

## **Reading porn: the paradigm shift in pornography research**

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## **Reading Porn: the paradigm shift in pornography research**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the paradigm shift in pornography theory and research from a focus on 'texts and effects' through to work emerging from the late 1980's onwards. The paper considers the reconceptualisation of pornography as a category, the location of pornography in relation to cultural hierarchy and form, the changing status of pornography in relation to mainstream representations, the significance of developing technologies and the movement towards more situated accounts of pornographic texts and their audiences as a series of attempts to contextualise the question 'what is pornography?'

### **Key words**

Pornography; paradigm; theory; research; context

### **The paradigm shift**

Modern sexual discourse has been characterised, above all else, by its self-referentiality; its compulsion to speak about sex, and to speak about speaking about sex, incessantly, obsessively. Our 'immense verbosity' (Foucault, 1990/1976:33) about sex, in a variety of discourses - legal, medical, psychiatric, as well as in the mass media, has been the subject of great academic and political enquiry, indeed the production of academic and political knowledge about the speaking of sex may be seen as paralleling this 'incitement to discourse' (Foucault, 1990/1976:34) elsewhere in the culture. As Lynne Segal notes, the production of this knowledge has taken on particular shapes and emphases in contemporary Western cultures, most prominently perhaps in 'the form of debates over pornography' (Segal, 1992:11). While clearly motivated by very different political concerns, the similar emphasis on 'texts and effects' in the feminist critique of pornography associated with Andrea Dworkin and Catherine McKinnon, in legislative attempts to regulate sexual representations, and in much scientific research into pornographic reception has worked to form a very specific framework for discussions about sexual discourse and representation. Within this framework pornography is isolated as *the* focus of concern, is defined (often rather hazily) in terms of its ability to harm, is assessed in terms of what it ''does', its effects on the individual and society' (Huntley, 1998:79), and is resolved with reference

to legislative controls. While there is clearly a great deal of value in the feminist examination of misogynistic sexual representations, this approach is both limited and limiting. In particular, as the Feminists' Anti-Censorship Task Force note, it 'assumes a simple link between words/images and behaviour' (FACT brief in Kelly, 1988:56). Moreover, the 'either/or', 'pro/anti' structure implied by this approach serves to limit and circumscribe what can be said and how in a particularly rigid way. The paradigm embodied by the 'porn debate' has made it extraordinarily difficult to examine pornography and other representations of sexuality from different perspectives.

Nonetheless, it is possible to identify a 'paradigm shift' in the theorising of porn (Kirkham & Skeggs, 1996:106). Walter Kendrick's *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (1987) and Linda Williams' *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the Frenzy of the Visible* (1989) played an influential role in this shift; the first, through a historical assessment of pornography as a category and the second, through a close analysis of pornographic texts as texts. In addition, collections such as *Sex Exposed: Sexuality and the Pornography Debate* (Segal & McIntosh, 1992) and *Dirty Looks: Women, Pornography, Power* (Church Gibson & Gibson, 1993), addressed the inadequacies of the 'porn debate', attempting to move beyond it through a re-examination of pornography, sexuality and the politics of representation. In the late 90's, this re-examination has continued; Laura Kipnis (1996) assesses the cultural significance of porn as transgressive fantasy, Brian McNair (1996) provides an overview of pornography's place within contemporary culture, Catharine Lumby (1997) revisits debates about porn, feminism and the public sphere and Laurence O'Toole (1998) examines the changing status of pornography in relation to technological development. Some studies which have a closer focus on specific types of pornographic texts and audiences have also emerged; for example, Simon Hardy (1998) investigates the reception of British soft core pornographic magazines, while Jane Juffer (1998) examines a range of sexually explicit texts available to female consumers in the United States.

In all of these it is possible to trace a movement away from the 'tired binary' (Juffer, 1998:2) of a debate about whether pornographic texts have fixed and simple meanings, embody and encourage clearly oppressive power relations, produce direct and quantifiable effects and can be challenged only through the regulatory mechanisms of the state, towards a range of approaches which examine 'in a less censorious way issues of visual representation, sexual excitement and sexual practice', approaches increasingly pursued not only in theoretical texts, but in 'seminars, conferences and undergraduate courses' (Kirkham & Skeggs,

1996:106). Broadly speaking, this is a move towards the contextualization of pornography which is carried out in a number of ways; through a theorising of the way pornography signifies within a wider cultural framework, as a category of the profane or transgressive, as an 'outlaw discourse' and as a debased low culture genre; through the close examination of specific pornographic texts; through the attempt to describe the generic attributes of pornography within a range of media; and through research into the ways in which pornography is consumed and integrated into everyday life. In addition, there is a revisiting of key debates around pornography, its relation to the politics of sex, gender and class, its connections to other forms of representation, its location within public and private spheres, and a great deal of speculation about its future development.

Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst argue that in the social sciences, 'paradigms may change not only because of internal conceptual tensions...enhanced by wider transformations within social theory', 'but also because of real social changes' (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998:32). It is possible to explain the new directions taken in pornography research in a variety of ways. Firstly, contemporary work on pornography can be seen to incorporate many of the theoretical perspectives and preoccupations which have become central within Cultural Studies, particularly in relation to the polysemic nature of cultural texts, the potential fluidity of readings, the status of popular culture, the significance of 'taste' as a form of cultural distinction and the relevance of ethnographic accounts for an understanding of the place of cultural consumption in everyday life. Secondly, this work has been inflected by developments within the feminist movement and its academic counterpart, Women's Studies. Here, the articulation of a range of *feminisms* which attempt to represent not only women's common identity and experience but their differences, and a growing emphasis on women's sexual agency and pleasure have perhaps been the key elements in the questioning of an earlier feminist orthodoxy on porn exemplified by the 'Dworkin-McKinnon' position. Thirdly, the burgeoning interest in issues of sexuality, growing from gay and lesbian politics and emerging within the academy as Gay and Lesbian Studies and Queer Theory, has worked to refocus many debates about sexual representation. In particular, an insistence that sexual politics are not reducible to gender politics and an emphasis on the instability of 'sex' and 'gender' has prompted a rethinking of the possible significances of pornographic production and consumption.

In addition to developments stimulated by changing political and theoretical agendas, the paradigm shift is

also a response to notable changes in the media representation of sex and sexuality. The last twenty years have seen the appearance of a much greater variety of porn, some of it seeking audiences beyond the traditional straight male market and taking as its starting point the desire to reconcile the sexually explicit with radical politics. The lines drawn between porn and other forms of sexual representation also seem much less clear than they did in the past; mainstream representation has become more explicit and 'perverse' and imagery and language which would have been classed as pornographic not very long ago has become part and parcel of popular culture. The landscape is clearly different now. While developments in media technology have at times become the occasion of their very own moral panics, often as the site of reproduction of 'old fears' about porn's 'effects' (Lumby, 1997:136-153), their potential to deliver porn to a wider audience than ever before and to make any attempt to regulate it apparently futile has also prompted a reconsideration of what pornography may come to mean in future years.

In the following sections I will attempt to map out some of the key themes and preoccupations which have emerged within the paradigm shift in pornography research, all of which seem to be motivated by an attempt to contextualize pornography in various ways. In the first of these I will examine some of the developments relating to pornography's significance as a cultural category, discourse or genre, through a questioning of earlier concerns with the definition and effects of pornography. The second will look at the question of pornography's changing status in relation to mainstream representations and technological developments, and the third will focus on the attempt to produce more situated accounts of differing pornographic texts and their readers.

## **Definitions and Effects/Taste and Distaste**

Any paradigm shift makes necessary not only a reconsideration of its subject matter, but also a reassessment of available methodologies and theoretical frameworks. As I have argued, many contemporary discussions of pornography now draw attention to the limitations of previous accounts, particularly to the attempts to define pornography and to chart its social effects. As Walter Kendrick notes, the term 'pornography' has been used to label a very diverse range of 'things', including Pompeian frescoes, 'great chunks of Shakespeare' and a variety of contemporary media texts (Kendrick, 1996/1987:x-xii). The failure 'of several generations' to produce a satisfactory definition of porn, Kendrick argues, should alert us to the pitfalls of confusing a regulatory category with some kind of textual particularity (Kendrick 1996/1987:xiii). Definitions of 'pornography' produce rather than discover

