



Sexually explicit representations and their significance in late modern Western culture: A critical appraisal.

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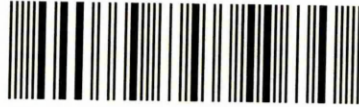
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**Sexually explicit representations and their significance in late modern
Western culture: A Critical Appraisal**

Feona Attwood

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Sheffield
Hallam University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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Sexually explicit representations and their significance in late modern Western culture: A Critical Appraisal

Abstract

This work examines soft-core pornography, pornographic conventions in advertising, the representation of male sexuality in men's magazines and of female sexuality in popular media and subcultural forms.

Specific instances are taken to investigate the applicability of widely used concepts such as 'transgression', 'objectification' and 'pornography' itself, and to pursue a more contextualized discussion of particular types of texts and their aesthetic, generic, cultural and social characteristics.

Broader issues of consumption are examined in work on the marketing of sex products to women and on the development of online sex 'taste cultures'. This charts some current developments in sexual representation and consumption such as sex toy manufacturing and online alternative pornographies in order to investigate the development of commodified and recreational forms of sexual pleasure and display which are increasingly important in constructing identity and social networks. The work also addresses existing research on audiences of sexually explicit media and the representation of pornography consumption in public debates and in academia. Here, issues of methodology, institutional framing and the socio-historical context of research are brought into sharper focus.

Finally, the work considers how the examination of texts, discourses, practices, identities and ethics might be integrated in the development of this area of study; particularly in relation to pornography research, approaches to online pornography and understandings of the contemporary sexualization of mainstream media. This aspect of the work identifies some of the major shifts in the production and consumption of sexually explicit materials along with some of the emerging and key issues in the field and suggests ways of developing the area of study.

Introduction

Eleven pieces of work researched and written over a seven-year period are submitted here. They have been produced during different stages of my academic life with quite dramatically different amounts of time to spend on research. They also span a period during which the area of study has undergone a number of shifts and transformations. The work can therefore be considered as part of an emerging field which is in development.

My interest in researching in this area grew out of an academic background in Cultural/Media Studies and Women's Studies. Pornography loomed large in many accounts of feminism and the media - my particular area of interest - and ideas derived from Laura Mulvey's work on the male gaze (1975) and Andrea Dworkin's polemical writings on pornography (1979) dominated my first experiences of thinking about sexually explicit media. Very little work which challenged the discourses of effects research, gaze theory and anti-pornography feminism existed up until the mid 1990s. At that time the main exceptions were Angela Carter's *The Sadeian Woman* (1979), Walter Kendrick's *The Secret Museum* (1987), Linda Williams' *Hard Core* (1989), some of the work in feminist anthologies such as *Powers of Desire* (Ann Snitow et al., 1983) and *Danger and Pleasure* (Carole S. Vance, 1984), and collections such as *Sex Exposed* (Lynne Segal & Mary McIntosh, 1992) and *Dirty Looks* (Pamela Church Gibson & Roma Gibson, 1993). Of these, Kendrick's history of the term 'pornography' and its cultural work in defining and regulating texts and Williams' innovative examination of hard-core pornography as a genre were the major influences on my thinking. Both pieces were groundbreaking in challenging views of pornography as a monolithic entity with self-evident characteristics and functions.

Over the next few years more new work emerged, including Laura Kipnis' *Bound and Gagged* (1996) and Brian McNair's *Mediated Sex* (1996), Catharine Lumby's *Bad Girls* (1997) and Jane Juffer's *At Home With Pornography* (1998). These books challenged received wisdom on sexually explicit media even further. Jane Juffer's approach has been particularly illuminating in opening up the field by including a much broader range of media such as identity erotica, lingerie advertising and sexual self-help books. By looking at a wider variety of texts and considering their location and accessibility for particular groups of readers, her work suggested new ways in which textual analyses of sexual representations might be related to patterns of production and consumption, notions of genre, cultural hierarchies of value, and wider historical changes in the way sexuality is depicted and experienced.

Work like Juffer's suggested new ways of thinking about sexually explicit media and new avenues of exploration. My initial sense of concern about pornography had been sparked more by the scary scenarios in Dworkin's work than by any pornography I found, as well as by a fascination with the troubling presence of sexually explicit media within my subject area which seemed to make it peculiarly difficult to teach or research. This concern developed into a research interest because of my admiration for innovative and clear-sighted work like Juffer's which refused common-sense views of sexually explicit media and asked new and interesting questions. My interest in working in this area has been sustained since then by the further development of this tradition of research in the US, Australia and Europe. I have also increasingly drawn on studies of sex commerce, new media technologies, leisure practices and forms of creative labour which all, from

differing perspectives, are concerned with the significance of sex in late modern cultures.

