

What do you like? Women's pornopleasures

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The title of this article is the title of my current research project. I want to know what kinds of pornography women take pleasure in. Researching women's pornopleasures is an ongoing journey fraught with personal and professional tensions. To begin with pornography connects with my earliest sexual memories, reading porno magazines under my friend's parents' bed, trying out the scenarios with one another when sleeping at each other's houses. This experience for me was wholly positive. Later as I became conscious of feminism and the anti-pornography stance, my reaction was ambivalent. For me pornography meant the guilty orgasmic pleasures of mutually pleasurable teenage girlie sex. What could be wrong with that?

Apparently plenty, pornography, in the era of 'women against the night' and pro-censorship campaigns was off the menu. Later, in the early 1990's coming to a feminist masters class entitled Feminism, Sexuality and Foucault I explored the issue in the context of the so-called 'feminist sex wars'. The feminist sex wars of 1980s pitted anti-censorship sex radicals against those for whom pornography was synonymous with women's oppression. This was a no-win battle. To support women's rights to pornographic pleasure was to support exploitation and misogyny. To argue against pornography was to support the conservative, sex negative status quo. Feminism whilst arguing that sexual power could provide a source of power for women was complicit with the suppression of sexuality. The debates over sex and pornography often ended with a call to become agents in our own portrayals of pornography, to stop talking and start doing (Assiter & Avedon 1993).

So what kinds of pornography do women find titillating and sexually arousing? Preliminary findings based on thirty in-depth interviews suggest that women have definitive and heterogeneous ideas about what they like. There is no particular pattern evident in the research findings to date. The women who took part in the research stated that they have taken pleasure in watching the following:

...explicit sex scenes on stage, dildo sex, play acting, really leather stuff, hard core and S & M, two women, natural really sweet and honest sex, sex with a big dog, Harvey Keitel touching the hole in Holly Hunter's stocking in the Piano, gang bangs if the woman is in control, porn that leads to sex, fisting, threesomes two women and a guy, two guys and a woman, Maori boys-the warrior thing, a little bit of intrigue, sounds of a woman coming, anal bondage sex with strangers, consequences and rules, women doing things to women,

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someone pleasuring themselves, dominating a Yakuza , being submissive, an hour and a half of women getting oral, the Marquis de Sade, a hint of violence, intergenerational sex like a grandfather or father with a daughter, promise or hint of things to come, women kissing, bum sex...

I presented these findings at the Congress of the World Association for Sexual Health in April this year. One of the first questions asked of me in response to the presentation was, why am I interested in pornography when surely erotica is a more suitable object of study when researching women's sexual pleasure? I hear this question repeatedly when I engage in discussions about the research project. The question itself firmly locates feminine desire in the pornoghetto of softer light, good, blissful eroticism while hard heavy,

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misogynist pornography remains a masculine domain . I am not denying that pornographic text does not represent women as subordinate social beings. The symbolic rituals that exist within pornography are much the same as those that exist elsewhere (Kappeler, 1986). Nor am I denying that erotica turns some women on. However, the conflation of women's desire with erotica is one of many social conventions that continue to reinforce traditional power structures in which female sexuality is suppressed.

Judith Butler (1997) adapts Althusser's concept of 'interpellation' (the process of calling into being) to explain the way in which conventions, or collections of conventions, come to have particular cultural meanings. According to Butler reality takes shape through reiterative performances. Every performance of a softer, more subdued, 'erotic' 'feminine sexuality' brings that characteristic into a space that is culturally intelligible instantiating a particular category of sexual expression. Thus, conventions such as the idea that women prefer erotica, or softer forms of sexual expression serve to ensure that the breadth of women's sexual expression and desire are kept simmering under the surface. However, there exists the possibility of resistance to, or transfiguration of, the signs and symbols that a culture assigns (Butler, 1997, Foucault, 1976). In this project the diversity of women's sexual expression and desire, many of which clearly exist outside the boundaries of social acceptability, are clearly visible.

The culturally inscribed idea that women enact a more subdued sexuality proscribes the very idea of women's porn pleasures and should make it difficult for me as a researcher to find informed research participants. In fact it is *extremely* easy to find women happy to talk frankly about what they like. However, the talk about sex and sexuality that takes place outside of the interview questions is the more revealing than the opinions on porn and over time, this slightly off topic talk has come to interest me more than the answers to the original research questions. The talk of sexual preferences, sexual scenarios and pleasures that are not captured within the pornographic genre is fascinating. I have found in previous research projects that when people speak on a subject that is considered marginal it often unleashes a torrent of information on and around the topic. The suppression of women's sexuality silences the actively desiring woman, making it difficult for her to voice dissatisfaction without entering the marginalised realm of the slut.

Providing a legitimate social space in which women can straddle the virgin/whore dichotomy and speak frankly about sex allowed the participants to say 'we do and we can be sluts too!'

References

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[1] Men who are involved with traditional organized crime groups in Japan

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Roland Barthes makes the distinction between good light erotica and hard and heavy pornography in Camera Lucida.