually explicit media is a focus of interest for academics because of the way it 'speaks' sex and sexuality for its culture. In this paper I examine existing and emerging figures of the porn consumer, their relation to ways of thinking and speaking about pornography, and the implications of these for future work on porn consumption.

**Key words:** Pornography, consumer, figure, discourse, audience research

Despite the fact that pornography is a multi-billion-dollar global industry we know far less about its audiences than 'probably any other genre of popular entertainment' (Jenkins, 2004:2). Given the 'pornographication' of mainstream media and the rise in academic interest in pornography, it seems particularly important to re-examine how we think about consumers of porn. In this paper, I examine existing and emerging figures of the porn consumer, their relation to ways of thinking and speaking about pornography, and the implications of these for future work in this area.

### Figuring the porn consumer – 'other'

According to Alan McKee 'there is a systematic "othering" of pornography consumers in academic research and in public debate about the genre. They cannot know themselves; they cannot speak for themselves; they must be represented' (2006b:3). Actual porn

consumers are absent from public debate and are represented by figures which stand for consumption and sexuality. As Michel Foucault has shown, the construction of figures is an important part of the process of producing knowledge about sexuality, and indeed in producing sexuality itself. In the nineteenth century, the hysterical woman, the masturbating child, the Malthusian couple and the perverse adult became 'anchorage points for the ventures of knowledge' about sexuality (1990:105). Figures are 'privileged objects of knowledge' (1990:105), corresponding to 'strategies' which form 'specific mechanisms of knowledge and power centring on sex' (1990:103). They offer ways of thinking about particular social issues and provide subject positions to take up in relation to them.

Existing figures of the porn consumer derive from a particular model of sexually explicit media focused on behaviour, effects and legislation (see Gunter 2002, for an overview of the kind of research derived from this model). This has grown out of an early, fairly crude approach to the media's social significance that has been focused mainly on media texts depicting sex and violence, generally seen as forms of stimuli, a view no longer treated with much respect in Media Studies. In some ways, of course, this view of porn is not entirely mistaken. Porn is *meant* to stimulate, and like other despised genres, such as the 'weepie', the thriller and vulgar comedy, is intended to have an 'effect' that 'is registered in the spectator's body' (Dyer, 1992:121-122). It is notable that these 'low' genres are the ones which have attracted an 'effects' approach and critical derision; pornography in particular is seen as 'the lowest of the cultural low', worse than the *National Enquirer* or Elvis paintings on velvet, 'the nadir of culture' (Kipnis, 1996:174).

Concerns about pornography are both social and aesthetic. As Laura Kipnis notes, 'When Lorena Bobbitt severed husband John's penis, no one wondered if she'd recently watched Oshima's *In the Realm of the Senses*, the Japanese art film where a male character meets a similar bloody fate' (1996:176). It is assumed that only low cultural media texts have effects, an assumption that reveals all kinds of prejudices about the class of different media and their audiences. At worst, porn is assumed to deaden authentic sexual response, callous sexual attitudes, inspire violent or perverted desires. The porn audience is imagined as a crowd of 'pimplly teenagers, furtive perverts in raincoats, and asocial compulsively masturbating misfits' (Kipnis, 1996:161).

The 'raincoater' has become an immediately recognizable sign for pornography and is perhaps the clearest stereotype of audience member to have emerged in the history of media consumption. But this figure has a history. As Walter Kendrick has argued, the porn consumer has most commonly been figured as a type of 'Young Person', (after Mr. Podsnap's preoccupation with this impressionable creature in Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend*), a troubling and 'inconvenient' figure because there is no apparent 'line of demarcation between the young person's excessive innocence, and another person's guiltiest knowledge' (Dickens quoted in Kendrick, 1996:49). This figure is always drawn from socially powerless groups - 'women, children, and the poor' (1996:237), and, no matter how victimized and passive it appears, is actually imagined as disruptive – not

only corruptible, but corrupting.

### **Figuring the porn consumer – ‘child’ and ‘addict’**

According to Kendrick, the characteristics of this figure shift over time. The ‘falsely innocent adolescent female’ common in nineteenth and early twentieth century discourses, later gave way to the figure of a ‘truly depraved adult male’ (1996:261), and more recently, to a ‘child...of indefinite age and irrelevant sex’ (1996:262). While none of these figures tell us very much about actual porn consumers, they do reveal a great deal about pornography’s significance as an indicator of social dangers. They condense a range of fears about the dangers of sex and technology. This is particularly visible in contemporary representations of children’s access to Internet pornography. In 1995, *Time* magazine ran a story based on a study of Internet porn by Marty Rimm from Carnegie Mellon University, subsequently discredited as a hoax. This story was essential in establishing the figure of the porn consumer as a ‘hydrocephalic’ and horrified child (Kendrick, 1996:254).