Aims

A PhD by publication cannot have aims in the same sense that a PhD by research does. However, my motivations in working in this area can be summarized like this;

1. to interrogate taken-for-granted concepts, approaches and rationales for studying pornography.
2. to broaden the field within which 'sex and the media' is critiqued by examining a variety of texts and practices within the broad field that constitutes the 'sexually explicit' and by using contemporary case studies which illuminate the changing significance of sex media and indeed, sex.
3. to explore ways of integrating concerns around texts, discourses, practices, identities and ethics without relying on assumptions about sex and sex media and taking seriously the place and significance of sex and representation in contemporary culture as a matter of 'intimate citizenship' (Plummer, 2003), rather than aesthetic distaste or moral panic.

The literature on pornography is vast. The obscene and the explicit have provided a focus for historical, sociological, anthropological and literary enquiry. The production and consumption of sexually explicit material has been of interest for academics working in a range of subject areas, such as leisure, media, psychology, health and education. However, close textual analyses have been surprisingly scarce and there has been a striking absence of qualitative empirical work on consumption, though this is starting to emerge (Smith, 2007; McKee et al., 2008).

Most debates about pornography have focused on 'texts and effects' and psychoanalytically derived work and effects approaches dominated early research. Both of these approaches tend to assume that media have fixed and simple meanings, privilege single 'expert' readings and are relatively unconcerned with social or cultural context. 'Scientific' methods such laboratory tests and surveys have been widely used and widely criticized. Although they have little credibility as useful means of analysis, their continued use in propping up commonsense views of the links between media and behaviour is demonstrated by the 'rapid evidence assessment' (Itzin et al.) commissioned by the UK government in 2007 in support of its attempt to legislate against 'extreme' pornography. Personal testimonies have provided another important way for individuals to stake out political claims around the significance of sexually explicit

media, usually as a form of polemic. Some are straightforwardly 'anti' as in the Minneapolis Ordinances (Everywoman, 1983), others aim to develop a more sex-positive and often porn-positive stance (Sprinkle, 1998; Bright, 2000). An emphasis on the personal continues to dominate more popular works on sex media and is particularly evident in third wave feminist writing (see for example, Stoller, 1999) and in some contemporary studies of online sexuality such as Audacia Ray's (2007) *Naked on the Internet* and Katrien Jacobs' work in *Libidot* (2005) and *Netporn: DIY Web Culture and Sexual Politics* (2007).

The dominance of methods focused on 'texts' or 'effects' have been problematic for Media and Cultural Studies researchers like myself who are interested in sexually explicit representations in relation to genre and sensibility and in pornography as a 'variorum' rather than a monolith (McClintock, 1992: 115), and who start from the position that audiences are literate and capable of making informed decisions about their media consumption. Indeed much work in the Cultural Studies tradition begins from a critique of the methods and approaches which have been widely used in the past, problematizing definitions and concepts which have been taken for granted. This kind of work is not dominated by the use of any particular methodology, but favours the development of an approach which begins with questions rather than assumptions and abstract assertions. My work has followed this tendency.

I have attempted to examine how Anglo-American pornography has been conceptualized, making sense of it as a category which gains meaning from its historical location and its relation to other cultural forms and artefacts. I have also examined the codes and conventions that are drawn on in specific texts and the way they address particular audience groups. This makes it possible to examine how sex is articulated in a range of genres - in restricted forms such as pornography, in high cultural practices such as art and in popular and mainstream media. It opens up the analysis of sexual representation and the ways bodies, sex, pleasures and relationships are presented across genres and forms. Finally, I have focused on the way that particular groups use media to articulate sex within specific settings and cultures.

Areas of Analysis

The work submitted falls into three distinct areas; 'Framing Sex Media and its Consumption' reviews the field of study with particular reference to online texts, the sexualization of mass media forms and the consumption of sexually explicit media. 'Re-reading Sex in British Media Texts' looks at examples of British soft-core print porn, magazines and advertising at the beginning of the 21st century and the way they address male and female audiences. 'New Communities for Sex Media' examines the growing female market for sex products and discourses of

sexual agency in women's subcultures and alternative online participatory cultures.

These are described briefly in the following tables:

Framing Sex Media and its Consumption		
Ref No		Description
2	'Reading Porn: The paradigm shift in Pornography Research', <i>Sexualities</i> , Vol. 5(1). 2002. pp. 91-105.	A critical review of the field of pornography research.
8	'Pornography and the Internet' in Katharine Sarikakis & Daya Thussu (eds.) <i>Ideologies of the Internet: Concepts, Policies, Uses</i> . Hampton Press. 2006. pp. 179-193.	An assessment of the applicability of existing approaches in the field to online pornography.
7	'Sexed up: Theorizing the Sexualization of Culture', <i>Sexualities</i> , Vol. 9(1). 2006. pp. 77-94.	A critical review of themes in writings on sexualization.
5	'What do people do with porn? Qualitative research into the consumption, use and experience of pornography and other sexually explicit media', <i>Sexuality and Culture</i> , Vol. 9(2). 2005. pp. 65-86.	A discussion of methodological issues in pornography audience research, survey of qualitative studies and assessment of knowledge gaps in the field.
9	'"Other" or "one of us"?: The porn user in public and academic discourse', <i>Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies</i> Vol. 4(1). 2007. http://www.participations.org/ .	A critique of the figuring of pornography consumers, the changing context of pornography consumption, and the implications for future research.