porn texts and in fact, often reveal less about those texts than they do about fears of their audiences' susceptibility to be aroused, corrupted and depraved. For Kendrick, the production of 'pornography' by definition has a particular function; the construction of porn as a 'special' category and as a 'secret' to be kept from certain social groups - women, children and the lower classes. This kind of historical approach has been extremely useful in shifting attention away from the pornographic 'things' that have been placed centre stage of the porn debate and onto the cultural anxieties surrounding pornographic consumption by particular groups. As Laura Kipnis notes, 'The fantasy pornography consumer is a walking projection of upper-class fears about lower-class men: brutish, animal-like, sexually voracious...', a fantasy which is 'projected back' onto the pornographic text itself. (Kipnis, 1996:175). This fantasy, whether it is applied to susceptible women, innocent children or 'brutish' lower class men, has been continuously reproduced in the porn debate, though it is not restricted to it. A tradition of viewing 'low' mass-media texts as potentially corrupting has helped to justify a great deal of social scientific research into the 'links' between many 'low culture' texts and 'effects'; in the realm of pornographic research as elsewhere, the result has simply been the production of some very contradictory conclusions. Pornography research has failed to find any convincing effects either by correlation or through experimental work. In fact as Lynne Segal notes, 'inconsistency is the only consistency to emerge from empirical research which ignores both the semiotic and the social context of images of sexual explicitness.' (Segal, 1994:359)

Though Kendrick warns that definitions ultimately fail to tell us anything much about pornographic 'things', paying attention to the desire to produce and act on those definitions does reveal a great deal about the disruptive place of 'pornography' within modern culture. What begins as an investigation of the limits of available theory and method, ends with a new series of questions and directions for theorising porn. Kendrick's identification of 'pornography' as a moment of classification replaying 'an imaginary scenario of danger and rescue' (Kendrick, 1996/1987:xiii) opens up the study of pornography by putting cultural classification itself under scrutiny; 'A culture's pornography becomes, in effect, a very precise map of that culture's borders', its 'anxieties, investments, contradictions' (Kipnis, 1996:164), signifying as a 'tender spot on the social skin which marks a point of friction' (Lumby, 1997:97) Identifying how 'pornography' is produced by *location*; on the other side of the culture's border, or as the border itself, makes it possible to ask questions about pornography's relation to other discourses

and categories, to place it within its cultural and social context, and to ask what is at stake in this kind of cultural production.

By stepping back from pornography in this way, its functions as a 'melodrama' or 'allegory' for a given culture are thrown into sharp relief. Such an approach has also been pursued in contemporary writings that look closely at the style, quality and sensibility of pornography and at the way these come to function as the sign of its offensiveness. It is the particularly explicit way in which porn depicts sex and bodies, its flaunting of boundaries, its perversity and its irredeemable 'lowness' which are often used to justify its condemnation. Attempts to distinguish porn from more elevated cultural forms such as 'high' art or literature, even when they appear to feature the same content and viewing relations - a male viewer 'looking' at a naked female body, for example - often inadvertently reveal the fact that content and viewing relations are not enough to distinguish porn as porn. Instead, it is the dirty, naughty, debasing and disgusting style or quality of porn that becomes the decisive factor. That such a distinction is only possible within a representational system that opposes and elevates certain kinds of cultural texts over others has been made clear by the art historian, Lynda Nead. Art and pornography are 'caught in a cycle of reciprocal definition, in which each depends on the other for its meaning, significance and status' (Nead, 1992:91). The ways in which sexual representations are categorized and discussed are underpinned by a classificatory system that emphasizes an interesting set of oppositions. Whereas the high art body signifies reason, cleanliness and order, the porn body connotes passion, dirtiness and disorder. The pleasures associated with art are those of 'contemplation, discrimination and transcendent value' while those of porn are 'motivation, promiscuity and commodification' (Nead, 1992:89). Cultural producers and consumers are also subject to this kind of distinction; the great artist and the connoisseur whose appreciation ennobles him can be contrasted with the porn baron and his audience of men in dirty raincoats, motivated by lust and susceptible to direct 'effects'. Definitions of erotica and pornography have traditionally borrowed heavily from this vocabulary of distinction that also underpins the categorization of other texts as 'high' or 'low' culture. As Richard Dyer notes, porn's characteristic tendency to 'move the body' links it to other socially reviled popular genres, 'such as the weepie and the thriller, and also low or vulgar comedy. Like all of these, it is supposed to have an effect that is registered in the spectator's body - s/he weeps, gets goose-bumps, rolls about laughing, comes' (Dyer, 1992:121-122).