Here, the ‘Young Person’ signifies sexual corruption alongside a ‘media literacy’ which has become impossible to monitor (Kendrick, 1996:264). New communication technologies work to short-circuit the traditional hierarchies of access to public space and knowledge that young people have been made to ascend in the past (Lumby, 1997:149-153). In this sense, the development of children’s sexual and media literacy has become a particularly potent symbol as ‘a specter of pending obsolescence’ for an older generation (Miller, 1995). Producers of Internet filter software draw on this figure of the young person in their marketing. Parents are exhorted to protect their families from ‘high-tech porn-pushers’. This marking of porn producers as ‘pushers’ draws on an addiction discourse, also found in *Time*’s representation of the child as pale, unhealthy, passive and transfixed.

The developing focus on children in the way pornography consumption is figured is consistent with a shift in the way moral panics are constructed. As Chas Critcher has noted, while the moral panics of the 1960s and 1970s focused on young people as folk devils - mods and rockers, skinheads and football hooligans, moral panics of the 1980s and 1990s cast children ‘as *the victims* of folk devils’ (2003:155). Zygmunt Bauman argues that in contemporary Britain depictions of the family home are now haunted by the ‘spectre of sex’ and children are portrayed as ‘always and everywhere sexual objects’ (1999:30). These portrayals depend on an understanding of children as ‘vulnerable and underdeveloped, incapable of informed choice about mass media use or sexual activity’ (Critcher, 2003:156). They also depend on the ‘imaginary scenario of danger and rescue’ (1996:xiii) which Walter Kendrick argues is always enacted in discourses about pornography. The other key contemporary figure of porn consumption to emerge in recent years is the cyberporn addict – a man preoccupied by online sexual activity and in the grip of a ‘solipsistic collapse’ (Patterson in Williams, 2004:105). This

figure is also central in *Time's* coverage of cyberporn, represented by 'an image of a naked man, his arms and legs wrapped around a keyboard and computer monitor, seeming to dissolve into the screen'. The man is a 'featureless everyman' in a 'formless room', bathed in the computer glow of 'blistering, apocalyptic light'. There is, as Patterson notes, 'a visual rhetoric of anxiety' around the connection between body and screen, imagined as unwholesome, overwhelming and masturbatory (2004:104).

Figures of addiction are prevalent in consumer societies which privilege consumption and pleasure, but which simultaneously emphasize the responsibilities of a self-reflexive individual who is 'continually obliged to negotiate life-style options' (Giddens, 1992:74). The addict is emblematic of a subject who is no longer capable of managing this contradiction and the cyberporn addict has become the clearest manifestation of a figure which, like the child-victim of porn, handily collapses anxieties about the commodification of sex and technology. The addict has become a recurring motif in contemporary discourses of sex, expressing a concern with compulsive sexual activity, pornography consumption and more recently, with cybersex. Figures of addiction suggest immaturity and an inability to make choices. They also suggest a counterpart expert who completes the scenario of danger and rescue – the clinician who will diagnose and treat addiction, the regulator who will stem the flood of porn into the family home or the parent who will filter it out. In this way, the porn consumer is figured as 'other' and the expert becomes the representative who acts on behalf of 'us'.

Although figures of the porn consumer work as short hand for a range of social anxieties, we should be wary of arguments that attribute fears around victim figures to a generalized 'psychological projection of adults', as Chas Critcher argues. Instead our focus should be on the way that particular figures are constructed through 'discourse mobilized by elites' (2003:161). Indeed, figures of the porn consumer are often constructed for the public by media commentators and politicians, and often as part of more extensive programmes of myth making about sex and technology. In the most recent panics around Internet pornography, for example, the child-victim and cyberporn addict have become emblematic of the Internet as a violent and disturbing 'sea of sex' which is overwhelming the family home (Akdeniz 1999, Hamilton 1999, Craig and Petley 2001). This kind of myth creation is disturbingly successful in scaring the public, particularly in the absence of real knowledge about porn consumption (Craig & Petley, 2001:194). It is worrying then, that it is often underpinned by unsound and inadequate academic work, in 'effects' research, projects such as the Marty Rimm study, and the burgeoning literature on cybersex addiction, which is prominent in research on online sexual activity (see Griffin-Shelley, 2003 for an overview). In all these instances, the scenario of danger and rescue described by Kendrick and the construction of an expert and an Other is evident.