Re-reading Sex in British Media Texts		
Ref No		Description
1	'A very British carnival: women, sex and transgression in <i>Fiesta</i> magazine', <i>European Journal of Cultural Studies</i> , Vol. 5(1). 2002. pp. 91-105.	A close analysis of a single soft-core porn text and evaluation of two key claims about pornography's significance.
4	"'Tits and ass and porn and fighting': male heterosexuality in magazines for men', <i>International Journal of Cultural Studies</i> , Vol. 8(1). 2005. pp. 87-104.	A thematic analysis of a range of British texts across two print genres; men's soft-core and lifestyle magazines.
3	'Pornography and Objectification: Re-reading "the picture that divided Britain"', <i>Feminist Media Studies</i> , Vol. 4(1). 2004. pp. 7-19.	An evaluation of three theoretical approaches to pornography and the close analysis of a controversial advert and its context.

New Communities for Sex Media		
Ref No		Description
6	'Fashion and passion: Marketing sex to women', <i>Sexualities</i> , Vol. 8(4). 2005. pp.395-409.	A comparative analysis of websites that market sex products to women.
10	'Sluts and riot grrrls: female identity and sexual agency', <i>Journal of Gender Studies</i> , Vol. 16(3). 2007. pp. 231-245.	A comparative analysis of the use of the term 'slut' in various cultural settings and its relation to feminism, identity and agency.
11	'No Money Shot?: Commerce, Pornography and New Sex Taste Cultures', <i>Sexualities</i> , Vol. 10(4). 2007. pp. 441-456.	A study of two examples of 'smart smut' and altporn as forms of taste culture and sexual commerce.

In the following sections I discuss the areas of work in more detail, drawing out the key concerns and conclusions throughout the work as a whole.

Framing Sex Media and its Consumption

'Reading Porn: The paradigm shift in Pornography Research',
Sexualities, Vol. 5(1). 2002. pp. 91-105.

'Pornography and the Internet' in Katharine Sarikakis & Daya Thussu (eds.)
Ideologies of the Internet: Concepts, Policies, Uses.
Hampton Press. 2006. pp. 179-193.

'Sexed up: Theorizing the Sexualization of Culture',
Sexualities, Vol. 9(1). 2006. pp. 77-94.

These three pieces of work attempt to develop a framework for the contemporary study of pornography and other sexual media. They map the changing landscape of sexual media, chart the ways in which academics have engaged with this, consider issues of citizenship, access, governance and regulation, and suggest how productive approaches for research might be developed.

'Reading Porn: The paradigm shift in pornography research' is the first of these pieces. It examines a shift in the way pornography has been theorized and researched, beginning in the 1990s, responding to changes in media representations of sex, to new feminist and queer approaches, and following, rather belatedly, the trajectory taken by contemporary Media and Cultural Studies. The article isolates some new areas of enquiry emerging from this shift. One of these is the significance of 'pornography' as a category and the ways in which that category works to locate some media texts within cultural hierarchies of taste and value and in relation to other types of sexual and non-sexual media texts; a mechanism which also often results in their regulation. Another is the changing relation of pornography to mainstream media and the ways in which the boundary between the two is increasingly becoming porous. The third is the increasing significance of developing technologies - particularly the internet - for the circulation of pornography and the fourth is a call for more situated and contextualized accounts of specific pornographic texts and their audiences. The article shows how each of these ways of approaching pornographic texts and their consumers can be seen as an attempt to recontextualize the question, 'what is pornography?', and how they make possible a reconsideration of the ways in which sexuality is articulated in media.

'Pornography and the Internet' considers some of these areas of enquiry in more detail, examining how they might offer a framework for theorizing and researching new forms of online pornography. It suggests that two major trends in recent pornography research can be used. The first of these is concerned with the symbolic function of 'pornography' which works to categorize and regulate texts, at the same time marking a border between what is acceptable and unacceptable. This approach is crucial for understanding debates about the regulation of online pornography, and also for problematizing the assumption that its regulation is inevitable and necessary. The second is concerned with the significance of a range of pornographies and is important for understanding the trajectory from earlier forms of sexually explicit texts to contemporary online sex media. The article argues that both approaches are necessary for developing an analysis of the extent to which online pornography represents a new form of representation, for identifying the challenge it presents for understanding the place of sex media in contemporary everyday life, and for thinking about its regulation and governance.