The kinds of vulgar, thrilling and physical pleasures offered by pornography have led some theorists to locate it, alongside other forms of 'low' culture, within the realm of the transgressive or the 'carnavalesque'. Here, it is argued, an accepted hierarchy which privileges contemplation over motivation, intellect over physicality, work over fun, the powerful elite over the powerless rabble, is overturned. Laura Kipnis and Rebecca Huntley both identify elements of the carnivalesque in porn, specifically in the American magazine *Hustler*, because of its obsession with excess, its inversions of official hierarchies, its 'ranting madly against all forms of power' (Kipnis, 1996:130) and its deployment of a body which is 'insistently material, defiantly vulgar, corporeal' (Kipnis, 1996:132). For Constance Penley, *Hustler* more particularly displays a 'white trash sensibility' whose 'lumpen bawdiness' can be located across a range of cultural texts, both pornographic and non-pornographic. The elements of this, bawdy humour, obscene language, attacks on the professional classes and middle-class morality, and 'trickster women with a hearty appetite for sex', can be found not only in porn, but in dirty jokes, bawdy songs and 'smutty folklore' generally, as well as in other contemporary representations and the presentation of popular 'white trash' celebrities (Penley, 1997:89-112). Such a list is clearly useful in highlighting the cultural distinctions underlying the categorization of pornographic and other texts as 'low' and 'distasteful', because of a variety of transgressive and sometimes subversive characteristics.

This kind of pornographic recontextualization - as a historically specific category, or as a particular sensibility emerging across a range of cultural texts may be seen as an essential precondition for the further analysis of pornography. By stepping back from pornographic *things*, writers such as Kendrick, Nead, Kipnis, Dyer and Penley make it possible to see pornography's location and sensibility as it connects with a wider process in which certain styles, forms of knowledge, expression and activity, cultural producers and consumers are elevated and denigrated. They show that the meaning of pornography, like other cultural forms and artefacts, lies not only within those *things*, but has 'symbolic dimensions' (Morley, 1995:314) at the level of cultural categorization and social regulation. A consideration of the many ways in which pornography signifies enables a more sophisticated analysis of the ways in which porn performs its cultural work to take place. Its significance within culture in the widest possible sense is highlighted; our attention is drawn to the ways in which pornography *signifies* for all the members of a culture whether they consume it or not. As



an 'outlaw discourse' (Wicke, 1993:79), pornography simultaneously threatens to overturn the established cultural hierarchy and provides the base ground on which that hierarchy is erected, it comes to stand for a whole range of social ills and anxieties (sexism, violence against women and children, neglect of the family and the moral good, the commodification of pleasure and so on), at the same time becoming the site of a 'carnavalesque' overturning of established order or of 'utopian' resolutions to actual social problems (Williams, 1990:153-183).

While this approach to re-theorising porn is essential for the delineation of pornography's special place in relation to dominant cultural, social and aesthetic values, it is clearly limited for any examination of specific and differing pornographies. Indeed, in both the attempt to make sense of pornography as a regulatory category and the focus on pornographic transgressiveness there is a tendency to make 'pornography' abstract again (Juffer, 1998:18-19), as only ever that which a given culture represses, confines, regulates, or only ever that which subverts, disturbs, returns from repression. There is a danger here, not only of reproducing the rather worn-out questioning of pornography's potential for liberation and repression, but also of negating some important political issues raised in earlier accounts. Even as they make visible the regulation of sexual representations through their association with 'low' qualities and 'low' readers, these recent accounts flatten out all opposition to pornography as a move towards censorship, against transgression. However, they do raise interesting questions about pornography's location within a culture and its relation to other forms of sexual discourse and representation. In particular, they offer a starting point for a historical examination of the articulation of sex in special restricted genres like pornography, in high cultural practices such as art and in popular and mainstream media. The perceived movement of pornographic qualities into the mainstream is one that has attracted a great deal of attention and it is this that I will consider in the following section.