Although anti-pornography feminist work can, on occasions, be differentiated from other anti-porn discourses by virtue of its concern with *actual* violence against women, it has also tended to replay this scenario. In the process, women are established as 'victims' of pornography who must be rescued. Contrasting the presentational styles of anti-porn

scholar, Gail Dines, and s/expert, Susie Bright, in the porn-education roadshows popular on American campuses during the 1980s and 1990s, Eithne Johnson shows how each depend on particular figures of the porn expert and consumer. Feminist anti-porn presentations relied on an understanding of pornography as 'patriarchal propaganda for violence against women' and on women's victim status (Johnson, 1997:27). Using a rather sadistic format, they appear to have been designed to shock and frighten the audience through the use of slide shows depicting violent and highly atypical, imagery. They constructed the educator's expertise as a form of privileged knowledge and the audience as incompetent readers of media texts. Such presentations insisted on a reading of porn, accessible only through expert guidance. In this way a 'correct, disciplined reading' of porn (1997:30) was enforced. In contrast, pro-sex feminist presentations emphasized the uses and pleasures of pornography, combining education and entertainment in the presentational format. This kind of approach made claims to expertise as the result of experience rather than superior knowledge. Bright, for example, emphasized her multiple roles as consumer, reviewer, consultant, performer and producer. Audiences were addressed as literate readers and a space was opened up for their 'multiple readings and interpretative competencies' (1997:31). Where anti-porn educators exhorted women to work towards porn's destruction, sex-positive educators suggested that women engage with it, developing a form of sexual and media literacy which might be termed 'sexpertise' (1997:33).

### **Framing Porn – same old story**

Despite a widescale rejection of behaviourist models and a 'turn to the audience' in contemporary Media Studies, a shift which can also be noted in sex-positive views of pornography, the broad area of sexually explicit media and its audiences has remained extraordinarily undeveloped. Talking about pornography outside the behaviourist paradigm is still difficult and it appears to be hard for commentators to avoid making a leap from the question of porn's significance to the familiar litany of porn's effects – violence, harm, abuse, contamination and addiction. For example, a typical feature article in *The Guardian* magazine about men and pornography begins with the question, 'What does porn do to men?' (Marriott, 2003:45) and goes on to ask, 'How does it affect relationships? Is it addictive? Does it encourage rape, paedophilia, sexual murder?' (2003:46).

Decca Aitkenhead, writing for *The Observer* (2003), completes the same series of moves, mourning the loss of a debate about whether porn 'might be bad for us', before going on to claim that 'pornography does extraordinary things to people'. Aitkenhead's examples include two professed porn addicts. One of these 'cannot buy a newspaper or magazine, or watch television, for fear of what he might see', the other describes his quest for the perfect porn image as being 'really about looking for death'. Aitkenhead recounts how 'cybersex experts' describe the Internet as 'the crack cocaine of

pornography addiction' and offers the mournful evidence of a woman whose partner constantly left 'semen on my office chair and pubic hair on my mouse'. While it is sad that such cases exist, the argument – that this is what porn does to people – is laughable. The article ends with the familiar claims that children are endlessly stumbling across porn when they attempt innocent searches for their homework; that typing 'golden retriever' finds you 'photos of couples urinating on each other' and that 'black hole' brings up 'close-up shots of black women's vaginas'. I Googled both but only managed to find information about dogs and astronomical phenomena.

This inability to escape the logic of effects or to maintain any kind of reality checking in relation to porn is overwhelmingly evident in broadsheet journalism – a typical headline in *The Independent* in 2006 proclaims that 'We are a nation addicted to porn' (Goodchild & Carrell). Petra Boynton describes her discussions with the journalists responsible for this particular story - their inability to make sense of the data they were basing the story on, the lack of supporting evidence for their claims, her attempts to help them through referrals to the Royal College of Psychiatrists and to various researchers in the UK, not one of which was quoted in the final report. She notes that 'As a consequence papers in the rest of the UK and other parts of the world are now running with the story of our "problem" with sex addiction' (2006). As one of the researchers who provided the journalists with information on existing research into porn consumption which was not used in the article, I share her frustration. This kind of reporting contributes to a view of porn consumption which impacts very heavily on academics with an interest in the area. It is only just beginning to be possible to write about sexually explicit representation without an enormous amount of prefacing in which questions of message, effect, and regulation must be ploughed through – a series of ground clearing moves that would be unthinkable in most other contemporary discussions of media texts and their audiences.

But the difficulties of speaking about pornography extend far beyond the relatively recent behaviourist model to much older ways of thinking about the way we read texts, some of these predating the actual existence of pornography, and deriving from earlier views of representation and the obscene. As Pasi Falk argues, obscene texts are 'the excluded Other', first in religious, then moral and juridical, and finally in aesthetic and medical discourses (1993:6). They are 'evil, immoral, pathological' and 'ugly' (1993:1) because they violate the distance thought to be necessary for separating both subject and representation from object (1993:10). Contemporary views of pornography are still based on this foundation; the 'good' images of fine art are considered to stimulate 'contemplation, discrimination and transcendent value', while the 'evil' images of porn promote 'motivation, promiscuity and commodification' (Nead, 1992:89).