The third article, 'Sexed up: Theorizing the Sexualization of Culture', takes a broader focus than the first two, moving away from pornography to examine emerging approaches to the study of sexualized cultural forms, the emergence of new sexual practices and texts, and the contemporary preoccupation with all things sexual. The article is particularly concerned with the way these approaches make it possible to identify the characteristics of late-modern sexual discourses and sensibilities. A number of key themes are explored: the implications of pornographication, particularly for women and sexual minorities; the emergence of classed 'domesticated' sexual forms addressed principally to female consumers; the development of postmodern forms of intimate relations and encounters; and attempts to document and foster a new sexual politics of intimacy and citizenship. The article shows that what sex means is changing, becoming linked to discourses of consumerism, style, fashion and therapy, and to hedonistic, auto-erotic and intense practices which provide 'free-floating sensation'(Bauman, 1999: 26) . The emergence of a new sexual sensibility alongside reflexive forms of self-regulation, debates about sexual citizenship and a developing politics of intimacy suggests a new centrality of sex in contemporary culture which requires the urgent attention of academics across disciplinary boundaries.

In these three articles, I attempt to move from an examination of existing approaches to sex and media towards an exploration of the way that developments such as online pornography and sexualized mainstream texts provide new challenges for academic analysis. I also begin to explore how questions about citizenship, ethics and regulation might be opened up and developed through a shifting away from moralistic views of sex and sex media.

'What do people do with porn? Qualitative research into the consumption, use and experience of pornography and other sexually explicit media', *Sexuality and Culture*, Vol. 9(2). 2005. pp. 65-86.

"'Other" or "one of us"?: The porn user in public and academic discourse', *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* Vol. 4(1), 2007.
<http://www.participations.org/>.

A second strand in this area of the work focuses more explicitly on the consumption of pornography, taking as a starting point the view that, although it forms the basis of many critiques of pornography, research based on an 'effects' tradition is of little value. In this strand, issues of methodology, institutional framing and the socio-historical context of research become the focus of analysis.

The first of these pieces, 'What do people do with porn? Qualitative research into the consumption, use and experience of pornography and other sexually explicit media', reviews the limited qualitative research that has been carried out on the consumption of sexually explicit media - research which is regularly ignored in public pornography debates. This work suggests that sexually explicit media are experienced in dramatically different ways and carry a variety of meanings for different groups and individuals. A range of definitions, uses and reactions are reported, and issues such as aesthetics and accessibility, not usually apparent in academic or political debates, emerge as important ones for consumers. The article suggests directions for future research, both in terms of developing methodologies and refining approaches to sexuality and media consumption. These include the adoption and promotion of qualitative methods, a focus on the engagements that different groups of users make with sex media, and the urgent consideration of knowledge gaps such as women's consumption of pornography and their relation to sexualized mainstream texts. Exploring the relations between media texts, attitudes, behaviours, fantasies and practices and between emotional responses and sexual politics are also suggested as more ambitious programmes for developing the field across disciplinary boundaries.

The second article, "'Other" or "one of us"?: The porn user in public and academic discourse', takes a different approach, examining what discourses about pornography consumption reveal about the cultural significance of pornography. The article looks at existing and emerging figures of the pornography consumer from the nineteenth century to the present day when the 'traumatized child' and 'addicted adult' predominate. It examines how these figures are related to particular ways of thinking and speaking about pornography, arguing that they collapse together fears about the commodification of sex and technology and work to signify loss of agency in relation to both of these. However, as pornography moves from the margins to the centre of culture, the 'Othering' of

the pornography consumer is less easy to sustain. As media of all kinds become increasingly important as resources for the development of personal ethics, a space is opened up for imagining the pornography consumer, not only as 'one of us', but as a literate and reflective agent.

Taken as a whole, these five pieces represent an attempt to consider and contribute to the development of the field of study; the way it is framed in public and academic discourse, the questions derived from that framing and the methods mobilized by those questions. The work identifies the limitations of the field of study and the most useful and productive approaches that have emerged. It also identifies the ways in which a range of interests in sexual citizenship, ethics and politics, and in aesthetics, regulation and technologies can be drawn on to develop the field.

Re-Reading Sex in British Media Texts

'A very British carnival: women, sex and transgression in *Fiesta* magazine', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 5(1). 2002. pp. 91-105.

'"Tits and ass and porn and fighting": male heterosexuality in magazines for men', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 8(1). 2005. pp. 87-104.

'Pornography and Objectification: Re-reading "the picture that divided Britain"', *Feminist Media Studies*, Vol. 4(1). 2004. pp. 7-19.

