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FORUM

After *The Feminist Porn Book*: further questions about feminist porn

The 2013 release of *The Feminist Porn Book* and its enthusiastic reception marks the cultural acknowledgement of a media phenomenon dating back at least as far as the 1980s. The book traces the development of US feminist porn since its inception – with revolutionary endeavours such as Femme Production, *On Our Backs* and Fatale Video – up to contemporary feminist (and queer) producers, directors and performers, thereby establishing a history and lineage, once and for all. Through a variety of voices and accounts (from industry as well as from the academic field), this anthology outlines a set of distinctive representation strategies and production choices, and recalls all of the specific institutions – theoretical and popular discourses, festivals, awards, retail environments – that work to establish feminist porn as a commercial and a cultural object.

In doing so, *The Feminist Porn Book* formalizes a sort of canon, describing what feminist porn is and why it is different from other pornographic forms, helping to place it within contemporary media landscapes and social contexts as a genre, as a market sector, and as a political position. Of course, the collection is not the first to attempt an analysis of women's involvement in pornographic production and consumption (see, for instance, Juffer 1998; Milne 2005; Ray 2007; Smith 2007; Sabo 2012), but it is the first to address the specificities of feminist porn directly, and thus offers a 'state of the art' assessment of the topic.

Over its various chapters, the essence of feminist porn, as a discursive genre and a political practice, is articulated around some pivotal (and sometimes controversial) concepts: 'authenticity' and the 'real'; the emergence of non-standard bodies, genders and sexualities; performers' agency and consent; and 'industry within an industry' (Penley et al. 2013, 12), characterized by fair-trade and sustainable modes of production. All of these concepts provide a deeper understanding of what feminist porn is intended to be by both producers and researchers, while at the same time calling for further investigations and discussions. For this reason, we have decided to choose *The Feminist Porn Book* as a starting point for this issue of the *Porn Studies* Forum Section, asking contributors to share their views on those notions.

The idea of authenticity – intended as the realistic depiction of bodies, sexual practices and pleasures – seems to be particularly significant for performers and entrepreneurs engaged in the production of self-defined feminist pornography. Authenticity is what differentiates these products from those labelled 'mainstream', although the subsequent dismissal of the mainstream as fake, based on stereotypes and (often) coercive might also be questioned (Paasonen 2011). First of all, there is a degree of uncertainty concerning the notion of 'authenticity' itself, and how the concept is differently deployed for political ends. As Smith and Attwood (2013) rightly remind us, anti-porn activists also rely on this notion, underlining the

difference between 'authentic sex' and 'porn sex'. In anti-porn understandings, authenticity is deeply connected to an idea of sex as something 'healthy', 'caring', 'private', 'responsible', 'loving', emotionally 'special' and even 'sacred' (2013, 51), as opposed to the commodification and emotional distance supposedly inherent in pornography.

Of course, the same notion changes meaning in the context of feminist pornography: from being a 'moral' and normative attribute, authenticity seems here to be interpreted as a revolutionary 'operational principle'. In her article for this Forum section, for instance, Madison Young develops a performative definition of authenticity as individual choice, negotiation of pleasures, and celebration of difference. Interestingly, however, Young (as well as other feminist porn producers) also seems to have embraced an oppositional idea of authenticity: being authentic, in fact, implies the possibility for performers to be themselves and to create unique and personal sexual relationships during shoots, as opposed to the pre-determined, artificial and staged sexual acts and bodies of (mainstream) porn.

This opposition between 'genuine' and 'staged' calls forth other questions. Is authenticity simply guaranteed by demonstrating respect for the profilmic (and 'extra-filmic') real-life sexuality and gender identification of the performers, or it is a quality that also has to be achieved through particular aesthetic techniques? And how it is related to the concept of realism in representation? This controversy is crucial to the feminist discourse, the claim for a realistic (e.g. non-stereotypical and 'mythical') representation of women being one of the central issues of feminist film criticism. In her seminal 1978 article, Christine Gledhill observed that:

> Before a proper mode of representation or aesthetic relation to the 'real' can be established, we have to have some idea of where the 'real' itself is located, and how, if at all, we can derive knowledge of it. At issue then is the status of 'lived experience', of phenomenal appearances, their relation to underlying structures, the determining role of 'signification' in the production of the real, and the place of 'consciousness' in this production. ([1978] 1984, 20)

Likewise, in the context of the debate on (feminist) pornography, one of the issues concerning authenticity is precisely the investigation of 'where the 'real' itself is located', and what role strategies of representation have to play. Is feminist porn's 'real' located in specific sexual acts, gender identities and body types? Are there any distinguishing sexual narratives that can be ascribed to feminist porn? Do feminist porn producers employ any specific techniques of the gaze? How important are production contexts in determining whether a product can be labelled as feminist or not? Alessandra Mondin's article in this Forum section addresses those issues, first of all examining the concept of fair-trade pornography – in terms of sustainable business models, performers' agency, DIY ethos and community values; and second, outlining the internal discussion among producers concerning the 'correct' aesthetic and rhetorical position(s) of feminist porn.