Since the invention of photography and then film, pornographic images have signified in an even more disturbing way, for they appear to thoroughly disturb the categories of the real and representational. On the one hand, as a form of sexual practice, porn is 'not real enough', it is a poor substitute for 'the real thing'. On the other, as a representation it is 'too real', because it wipes out the distance necessary for reflection, because it 'causes'

sexual response, because even its status as representation is ambiguous – the performers are ‘really doing it’. For academics and cultural commentators, porn’s emphasis on reaction, physicality and pleasure over deliberation, mind and intellect may also make it a suspect object of contemplation. While some writers have argued that it is exactly these dangerous and ambiguous qualities which make porn worth studying, and despite the much-discussed incitement to speak about sex in modern societies, pornography is a despised form of speech, and a difficult *object* of speech, towards which, as Linda Williams writes, ‘it is difficult to strike a proper attitude’ (1991:xi).

### **Reframing Porn – out of the Secret Museum**

As Walter Kendrick has shown, in the nineteenth century it was precisely through the claim to moral, aesthetic and intellectual distance that the discussion and consumption of pornography was made acceptable, albeit only for a few refined, middle class male scholars and collectors, and only within the walls of a ‘Secret Museum’. But the late twentieth century democratization of higher education and the abandonment of ‘correct’ expert readings of texts in some academic quarters have made this claim more difficult to sustain. As a consequence, the study of pornography has become suspect (Jenkins in Church Gibson, 2004). Henry Jenkins, describing his own experience of media interest in his teaching about porn at MIT, notes that controversy is easily spun around porn in the classroom and that many educators have had ‘their reputations destroyed, lost their jobs, and faced legal sanctions for teaching or researching porn’ (in Church Gibson, 2004:2). Critiques of porn education tend to be vitriolic or dismissive. An otherwise well-informed and largely sympathetic discussion of the topic, featuring interviews with Linda Williams, Judith Butler and Laura Kipnis, ends with this put-down, ‘do we really need a whole curriculum devoted to it? After all, a blue movie is still a blue movie, even if it’s screened in Rhetoric 241’ (Atlas, 1999). But despite a generally hostile media response, academic interest in pornography continues to grow. A shift in the way it is conceptualized by academics is also evident. New work on pornography examines how porn signifies as a category, a discourse and a genre, and the need to study pornography in *context* is now established (Attwood, 2002). Discussions of how to teach this material are also emerging (Kirkham & Skeggs, 1996, Kleinhans, 1996, Jenkins, 2004, Reading, 2005).

Jennifer Wicke has traced the origins of this growing interest from the early 1990s, in academia and more generally, in ‘intellectual journals, magazines, journalistic debates, television opinion shows and independent film-making efforts’, noting how this ‘orgy of publication and commentary’ mimicked the ‘equally unstoppable flood of pornographic materials into all cultural interstices’ (2004:176). By the end of the 1990s this trend was pretty impossible to escape even in the mainstream media. On British TV, for example, programmes about pornography were relatively common. As Brian McNair notes, the TV interest in porn was pioneered by Channel 4 in their *Red Light Zone* series in 1995, leading to programmes ranging from the ‘self-deprecatingly “trashy” and ironic...to

historical and sociological documentaries' (2002:82), most of which 'delivered a non-judgemental, frequently sympathetic account' (2002:84). McNair argues that these programmes reflected the development of 'a broad collective ease with the public exploration of sexual culture; a popular interest in consuming, through the media of the public sphere, sexuality in all its forms (while maintaining the continued segregation of the truly pornographic from mainstream culture)' (2002:86).

In the introduction to the book accompanying the TV documentary series, *Pornography: The Secret History of Civilization* (Channel 4, 1999), Fenton Bailey describes a number of failed attempts to make such a series over a ten year period, attributing its eventual commissioning to burgeoning academic interest in pornography, and also to wider shifts in the culture where porn had become a fashionable object of reflection (in Tang, 1999:9-21). This is evident in other media, for example, in mainstream film treatments of porn topics such as *The People Versus Larry Flynt* (1996), *Boogie Nights* (1997) and *Wonderland* (2003). These documentary and fictional presentations of pornography accompanied an increase in public forms of sexual confession, and all of these have been seen as part of a broader movement towards a 'striptease culture' in which cultural commentators, media producers and ordinary people begin to speak about sex in a way which is 'closer to anthropology than pornography in (the) focus on the discovery and explanation of sexual phenomena' (McNair, 2002:88). In this sense, contemporary representations of pornography and its consumption are part of a cultural shift towards new public forms of talk about sex.