As I indicate above, developing the study of sex media depends on their framing and analysis within broader sets of questions about taste, lifestyle, ethics and politics. However, the close analysis of specific texts is also important for illuminating how particular sexual sensibilities emerge in particular contexts. My work in this area has focused on British and relatively mainstream media examples - soft-core pornography, men's magazines and advertising¹ - whose 'onscenity' to use Linda Williams' (1989) term, reveals a great deal about the shifting boundaries between the obscene and the mainstream in early 2000s British culture.

In 'A very British carnival: women, sex and transgression in *Fiesta* magazine' I address two claims that are repeatedly made about pornography - that its theme

¹ A related piece of work not submitted here examines the portrayal of 'dandy' masculinity in British lifestyle television programming; 'Inside Out: Men on the Home Front', *Journal of Consumer Culture* Vol. 5(1). 2005. pp. 87-107.

soft-core pornography was in decline and new forms of lifestyle media and 'porn-chic' representations were becoming more visible. By producing more complex and nuanced readings it is possible to mark out productive avenues of investigation - in this instance, those of taste and class - and to identify broader changes in the cultural significance of sexually explicit media, particularly as they relate to broader cultural concerns with self-fashioning and self-presentation.

New Communities for Sex Media

'Fashion and passion: Marketing sex to women',
Sexualities, Vol. 8(4). 2005. pp. 395-409.

'Sluts and riot grrrls: female identity and sexual agency',
Journal of Gender Studies, Vol. 16(3). 2007. pp. 231-245.

'No Money Shot?: Commerce, Pornography and New Sex Taste Cultures',
Sexualities, Vol.10(4). 2007. pp. 441-456.

The final area of work represents an attempt to investigate some more recent developments in sex media, moving away from a focus on mainstream media genres to consider how sex is reconstructed in a range of other sites - marketing strategies, subcultures and online communities. This work also focuses attention on the ways that different groups are invited to engage with, and often develop their own practices and ideas around sex.

The first of the pieces, 'Fashion and passion: Marketing sex to women', focuses on new forms of sexual address to women by examining how sex products are marketed to female consumers in the websites of sex businesses such as Myla and Ann Summers. It asks how a variety of existing discourses - of fashion, consumerism, bodily pleasure and sexuality - are drawn on in the construction of this new market, in the process producing a new signification of 'sex'. Notions of taste and aesthetics emerge as particularly important in redefining an interest in sex as 'classy' and therefore accessible and appropriate for women. In the process, sex comes to reference a more contemporary ideal of femininity associated with style, image and self-fashioning and joins a range of health, therapeutic, sexual, fashion and beauty practices in which mind, body and spirit are revived and reworked.

'Sluts and riot grrrls: female identity and sexual agency' examines the history of the term 'slut' and traces its appropriation in a variety of new media texts and sub-cultural practices and performances, particularly those associated with 'girlie' and 'riot grrrl' culture. It argues that this kind of examination can also be a

is 'male power', or, alternatively, that it transgresses sex and gender norms. Focusing on one specific text becomes a means of locating these terms more precisely in relation to a particularly British bawdy downmarket style of presentation. Here sex is associated with 'naughty laughter' and ordinary life transfigured. Conventional ideals of domesticity and romance are overturned through a celebration of the physical and a fantasy of sexual equivalence between men and women, yet the 'dirty' style also depends on the self-conscious presentation of transgressed propriety and on women's bodies and voices as the currency for expression.

"'Tits and ass and porn and fighting': male heterosexuality in magazines for men" also focuses on media texts that are addressed to male readers, examining the key conventions that are repeated in presentations of male heterosexuality across British soft-core pornographic and men's lifestyle magazines. The depiction of the male body, sexual pleasure and heterosexual activity are considered in the broader historical context of men's print media and the socio-cultural context of sex and gender representation in British media of the early 21st century. The analysis demonstrates that the texts are consistent with a postmodern presentation of sexuality as recreational, narcissistic, hedonistic and auto-erotic which is evident in lifestyle media for both men and women. However, while sex is presented in women's magazines as a form of wholesome self-care and a means of heterosexual relationship maintenance, contemporary men's magazines are dominated by a fascination with 'low' and episodic forms of sexuality.

'Pornography and Objectification: Re-reading "the picture that divided Britain"' examines the significance of the terms *objectification* and *pornography* in existing approaches to the analysis of pornographic texts, arguing that a tendency towards essentialism in each of these serves to limit their application to contemporary representations. A discussion of the public controversy in the UK around an advert for Opium perfume in 2000 is used to illustrate the strengths of each approach to pornography and to highlight their shortcomings. The diversity of responses which the Opium campaign elicited shows how its meaning depended on the aesthetic, generic and spatial categories within which it was placed, and drew variously on established views about gender representation and emerging discourses of body image, celebrity and sexual display. The article concludes that a greater attentiveness to the context of particular images and to the variety of reactions they provoke is necessary for theorizing their contemporary significance.