## **Pornographication**

It is often claimed that in the last twenty years or so the boundaries between porn and art, porn and mainstream media representation have been tested as never before. Squabbles over the obscenity of art exhibitions have become routine. Mainstream publications incorporate language and iconography traditionally associated with soft porn, carry advertising for sexual services and commodities and endlessly interrogate sexual pleasure. Television is regularly criticized for its obsession with sex, in serious drama, irreverent entertainment or 'educational' documentaries which promise 'astonishing frankness', 'sex as we have never seen it before, straight sex, weird sex, people talking about sex, people talking to people about sex' (Dugdale and Brown, 1998:2-3). Advertising, fashion and popular music recycle imagery previously considered perverse and transgressive. The 'codes and conventions' of porn 'have become part of the armoury of popular cultural production' (McNair, 1996:137). As Charlotte Raven notes, in a culture where sex is used to sell *everything*, including loaves of bread (a Hovis ad enquires whether we 'Fancy a threesome?') and the English National Ballet, *everything* becomes sexual in a very non-specific way. 'Sex talk' becomes 'a kind of background gibberish', 'a pre-rehearsed script', 'a totally sealed, self-referential discourse.' (Raven, 1998:7)

This perceived 'pornographication of the mainstream' (McNair, 1996:23) clearly needs to be set in the context of a much broader historical examination of sexual representation. The categorization of certain kinds of sexually explicit material as 'pornography' is a relatively recent phenomenon as Kendrick shows, and comparatively little work has been carried out on the passage of this kind of material from popular usage into restricted categories and out again, or on the qualities and pleasures shared between sexual representation in pornography and sexual representation in other popular cultural forms. However, the perception of a shift towards the sexually explicit in mainstream mass media has restimulated debate about the definition and status of pornography and about the significance of new technology for contemporary sexual representation.

For writers such as Catherine Lumby, such a shift must be located within a wider assault on the boundaries between public and private discourse in modern Western culture, an assault most evident in the potential of new media technologies to decentralize media production and consumption and even to call the very categories of private and public into question. At the same time, a movement towards 'tabloidization' has seen a massive incursion of

the private and the personal into the public sphere, most notably in the form of 'reality' and lifestyle tv, confessional talk shows and celebrity gossip; 'the news without underpants' (Lumby, 1997:117). This movement threatens to disturb the privileging of particular expert discourses for the interpretation of private lives, to challenge conventions of decency and rationality and to resist regulatory controls and is often represented as a downward spiral, a debasing of the public sphere, a worrying turn (or return) to the emotional, personal, physical and visceral and all things 'low'.

An approach that focuses on the development of sexual representation across a range of media is useful in that it directs attention away from the debate about 'porn' and its regulation and onto the more important question of how sex is represented in contemporary culture. It demands a recontextualization of our understanding of sexual representation, discourses of sexuality and the construction of sexual identities in the light of contemporary media developments and in the context of a mainstream culture which seems to rapidly becoming pornographic itself. This kind of starting point necessitates a reconsideration of the role and future of pornography and raises a number of interesting questions. As technological developments in the circulation of explicitly sexual material promise to deliver it to increasing numbers of consumers, what will happen to the Secret Museum of pornography when there are no more museums to hide it away in and how will the 'secret' of sex' continue to be produced once it has been so exhaustively revealed? Can the charge and thrill of a pornography that has for some time depended on its transgressiveness continue to be reproduced in such a context? And as the media play an ever-greater part in the 'incitement to discourse' about sex, what shifts of emphasis and, indeed, power, might occur? What figures of authority will interpret our sexual confessions? Are we simply witnessing an intensification of the regulatory mechanisms of sexual discourse or do these shifts signify new forms of expertise, new subject positions, new power relations, new regimes of truth? In the context of this sexualised media, will a focus on 'pornography' be useful any longer?