Jane Arthurs has argued that although there are innovations in ways of talking about sex in the media, McNair's account overstates the collective embrace given to forms of sexual exploration (2004:42). Indeed, she claims that there is a 'continued conservatism' in the representation of sex on mainstream TV, where news and science programmes offer 'normative constructions of gender and sexuality', the body of the 'other' is shown as subject to male power, sexual diversity tends to be represented as scandalous and deviant (2004:146), and sexual performance is privileged over pleasure (2004:45-46). But although McNair may overstate the extent to which ways of talking about sex have changed, it is clear that new ways of talking are emerging. It is worth asking, as Ken Plummer does, why it is that certain ways of talking about sex become possible at different times in history. He notes, for example, that by the mid-nineties, crossdressing, transexuality, sex work, s/m and fetishes were beginning to be an acceptable focus of public discourse and representation (1995:113). Plummer notes that the taboo on speaking about pornography was proving harder to break, but some shifts were apparent – male academics and activists were talking about their use of porn, though only in terms of the damage it had done them (1995:113), while, as the earlier discussion of porn



education roadshows has shown, female sex-positive producers and practitioners who liked and approved of porn, or at least its potential, were refusing to keep quiet (see, for example, Califia 1994, Tisdale 1994, Bright 1995, Palac 1998, Sprinkle 1998). These changes were part of a more general shift in which 'Sexual stories of authority' were 'fracturing' (1995:133) and ways of speaking about sex were becoming 'more self-conscious and reflective' (1995:135).

### ***Porn Chic***

There have been important changes in the ways that sex and sexuality are constructed through ways of talking. While porn flourished in the nineteenth century, it was clearly marked as a taboo and dirty form of talk, in need of paternalistic regulation by those with sufficient moral and intellectual integrity to remain uncorrupted by it. This approach dominated the twentieth century landscape too, and despite feminism's important insistence on the sexism of much mainstream pornography, an unfortunate adoption of the same model in prominent anti-pornography feminist discourses worked to perpetuate this power relation. Sex-positive feminist and queer approaches to porn have been markedly different, and the new accessibility of porn, coupled with its presence as an object of public representation, has altered the climate in which porn is consumed considerably. There is a great deal of unevenness in contemporary discourses around pornography. For example, the political progressiveness of feminist and queer interests in porn are quite different from the individualist and consumerist embrace of sexually explicit materials, the freakshow voyeurism of some titillating 'docuporn' and the 'ironic' borrowings of soft-core conventions in lad mags. All the same, what unites these is the way they make porn more public and in many ways, more cool, than ever before.

Porn has become 'chic'. Porn producers from earlier eras such as Hugh Hefner and Larry Flynt have become newly fashionable as part of 'a wider vogue for retro-cool' (Osgerby, 2001:202). Porn stars figure more widely in mainstream media such as men's lifestyle magazines and a new porn-star type of celebrity femininity, exemplified in the UK by Jordan and Abi Titmuss, has emerged. Types of performance such as pole and lap dancing, previously associated with the seedier end of the sex industry, are being sold to women as forms of exercise and entertainment. The playboy bunny has become a familiar logo on high street clothing for women and the term, 'Porn Star' is used to signify rebellion and humour on 'alternative' clothing (see [www.pornstarclothing.com](http://www.pornstarclothing.com)). As the pornosphere expands, new kinds of porn texts are emerging (Jacobs, 2004a). Alternative

porn texts are proliferating and independent porn producers are making new and diverse kinds of sexually explicit materials, often drawing on a DIY aesthetic and collaborative forms of working using digital media and networks (Jacobs, 2004b). Mainstream porn producers are increasingly targeting new audiences. There are college sex magazines in the US; *H Bomb* at Harvard and *Boink* at Boston University. Online sex magazines like *Nerve.com* target 'young, urban, over-educated hipsters' (Nerve.com, 2005) and aim to produce content which is 'more graphic, forthright, and topical than "erotica", but less blockheadedly masculine than "pornography"' (Griscom & Field, 2005). There are new sex magazines for women such as *Scarlet* in the UK and *Sweet Action* in the US.

Of course, these processes are uneven, as the continuing existence of discourses which promote and condemn porn within the media demonstrate. Looking at the often contradictory ways in which politicians, academics, journalists and professional and amateur producers of porn speak about pornography, it is not always easy to make sense of what is happening. There have been claims, both that the pornographication of mainstream culture is now accomplished and that it is the subject of a backlash. There are many indications that porn is now much more acceptable than it has ever been, yet in the UK, there are proposals to dramatically tighten laws on the possession of porn. All the same, it is hard to feel that porn is the excluded other when it is so prevalent and so present in public. And the scramble for new audiences of porn continues. The much-heralded emergence of a market for female consumers is still in the early stages of development, but the signs are promising. The market for sex merchandise aimed at women is booming, both in terrestrial shops and online where women buy toys and other sex products. Increased access to porn through the Internet has opened up this market to women too, and there are many claims that they now form a sizeable segment of the porn audience. Women are increasingly offered guidance in 'how to watch' porn. *Scarlet* magazine presents 'porn appreciation: a beginner's guide' (Hill, 2005:42-43), while Violet Blue's tinynibbles site provides advice on 'How to Watch a Blue Movie'. In her (2003) *The Ultimate Guide to Adult Videos*, Blue argues that women's adoption of porn is 'a happy sign of a much-needed change in women's sexual roles' (2003:6). Her latest book, *The Smart Girl's Guide to Porn* (2006) explains how to become 'a savvy porn shopper'. If the female porn consumer did not exist before, she is in training and under construction in these kinds of sites.