Close analyses of this kind make it possible to draw out continuities and similarities between particular kinds of texts - whether they are linked by emerging ideas about gender or a British tone, for example, whilst also revealing the diversity which can be found even in despised and formulaic texts. This work also traces subtle shifts in meaning across a range of texts in the specific context of popular British media at the beginning of the 21st century when traditional

starting point for asking what is at stake in struggles *between* groups of women, whether these take the form of differences of class, generation, aesthetics or politics. While earlier feminist engagements with sexual naming often draw on the notion of a 'natural' femininity and of 'real' meaning, more recent ones work to re-fashion femininity from existing items, an approach that suggests that the meaning attributed to sex and gender depends on intent and performance.

In these pieces of work I begin to consider how differing feminist approaches - second and third wave, sex positive, alternative, postfeminist - to sex, gender and identity are marked by generation and class and by different ethics, aesthetics and political strategies. New types of practices are emerging and these pose new challenges for existing models of production, representation and consumption, and for ideas about the commercialization of sex. In these studies it becomes more apparent than ever that questions of media production and consumption, taste and aesthetics, political and ethical issues, and sexual practices must be examined together.

'No Money Shot?: Commerce, Pornography and New Sex Taste Cultures' is the final piece submitted here. It focuses on two websites - Nerve, an online magazine devoted to 'smart smut' and SuicideGirls, an 'altporn' site, examining how these can be understood as participatory taste cultures which combine commercial and community elements and investigating how sites like these construct sexual display as a form of recreation, self-presentation and community building. Here, the characterization of a cool, contemporary, sexy femininity combines bodily display, the expression of individual taste and an allegiance to alternative communities, aesthetics and ethics as a novel form of self-presentation.

As in the previous article, the focus moves from 'made media' to 'making media' here. These articles also map a shift towards auto-eroticism in various ways, drawing on discourses of sexual revolution, feminist sexual politics, self-care, display and consumerism. This is a particularly postmodern construction of sexuality that echoes a broader contemporary preoccupation with the creation of '*the self for itself*' (Simon, 1996: 13).

Throughout this area of work I am concerned with making sense of younger women's engagement with elements of a consumerized, sexualized culture which has been viewed as a key source of women's oppression, but which demands an understanding of the differing contexts in which women struggle over sex and technology². The articles are also motivated by an interest in documenting how emerging forms of sexual representation can be understood as part of 'a broad

² Another project belonging to this area of the work, not submitted here, used focus groups to explore young women's views of sexualized culture; 'New Femininities and the sexualization of mainstream culture', ESRC Seminar Series, New Femininities: Postfeminism and Sexual Citizenship, Open University, April 2006, unpublished paper.

postmodern taste for “authenticity” which increasingly focuses on new public displays of ‘the ordinary’ (Barcan, 2000: 145-146). These are part of a wider ‘reconfiguration of erotic life’ in which sex and commerce are combined (Bernstein, 2001: 397) in a wide range of sites. Forms of auto-sexuality addressed to women, women’s performances of active and alternative sexual identities and the rapid growth of new forms of online pornography and the taste cultures that grow up around them blur the boundaries between pornographic and other aesthetics, between commercial and non-commercial forms of sex, between consumption and community, and between sex as representation and self-presentation³.

Coherence of the Work

Clearly, in the case of a PhD by publication, coherence does not consist of following a research plan with defined aims or carrying out the close analysis of a pre-determined topic or set of materials. However, the work is coherent in a number of ways.

Firstly, it involves an interrogation of existing approaches to the study of sexually explicit media, often focusing on key terms - ‘objectification’ or ‘transgression’ or ‘pornography’ - or on key themes - ‘gender and power’, ‘regulation’ or ‘aesthetics’. It also involves an analysis of existing rationales for examining sexually explicit media, the assumptions and inconsistencies that often underpin these and the cultural and political work that they perform.

I have tried to examine how established terms and approaches are structured by particular discourses which often depend on aesthetic and moral judgements about sex and about media and I have attempted to make sense of these in a productive way, asking why, even when they are considered trivial and unworthy of study, some representations become culturally and politically significant. Often sexually explicit media seems to mark a blister on the skin of culture (Lumby, 1997), or become ‘mechanisms’ or ‘dramas’ (Kendrick, 1987) for dealing with a variety of social concerns and anxieties. I have been particularly interested in the relation of sexually explicit media to the construction of gender and heterosexuality, and to feminist thought, especially given that this has been so riven by debates around sex and, especially since the 1990s, about sex media. Focusing on the ways in which anti-porn arguments have been framed, on the political struggles over sexually explicit media within feminism and between women, and on the ways in which pornography consumption has been figured

³ A related piece of work, not submitted here, examines men’s online cybersex practices; ‘deepthroatfucker and Discerning Adonis: Men and Cybersex’, *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, forthcoming.

has been useful in developing my understanding of pornography's broader significance.