Barbara DeGenevieve also questions this idea of a 'correct' representation inherent in feminist porn. DeGenevieve expresses her personal disappointment at the notion of 'politically correct' as applied to sexual representations, while also stressing the importance of fetishization (and even objectification) of (queer) bodies and practices in order to generate dynamics of authentic (pornographic) desire.

The Feminist Porn Book also debated the role feminist porn has in the development of gendered and sexual self-consciousness in those involved, as well as in their audiences. Performers and producers who do not feel represented by mainstream porn (or by mainstream media in general) appear to have found a home in feminist (and queer) porn – a place where it is possible for them to produce truthful, respectful and empowering representations of themselves, while also providing their fans with images and narratives in which they can recognize their non-stereotyped bodies and/or fluid gender identities. Most often, however, none of them really explains in detail how this process occurs. Is it simply related to the pornographic display of their ('different') bodies and identities as shared objects of desire? Or is it directly influenced by the actual practice of performing (pornographic and 'public') sex? In her Forum piece, Courtney Trouble goes further, explaining how she found knowledge – about herself, about her sexuality and gender – in analyzing her feelings while performing for the camera, and through introductions to different and non-stereotypical sexualities and genders during her pornographic career.

All these notions, then – authenticity, fair-trade and ethical production, agency and choice, difference – pose further questions about the 'inveterate' opposition between 'alternative' forms of pornography and 'the mainstream'. Is mainstream porn really totally devoid of authenticity, stereotypical and, by its very nature, exploitative? Or perhaps there is a space for representations of authenticity and difference, and also for ethical forms of production in the adult film industry as a whole? Even though almost exclusively associated with indie porn, these operational principles are also a priority for a number of producers and directors outside the domains of feminist or queer porn, as mainstream performer Stoya writes in her Forum piece.

In the interview by Georgina Voss that concludes this Forum section, Tristan Taormino discusses the overlapping between these two different contexts – feminist/queer/indie/alt porn and mainstream/corporate porn – alongside a discussion of recent transformations of the US porn industry, the relationship between porn and sex education in her work and, of course, her experience as one of the editors of *The Feminist Porn Book*.

In this opening Forum section, we want to continue the discussion of feminist porn started by this ground-breaking anthology. We have highlighted a few controversial notions and asked contributors for their thoughts on them. Still, at least three other important questions remain, which perhaps others will wish to take up in future issues of this journal. As *The Feminist Porn Book* is focused on the American context, all production outside the United States is effectively excluded from the canon of feminist porn. It would be really interesting to discuss what is happening, for instance, in Europe or South America, and how this production relates to the respective national/regional pornographic industries, or whether it 'fits the code' of feminist porn as established by this book.

There is also a question concerning the definition of feminist porn itself. If feminist porn is mainly produced to address female desires and fantasies, what are the differences between pornography self-defined as feminist and all the products labelled as 'porn for women'? If feminist porn is also a means for a truthful representation of the so-called sexual minorities, to what extent is it different from queer porn? And is it even necessary to separate the two spheres?

Another *vexata quaestio* is that of audience responses. As Erica Rand argues in her review of the book in *Jump Cut*:

> This is partly […] because how porn (or any cultural product really) influences consumers remains hard to access, maybe fundamentally unknowable, at least in terms of any formula or decoder ring that could translate representations into meanings into beliefs, desires, or actions. (Rand 2013)

Questions about how, where and when these products are consumed and by whom, and whether audiences perceive a difference between feminist porn and other pornographic materials, are pressing. What difference does it make to a sense of self and personal ethics that one's porn is produced according to fair-trade principles? Are audiences committed to alt, indie, feminist or queer pornographies in fan communities of sorts? Answering those questions will require extensive media-ethnographic investigations of audiences. A first attempt is currently being made by Alessandra Mondin's research project Feminist Desires, now in its early stages.[1] The project will investigate (through a questionnaire on its website) the way audiences react to these kind of products, in terms of preferences, habits and consuming practices. Just one of the next steps in the research on feminist porn.

Note

1. PhD project, University of Sunderland, UK, started in 2013.

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