The welcome given to the development of a sex market for women draws on sex-positive discourses, though its feminist credentials are not always so clear. However, it is possible to see in both a distinction made between 'bad girl' and 'good girl' figures in order to mark out territory in which the pleasures of sex consumption for women can be represented. As Eithne Johnson shows, these figures are also drawn on in the making of sex-positive and anti-pornography distinctions. Johnson allies the 'good girl' figure with that of the 'Final girl', a slash horror film character identified by Carol Clover (1992) as one

whose bravery and chastity allows her to triumph over evil and violence. Anti-pornography roadshows invited 'every woman to take a lesson from the Final Girl, who is fierce and chaste' (1997:33) by opposing pornography.

This figure is still a powerful one in the porn debate, but the 'bad girl' has emerged much more strongly in contemporary political and popular cultures. Susie Bright's eulogy for Andrea Dworkin who died in 2005, is an interesting moment in which one of the most prominent 'bad girls' of the late twentieth century pays tribute to the woman who is most emblematic of anti-porn feminism. Bright acknowledges the debt of sex-positive feminists like herself to Dworkin, arguing that they learnt from her how to look at porn with a critical eye. But, she concludes, Dworkin 'was the animator of the ultimate porno horror loop, where the Final Girl never gets a chance to slay the monster; she only dies, dies, dies, with the cries of the angry mourners to remember her' (Bright, 2005). It is hard to see what the figure of the Final Girl, frustrated or victorious, has to offer women in a context in which sex and its representation is increasingly presented by and on behalf of women.

### **Refiguring the porn consumer – 'one of us'?**

It is too early to predict how porn consumers will be refigured in the coming years, though as I have argued, it is possible and important to document the shifts that are already taking place. But it seems likely that we will increasingly see them represented by figures that, like sex-positive 'bad girls', are characterized by knowledgeability and playfulness. Certainly, porn scholars in the last years of the twentieth century were often transfixed by this kind of figure, represented most clearly by Annie Sprinkle, the 'post-porn modernist' who describes herself as 'prostitute/porn star turned Ph.D. sexologist, educator, multimedia artist and Utopian entrepreneur' on her website. Her latest publication, a mainstream self-help book, *Dr. Sprinkle's Spectacular Sex: Make Over Your Love Life with One of the World's Greatest Sex Experts* (2005), displays the cool hybridity for which she is famous. The book is 'More educational than the movie *Kinsey*', 'naughtier fun than TV's *Desperate Housewives*' and with 'more frank sex talk than a full season of *Sex and the City* (website, 2005). Sprinkle's expertise is derived precisely from her range of experience and from her ability to move between different forms and sites of knowledge. It is a type of expertise that is increasingly admired in the academy. Indeed, the book cover endorsements of the new collection, *Porn Studies*, edited by Linda Williams (2004), are by Sprinkle and by 'sexpert, blogger, author and mother', Susie Bright.

Changes in the way academics now study porn have been widely noted (Kirkham & Skeggs, 1996, Attwood, 2002). Two edited collections published in 2004, *Porn Studies* (ed. Linda Williams) and *More Dirty Looks* (ed. Pamela Church Gibson), stress a number of new emphases in the field. These are the importance of porn as a subject for research and teaching; the variety of porn texts; the importance of aesthetics, the avant-garde, the cultural and intellectual economies for understanding porn; a shift of focus from 'women'

to 'gender' and from straight porn to a more diverse set of representations, and an awareness of the importance of race and class. As Linda Williams writes, '*Porn Studies* differs from previous anthologies about pornography...in its effort to take pornography seriously as an increasingly on/scene cultural form that impinges on the lives of a wide variety of Americans and that matters in the evaluation of who we are as a culture' (2004:5). There is a shift in the way the porn consumer is imagined. But despite the impression that the porn consumer is no longer imagined as 'other' but 'one of us' – as Linda Williams puts it: 'Who is watching all this pornography? Apparently all of us' (2004:2) – the porn consumer is still largely absent from discussion.

As Martin Barker argues in his critique of audience research (1998), 'the measures we use for assessing the utility of academics' accounts of the "individual's" relations to the media should be their ability to throw light on what real, concrete audiences do and say with their media', and we should consider the impact of our definitions of media consumption on individuals' understanding of themselves and the media's role in society (1998:190). As the history of research into porn consumption shows, academics have contributed relatively little to this understanding so far.