Secondly, I have attempted to broaden the field within which 'sex and the media' is critiqued. My work has examined soft-core pornography, lifestyle media, fashion, advertising, marketing, subcultures and online communities. Using this range has proved useful for tracing connections and drawing distinctions between media forms and between new and older types of media and their consumers. This kind of close and comparative work has also been useful in isolating how particular representations of sex differ according to context. For example, British soft-core magazines draw on popular comic representations of sex as well as the lifestyle ethos of *Playboy* magazine; newer lifestyle magazines for men rework pornographic and lifestyle conventions in the creation of 'middle-shelf' publications, in the process helping to put soft-core magazines out of circulation. There is a general shift towards the presentation of sex as recreational, narcissistic and auto-erotic across much popular media, but gender differences are still quite marked; sex is often presented to women as a form of self-improvement while it is generally presented to men as a form of self-pleasure. In both, women often *embody* sex. This focus on women as signifiers of sex and sexuality is also apparent in subcultural and online sex media. Yet here sex is often also central as part of identity projects in which femininity and the significance of sexually explicit representation are refigured in more playful and dramatic ways, and in which representation is also a form of participation. Here, sex, gender, cultural performance, display and technology are configured in more complex ways than established media analyses of texts and audiences have imagined.

Finally, by closely examining specific cases within the context of a broad field of sexualized media I have attempted to open up a discussion of identity, agency and ethics. I have tried to avoid reproducing a binary logic which has consistently worked to close down the field of enquiry; refusing to see sexual practices and representations as means of liberation or oppression, and understanding them instead as means of constructing sexual sensibilities, identities and communities. In particular, focusing on contested mainstream representations as in the Opium advert controversy and alternative uses of media in riot grrrl performance and altporn communities shows that sexually explicit discourse can become the focus of attempts to renegotiate sex and gender identity, to think through and exercise new forms of sexual agency, and in some instances to develop new ethical frameworks for the production of sex media.

Since I began this research in 2000 new work has emerged which has contributed to the re-mapping of the field of study. Brian McNair's *Striptease Culture* (2002) has redrawn the landscape in which pornography, porn-chic and a range of other texts enact varying degrees of display and revelation. Two collections, *Porn Studies* (Linda Williams, ed.) and *More Dirty Looks* (Pamela Church Gibson, ed.), both in 2004, represent the developing area of Anglo-

American 'porn studies' and identify new themes in pornography research: the importance of pornography as a subject for research and teaching; the variety of pornographic texts; the importance of cultural and intellectual economies for understanding pornography; a shift of focus from 'women' to 'gender' and from straight pornography to a more diverse set of representations; and an awareness of the importance of race and class in the study of pornography.

David Buckingham and Sara Bragg's work on young people, sex, relationships and the media (2004) has presented a very helpful account that is firmly located within the new culture of self-regulation, literacy and citizenship. More recently, Clarissa Smith (2007) has produced an ambitious study of the producers, representational regime and consumers of a single pornographic text aimed at women, *One for the Girls!* The relation of sexualization, femininity and feminism has become the subject of an important and productive debate (see Gill, 2003, 2007a, 2007b, 2008; Duits & van Zoonen, 2006, 2007). Susanna Paasonen et al. have produced an impressive collection dealing with the impact of pornography on popular culture, *Pornification* (2007). Martin Barker's recent work (2007) on audiences of sexually violent film suggests novel and thoughtful ways of examining audiences' engagements with sex media. A useful and accessible overview of current pornography debates is also provided in Alan McKee et al. (2008) *The Porn Report*.

My own work can be situated within these developments. Several of the articles submitted here deal with the sexualization of culture, a theme also explored in my edited collection, *Mainstreaming Sex* (2008). This includes discussions of reality porn and the rise of the amateur; new violent hard-core; erotic fiction; pornographication and the cinema; film depictions of masturbation; sex and the problem page; sexualized adverts; young people, sex and the media; women's use of pornography and erotica in the home; pole dance as exercise; and third wave feminism and sex. The final piece that I have submitted, 'No Money Shot', can be seen as part of two emerging sets of studies. It grew out of a larger AHRC funded project on women and sex online, itself part of a growing academic interest in new technologies and sex (Waskul, 2004; Jacobs, 2007; Jacobs et al. 2007; Attwood, forthcoming), and it is also part of a developing interest in contemporary forms of sex commerce (Agustin, 2007; Bernstein, 2007). In all three areas - sexualization, sex and technology, and sex commerce - an interest in media and communication technologies as 'technologies of the self', image work, agency, performativity, 'authenticity', ethics and citizenship are foregrounded.