Such questions can only be speculative and tentative, but they already being pursued, most visibly in discussions about the development of 'cybersex' within the new media technologies. It is in this arena that the boundaries that have guaranteed pornography its special place within culture are most obviously collapsing. Here, it is not only the categories of pornographic and mainstream, private and public, licit and illicit, but those of reader and text, real and representational, producer and consumer which may

be ceasing to function in familiar ways. This prospect is both intriguing and disturbing and 'we are simultaneously flooded with predictions of doom and predictions of imminent utopia' (Turkle, 1996:268). While it is impossible to predict what effect such technological developments will have in the long term, it may be productive to consider in what ways the future they imply has already begun in the present. For Abercrombie and Longhurst, the paradigm which best describes contemporary media consumption is one which focuses on the increasing spectacularization of society and its interpellation of 'readers' as narcissistic performers (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998:77-98). Such a paradigm attempts an attentiveness to the characteristic cultural modes that typify the interactions of producers, texts and consumers at the beginning of a new millennium. The description of a world of mediascapes which are increasingly inseparable from, indeed '*constitutive of everyday life*' (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998:69), within which we are encouraged to construct ourselves in a narcissistic pursuit of pleasure and a quest for the self clearly captures something of the kinds of sexual possibilities held out by new media technologies, but may also be useful for an understanding of the ways in which sexuality already signifies in contemporary consumerist, radically individualist (Weeks, 1995:28-29) and spectacular societies; as a commodity, consumed by individuals like 'fast food' (Arcand in Tang, 1999:173), as a narcissistic relationship with the self, as a site of individual pleasure and gratification and as 'a form of personal therapy/self-expression' (Simpson, 1994:14). Relocated away from reproduction, family, community and relationships with others, 'sexuality' may increasingly refer to a form of self-interaction with one's own body and imagination, mediated through particular forms of cultural expressions, representations and performances; a kind of 'autosexuality'. It seems likely that the kinds of disembodied sexual interactions promised by new media technologies will offer the perfect sexual product in such a world - a form of self-interaction free of the danger, mess and inconvenience entailed in sex involving other people. However, it may also be productive to ask how the kind of sexual representations already circulating in pornography and in mainstream media, of sex and about sexuality, are caught up in this kind of 'self-referentiality'; endlessly referring back to the self and to self-representation, and implying a logical outcome in which the distinctions between sexual practice and sexual representation, sexual reality and sexual fantasy, sex and porn, move towards redundancy (Simpson, 1994:148).

While discussions of new technologies are clearly essential for the contemporary investigation of sexual representation, the twin dangers of abstraction and the

'tired binary' of the porn debate (Juffer, 1998:2) will need to be carefully negotiated. It is too easy to represent contemporary developments in sexual representation as entirely consistent with earlier pornographic production or to dismiss concerns about the role of the new technologies as part of the 'perennial little melodrama' (Kendrick, 1996/1987:xiii), which according to Kendrick, pornography unfailingly represents, and in both cases to overlook what is distinctive about the current situation. On the other hand, there is still a great deal of work to be done in order to establish that the perceived shift in sexual representation is as dramatic as has been suggested or that new media representations of sex mark such a decisive break from what has gone before. In either case, it is clearly necessary to contextualize these representations in relation to changing media trends, technologies and forms of consumption, and with reference to the potential reconfiguration of pornography and the mainstream, of the everyday and indeed of 'sexuality'. In order to accomplish this, it will be equally important to develop theoretical frameworks which are capable of accounting for such reconfigurations and to extend knowledge about specific sexual representations, about their significance for a variety of audiences and about their location within everyday life.

### **From Pornography to Pornographies/ Readers, Texts and Contexts**

The attempt to produce more situated accounts of sexual representations and their audiences returns us to the question, 'what is pornography?' in a new and productive way. In this formulation the question suggests an attentiveness to processes of classification which separate out pornographic and non-pornographic texts at specific historical moments and to similarities and differences in 'the myriad types, texts and subgenres that make up porn's kaleidoscopic variorum' (McClintock, 1992:115). As such, it enables a consideration of *pornographies*; of the ways in which gay porn is both like and unlike straight porn, in which Page 3 photographs, interactive sex games, amateur videoporn and dirty magazines may share the status of pornography while possessing distinct and individual features, and in which hardcore and softcore are marked by different representational regimes with a range of 'internal divisions and distinctions' (Wicke, 1993:68). Linda Williams' examination of hardcore pornographic film (1989) clearly sets the precedent for this kind of detailed textual and generic analysis, and reaches beyond that to consider the relation of pornography to other genres such as the film musical. Such an approach is crucial for establishing the extent to which pornography can be said to exist as a genre; more importantly, it opens up the