However, there *is* some research which has sought to avoid crude ways of thinking about the media and about sex. This work, which has surfaced in a range of disciplines, suggests that, far from producing any measurable 'effect,' pornography is experienced in a variety of ways by consumers. Sexually explicit media takes on a range of meanings; different decodings and uses are reported and consumers display both critically distanced and highly engaged audience behaviour (Cowan et al 1989, Loach 1992, Senn 1993, Hardy 1998, Loftus 2002, Ciclitira 2002, Smith 2002, McKee 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c). Reactions to sexually explicit media may also be intensely contradictory; some men and women report being simultaneously attracted and repulsed by pornography (Loftus 2002, Ciclitira 2002 and 2004). Consumers of porn distinguish between the types of porn they approve and disapprove of (for example, non-consensual and child porn), and between the fantasy sex represented in porn and the sex they have in real life. They take ethical positions on the porn debate and act as responsible parents in terms of the media their children encounter. A number of porn consumers cite a range of useful functions that porn has served for them – educating them about sexual positions and practices, giving them permission to experiment sexually, reassuring them about their own sexuality. Porn consumption does not appear to be linked to negative attitudes towards women (McKee 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c).

This research also shows that the significance of sexually explicit material depends very much on context; for example, pornography functions differently for groups of adolescent boys and older single men (Hardy 1998), and it carries symbolic value even, or perhaps especially, for individuals who have little direct experience of it (Cowan et al 1989, Senn 1993). It functions particularly awkwardly within some heterosexual relationships and amongst groups of women, and the difficulty women face in relating femininity, feminism and pornography is striking (Ciclitira 2002 and 2004, Wilson-Kovacs 2004). This difficulty

highlights the real cultural power of porn and the importance of contextual factors that work to produce reading and consumption practices. In particular, gendered practices of looking and speaking structure the consumption of pornography. It has come to be seen as normal for women to be the focus of sexually explicit representation, whilst the existence of what are quite literally cultural 'blind spots' prevent some consumers from being able to 'see' men erotically at all (Eck 2003). These practices also work to structure the responses of individuals to pornography's place in their lives; for example, some women report an inability to object to its use in heterosexual relationships (Shaw 1999), while others display anxiety around speaking openly about their enjoyment of it (Ciclitira 2002 and 2004, Wilson-Kovacs 2004).

Finally, this research has uncovered new areas of interest and concern for porn researchers. For example, some women seem much more anxious about the issues of body image and female attractiveness than they do about issues of sexual violence (Boynton 1999). The importance of styles and aesthetics in various genres of sexually explicit media also emerges as a significant area for study; social hierarchies of generic acceptability and accessibility appear to govern consumers' negotiation of visual and linguistic styles as well as their apprehension of appropriate forms of body image and presentation (Boynton 1999, Eck 2003, Wilson-Kovacs 2004). As this work shows, pornography is part of the human repertoire of sexual practices and behaviours; a source of sexual knowledge, a resource for constructing identity and an important signifier in the performance and display of gender and sexuality. Consumers emerge from these studies, not as victims, addicts, aggressors or misfits, but as sexual subjects whose experiences and understandings of porn depends on a wide range of social and cultural factors. The most valuable amongst these pieces of research are those which are particularly attentive to the context of porn consumption, whether this takes the form of focusing on the place of pornography in relationships and peer groups, on its relation to discourses of sex and gender, or on its connections with other genres and the wider set of aesthetic values which govern them. Work in this area need not take the form of ethnography – indeed, the most groundbreaking and interesting study to emerge so far is Jane Juffer's, *At Home with Pornography* (1998), a consideration of the way pornography is made available to and 'domesticated' for women - because it refuses to see any of its subjects – erotic novels, sex advice literature, lingerie catalogues, sex shops – as separate from questions of sexual discourse, generic categorization and aesthetic hierarchy, as well as the more practical issues of where they are physically located and therefore how accessible to consumption by particular groups they actually are. Work which is as thoughtful as this is what we badly need in the future. Having said that, it is such a novelty to hear the voices of people who use and enjoy pornography that even quite basic studies that allow them to speak are enormously welcome right now.

## **Developing Porn Studies**

There are a number of possible directions for future work on people's consumption of pornography. We need to know much more about the investments that users make in porn and how and why different groups of people engage or fail to engage with sexually explicit representations. What are the pleasures offered by different kinds of porn, and how do we make sense of the other reactions – disgust, fear, excitement, indignation, boredom – that it arouses? As Susanna Paasonen argues (2004), a focus on porn and affect offers us a way into looking at our emotional investments in porn and at the relationship between representations, emotion and desire and intimate acts and encounters. She points out that porn is difficult and disturbing precisely because it signifies so intensely – viscerally, as well as culturally and politically – in the connections between these things. That difficulty should itself be a site of investigation for academics, precisely because it is so overloaded with significance and because it might tell us an enormous amount about the complex interrelations between media texts, our selves and the world we live in.