Contribution of the work

There are some external measures of the contribution of the work to knowledge in the field of study. Firstly, many of the articles have been published

in influential journals in the field and are frequently included in journals' 'most read' lists where these are provided.

In addition, two of the submitted articles have been reproduced:

'Fashion and passion: Marketing sex to women' has been translated into German and reprinted as 'Mode und Leidenschaft: Frauen und die Vermarktung von Sex' in *Zeitschrift für Sexualforschung* (2006) 9(2): pp. 118-132.

'A very British carnival: women, sex and transgression in *Fiesta* magazine' has been reprinted in Anita Biressi & Heather Nunn (eds.) (2007) *The Tabloid Culture Reader*. Maidenhead: McGraw Hill/Open University: pp. 103-112.

A third, 'Sexed up: Theorizing the Sexualization of Culture' has been translated into Dutch and will be published in 2009 in Rudi Bleys et al. *Lief & leed. Seks en relaties anders bekeken*. Antwerp: Sensoa/Garant.

An extract from a fourth article, "'Other" or "one of us"?: The porn user in public and academic discourse', has been translated into Romanian and published in the performing arts magazine, *Man.In.Fest. Trimestrial de Cultura Spectacolului* (2008) 2: pp. 31-33.

As with all academic work, there are a number of limitations and weaknesses in the pieces that are submitted here. Some of the work has dated quickly; the writing on pornography and the internet particularly so. One weakness can be attributed to the continuing prominence of anti-porn and 'effects' approaches which produce an unhelpful starting point for discussion, often enforced by editors and reviewers and leading to a certain amount of repetition in the writing. In other instances, I have been solely responsible for the over-labouring of certain points, particularly perhaps, the importance and significance of issues of taste and aesthetics.

However, this body of work makes the following significant contributions to knowledge:

- It examines and critiques key terms, stances and assumptions in the field of study
- It reviews existing methodologies and suggests new approaches and research questions
- It carries out close examinations of texts
- It charts and helps to develop a paradigm shift in the study of pornography and other sex media
- It conducts contemporary case studies of the way sex is articulated in media texts
- It contributes to an emerging focus on the aesthetics and address of sex media

- It develops knowledge on new communities for sex media
- It contributes to new areas of study; in particular, of sexualized media and online pornography
- It works across disciplines to broaden the field of study
- It contextualizes the field of study in terms of broader significant shifts in the ways that sexual knowledge, practices, identities and relationships are constructed

The work submitted here is part of an attempt to tackle what has been a largely invisible and generally undervalued topic within the broad field of Media and Cultural Studies and one that constitutes a serious knowledge gap. I have approached sex and the media as a serious field of study and examined both as contradictory, contested, complex and important aspects of life. I have also tried to produce work that reflects on the field of study itself and to contribute to an understanding of how it might be developed conceptually and methodologically. Working like this necessarily involves an interdisciplinary perspective; although my work emerges from Cultural and Media Studies, it has become increasingly concerned with issues of work, leisure, identity and regulation and with the way they have been conceptualized and studied in a range of disciplines.

The field of study within which my work is situated is now concerned with a much broader range of issues than in 2000 when I began to work in the area. It has grown to encompass 'porn studies', film work on 'shocking media', research into censorship and regulation, new studies of sex and digital media, and interdisciplinary work on the sexualization of culture. Yet it is still underdeveloped. The mapping of existing genres and subgenres is in its infancy and the place of sexually explicit media and technologies in people's everyday lives is relatively unexplored. We do not know much as yet about the new forms of porn culture and conventions of sexual representation that are beginning to appear, or about the experiences of those who make and use them. Working in this area of research carries little cultural capital and frequently arouses responses of amusement, awkwardness, condescension, suspicion and hostility within the academy. Beyond academia, work which does not reproduce the familiar view of sexually explicit media as dangerous and its consumers as 'others' is routinely ignored (Attwood in Ryan Flood & Gill, forthcoming).

It is, however, becoming increasingly important. The sexualization of mainstream culture and the vastly increased access to sexual materials online has made sex more publicly visible than ever before. Media have become central to the unprecedented and global growth in all forms of sex commerce, underscoring the cultural and economic importance of sex. Communication technologies have become part of people's sex lives, facilitating new types of sexual practices and encounters in virtual and material environments. Evidence from a range of disciplines highlights the increasing importance of media and communication technologies in constructing sexual identities and lifestyles within 'a continuously

sexualizing culture' where 'the meanings of the erotic are themselves in constant flux' (Weeks, 2007: 124-125). The growing centrality of notions of media literacy and sexual citizenship to debates about education, regulation and life politics also suggests that scholarship in the area may be further stimulated. For all these reasons, the field of study seems likely to develop substantially in future years, becoming increasingly attentive to the contexts within which sexually explicit media are now situated.

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