analysis of sexual representation through an examination of the style, narrative, iconography and address of a range of texts and enables a comparison of the ways in which bodies, sex, pleasures and relationships are presented in anything from an erotic novel, a medical textbook, a women's magazine, to a hardcore film, a television documentary, a piece of performance art. Jane Juffer's work on 'domesticated porn' (Juffer, 1998) which examines the types of sexually explicit material accessible to and consumed by women in contemporary America neatly combines a consideration of the categorization of texts in relation to 'pornography' and in relation to notions of 'oppression' and 'transgression' with a discussion of a wide range of texts and represents a welcome broadening of the field in this respect. Her investigation of such diverse texts as erotic fiction, sexual self-help books, couples videos and lingerie catalogues and of the accessibility and location of these for particular groups of readers usefully indicate some of the ways in which the textual analysis of sexual representations might be located in relation to patterns of production and consumption, restricted and mainstream categories and wider historical changes in the way sexuality is depicted and experienced.

Juffer asks, 'What are the material and discursive conditions in which *different kinds* of pornography are produced, distributed, obtained and consumed?' (Juffer, 1998:2). Like other contemporary approaches to pornography research, it is a question which opens out earlier attempts to define pornography and chart its effects and like these it represents a new interest in contextualizing pornography by situating particular texts in relation to issues of cultural categorization and classification, cultural value and hierarchy and to the articulation of sexual discourse in a variety of genres, forms and media. It is also a question which directs attention to the particular ways in which pornography might signify for different groups who make use of it (or who indeed may avoid it) and therefore to the question of audiences. An ethnography of pornographic consumption, informed by frameworks which allow for an examination of the ways in which pornography functions within sexual discourse at the level of the individual, group or sub-culture, how, for example, it is linked to the production of knowledge about sex and sexuality and to the ways in which these are spoken about, seen and experienced in everyday life is clearly called for here.

However, a 'turn to the audience', apparent in many other forms of cultural analysis, remains undeveloped in relation to pornography and other sexual representations. Simon Hardy's work (1998) which focuses on British men's decodings of soft-core pornographic magazines is an

exception in this respect. Little work has been carried out which sheds light on the ways in which porn is 'used, worked on, elaborated, remembered, fantasised about by its subjects' (Wicke, 1993:70), or on the ways in which sexual representations are placed within the sexual repertoires of groups and individuals. As both Segal (1990) and Juffer (1998) argue, any such work would need to take into account the question of context at a number of different levels. The semiotic context of sexual representations would need to be considered in order to locate texts in relation to questions of genre, style, sensibility, address and form. Issues of geographical and social context, location and access, the status, power and characteristics of groups of consumers, would be crucial for establishing not only what kinds of representations are available for consumption and who they address, but within what sorts of settings and relationships this takes place and how this kind of placement impacts on the experience of consumers and the significance of these representations for them. Finally, the historical and cultural context of texts and categories of texts would need to be investigated as a way of establishing how these are culturally marked as pornographic or non-pornographic, as restricted or mainstream texts, as low, high or middlebrow representations, as dangerous or safe, oppressive or transgressive. Audience readings of sexually explicit material and the placing and use of this material in relation to the construction of sexual identity, knowledge, pleasure and behaviour would be informed by all these contextual factors.

In their discussion of gender and media consumption, Ien Ang and Joke Hermes describe a movement from early studies underpinned by rather simplistic notions of misrepresentation and passive consumption to a more sophisticated contemporary stance which aims to investigate 'how gender might be articulated in practices of media consumption' (Ang & Hermes, 1991:326) through research which is informed by a 'spirit of radical contextualism and methodological situationalism' (Ang & Hermes, 1991:339) and which recasts the examination of gender and consumption as a project of 'enormous complexity' (Ang & Hermes, 1991:340). In many ways, the paradigm shift in pornography research has followed a similar trajectory, from early accounts which focus on 'texts and effects' to work which attempts to contextualize the consumption of pornography and other sexual representations. Taken to the limit, 'radical contextualism' may stretch out in any and all of the directions that I have charted here, and clearly, this poses potential problems of boundlessness which may initially appear overwhelming. But the recontextualization of the question 'what is pornography?' is a shift that enables a very productive reconsideration of the ways in

which sexuality is articulated in practices of textual production and consumption. At the present time, when the representational boundaries which in recent times have been essential for the categorization and indeed the existence of 'pornography' appear to many to be breaking down, the reconstruction of this question is both necessary and inevitable.



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