We need work that investigates how media texts, attitudes, behaviours, fantasies and practices are related. And we need work that will place these questions in the broader context. We need to ask about pornography's particular, but shifting, cultural significance, about the 'cultural work' it performs, both in terms of its relationship to aesthetic, generic, social and political categories, and, given the current context in which mainstream culture is becoming sexualized (McNair, 2002), in relation to the much broader range of sexual services, technologies, products and practices which are now available. What patterns of consumption are there within the network of available sexual experiences? How are these combined and how do they come to mean what they mean in the life of an individual, a relationship, or a community? How do particular choices and combinations of choices gain approval or disapproval and how does that impact on our experience and understanding of sex? Given the variety of sexual texts, acts and experiences that now exist in our 'pornographied' culture, this approach might help us push beyond the immediate questions we can think of about how porn is consumed to the more interesting issues of how the diverse sexualities of late modernity are constructed and how cultural and social factors are intertwined in this construction.

Representations of and discussions about pornography continue to be a site of struggle, but not in exactly the same ways as they have been in the past. The following factors are currently important in framing the ways in which porn and talk about porn is developing.

Firstly, there is a set of general shifts about the ways sex and the body are represented, understood and experienced. There is a preoccupation with the body and with sexual desirability in mainstream culture. Sex is increasingly commodified and recreationalized so that it is understood as a form of consumer leisure and pleasure. In addition, there is some evidence of changing perceptions of obscenity and other shifts in attitudes towards sexuality (BSC 1999, Millwood Hargrave 1999, Hill & Thompson 2000). These shifts work to make the distinction between mainstream and obscene categories of representation less clear and make porn appear less 'other' in terms of more general regimes of

representation and practice.

Secondly, technological developments, in particular, the Internet, have allowed for unprecedented access to sexually explicit material, making pornography less 'obscene' and more 'onscene', to use Linda Williams' term (1989). The rise of amateur porn and the availability of technologies that make it possible for people to make their own pornography are also significant because they work to elide the distinctions between producer and consumer and between representation and practice. In this way, porn is normalized as part of a repertoire of everyday sexual practices. Media and communication technologies are becoming more widely understood as part of the fabric of ordinary life and this development has been accompanied by a blurring of the 'real' and the 'representational' in everyday practices which involve home video, camera phone use or instant messenger systems. This understanding is reinforced by genres such as lifestyle and reality TV and by online forms of self-presentation such as blogging. Media technologies are also increasingly understood as providing a set of resources for constructing identities and individual biographies.

Thirdly, broad shifts around class and expertise have worked to reframe pornography's status and significance. While gentleman-scholars, conservative academics and politicians dominated earlier porn debates, contemporary societies have seen the emergence of a range of cultural intermediaries identified with individualist and hedonistic approaches to sexuality. New ways of talking about pornography are partly related to the prominence of a new petit bourgeoisie whose approach to sex is marked by a desire to break with older, more puritanical views of sex through displays of sexual transgressiveness (Jancovich, 2001). This class is over-represented in the media and associated professions and it is not surprising that their views have particular visibility and impact in the wider society.

Fourthly, a changing politics of sex and intimacy, built on an earlier feminist insistence that 'the personal is political', has worked to foreground sexual practice and representation as political issues. In this process, the increased visibility of sex-positive feminist and queer approaches to sex in forms of activism, the academy and the wider culture have worked to reframe pornography as something that 'excluded others' might well engage with to their advantage.

Fifthly, shifts in the significance of the academy, particularly in its repositioning as an accessible and democratic site, the rise to prominence of Media and Cultural Studies, and the disciplinary shifts within these areas of study which have increasingly privileged the polysemy of texts and the activity of audiences, have worked to foreground pornography as an object of study, open to a range of readings, pleasures and uses.

While the history of these developments remains to be fully examined, it is clear that there has been a movement away from forms of paternalism and particularly from the key figures of gentleman-scholar and Young Person. At the very least a space has been

opened up for discussion and intervention and it is important that academics are fully involved in that. As David Buckingham and Sara Bragg argue in their work on children's responses to representations of sex (2002), the media has become increasingly central in society as a resource for what we know about the world and how we make sense of our selves and our lives. What might be the beginnings of a move away from regulation towards a view of the consumer as a literate and reflective being might also be an important moment in the history of pornography.

Sexually explicit media continues to have a particular importance because of the way it works to articulate sexual and gender identities, and because of pornography's historical status as a highly political form of representation. Pornography's political significance remains of paramount importance. If we are to rely on ourselves rather than rules and regulators to make intelligent, creative and ethical decisions about our media consumption and our sexual practices, we will need to be considerably more well informed than we are now. Interrogating the ways in which porn consumption has been framed and understood in the past – and how it might be in the future - is a vital part of developing research in this area.

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Contact (by email): [Feona Attwood](mailto:Feona.Attwood)

## Biographical Note

Feona Attwood teaches Media and Communication Studies at Sheffield Hallam University, United Kingdom. She is currently working on an edited collection on the sexualization of mainstream culture.

