

PORNOGRAPHIES: AN INTERVIEW WITH SUSANNA PAASONEN¹

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Your book *Carnal Resonance: Affect and Online Pornography* proposes a move beyond the binary affect x representation. You say that “critique ‘after representation’ is difficult to tell apart from studies of representation” (p. 10). Do you think that this rejection of the opposition between representation and affect suggests a methodology for porn studies in general? Or to put it more broadly, how can we best “read” porn?

I would say that a rejection of the binary - which I think is to a degree a false one - points towards a methodology for porn studies, and maybe also for media studies more generally. Contemporary media, in my country as well as elsewhere, works explicitly through forms of “affective address” in the sense of foregrounding the personal, the intimate, the embodied and the emotional in entertainment programming and news features alike. Online newspapers share links to both cute and shocking links in order to attract clicks, reality television recurrently foregrounds individual bodies and feelings, ISIS releases execution videos for visceral effect, etc. In order to understand how and why all this works, it is necessary to pay affect some kind of analytical attention.

As Richard Dyer argued some time ago, the power of popular culture is dependent on its power to move us. The question, or at least one of the questions, therefore is how are we moved, what does this involve and affect, in concrete ways. This seems particularly pertinent in studies of porn, which, as a genre, aim to evoke sensory responses, which recurrently evoke strong reactions and political arguments both for and against, and the imageries of which are explicitly fleshy and even visceral. Studies of porn to date have to a large degree conceptualized the genre as a cultural metaphor and symbol, often for mutually incompatible things (i.e., violence against women, sexual liberation, working-class resistance to bourgeois morals...). In addition, scholars, myself included, have focused on the representational, such as the ways in which social categories such as gender, race and class are depicted, and what kinds of hierarchies or relations of control pornography includes.

The problem here, for me, lies in that the aesthetics of porn tend to operate through exaggeration and hyperbole. Things are not subtle but explicit. It then follows

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that social differences, as embodied by performers/characters, tend not to be just obvious but dramatic and dramatized: the juxtapositions of large and small, young and old, black and white, male and female bodies are somewhat dramatic in the imageries of mainstream straight porn that I started out studying. One can even claim that porn operates through stereotypes and hence stereotypes take little analytical skill to identify, recognize and critique. So in addition to, or rather than asking what these images mean and what representational conventions they draw on, one can also ask what their effect, how they work and what they afford in terms of viewer experience. Which obviously links to issues of affect as bodily sensation and intensity.

In studies of media, it is necessary to pay attention and understand to how things are put together and what historical lineages, connections or echoes the texts we read, the images we watch and the sounds we listen may involve. In other words, it is necessary to analyze and conceptualize the representational. At the same time, as many new materialist scholars have argued, this should not result in an exclusive focus on issues of meaning, signification and the textual. To the degree that the metaphor of text is connected to semiotic analysis, the notion of reading can be seen as descriptive of a methodological standpoint that foregrounds meaning and analyzes text, image and sound as similar kinds of structures of meaning. Yet image and sound are not about structure in the same sense as language: as modalities of expression, they are dissimilar in their operations and these dissimilarities deserve to be accounted for.

Ken Hillis has warned against expansive uses of “text” and “reading” in studies of online phenomena and I think this warning applies to studies of all kind of media. When analyzing porn of the audiovisual kind, we need to look, listen, read and experience, to both sense and make sense of it: methodologically, this may include audience research, auto-ethnography or forms of audiovisual analysis. So in this sense I am not arguing for a clear-cut methodology as such, but for more of an analytical point of departure in and for studies of porn. My argument is for including the experiential in studies of pornography and to conceptualize it in order to understand how porn works. This is basically a very simple question but one that is not necessarily that easy to answer, given that different people like and dislike different things, experience and interpret things in diverse ways.

What can we learn about contemporary desire by studying online pornography?

To give an obvious answer, we learn about diversities of desire: the different niches, fringes and trajectories of desire documented and fantasized in contemporary porn that come in virtually endless variations and under a plethora of tags. At the same time, we also learn about how certain desires and practices gain a more normative and visible status than others - about the hierarchies and norms inherent in ways of categorizing sexual imageries, rendering them accessible and naming them. All this is especially evident on online platforms. One central development has to do with the shifting publicness of personal and intimate imagery, following the accumulation and evident popularity of amateur pornography during the last decade or so. A least partly this seems to point to a desire for visibility - the visibility of one’s body, sexual

preferences and likes, etc. - that is about both having an audience and sociability in the sense of sharing. (For its part, the much discussed genre of revenge porn points to both similar and different things in terms of audience, sociability and consent alike.)

Online pornography is usually risky for the user. We are often warned while using search engines like Google that porn sites can “damage” your computer, that there might a chance to catch “a virus”. The language here echoes the cautionary tales that aim to alert against “real life” promiscuity and it is specific of online digital media. With print magazines, film and DVDs, for example, the medium itself cannot be “contaminated” because it is not connected with other devices. How do users respond to this online interconnectedness and its risks?

The notions of infection and contagion are definitely connected to the overall perception of online porn as problematic, harmful and potentially addictive. Such accounts are abundantly present especially in more popular genres of writing, and in Anglophone contexts more than others, and they precede the era of online porn. At the same time, their volume seems to have been amplified since the late 1990s as porn consumption has increasingly shifted online and as the volume of potentially available content has grown manifold. These accounts invest porn with a great sense of power to affect and addict people, to get them hooked on the abundance of options and stimuli that online porn has to offer: in this sense, they are very much about affect.

Filtering software generally operates in such a framework of risk, damage and harm, especially when it comes to children, in order to make people purchase their products and make their computers more safe.

Porn links have definitely been used in distributing viruses as they may inspire the user to click and download yet the actual risks involved in accessing porn vary. Tube sites tend to be low-risk, torrent files higher risk since it's not always obvious as to what one is actually downloading. And then of course risk doesn't necessarily actualize as harm. During my dozen or so years of studying and watching a lot of online porn, I haven't to my knowledge downloaded a virus so far. (No doubt that my computers have been contaminated in a more symbolic vein.)

On the one hand, network media facilitates very solitary, isolated types of porn consumption: one can access a range of things (more or less) anonymously, for free and without leaving one's home or office. On the other hand, porn sites also facilitate sociability and contact among users as well as with performers, as is the case with webcam sites. There is a different kind of “stickiness” to this kind of sociability as possible contact that's both appealing and potentially risky.

In a recent dialogue with porn producer Paul Morris, you discuss “a conceptualization of utopian sensibility within bareback pornography as an issue of transparency, community, abundance, energy, and intensity”. At some point Morris reveals that “a writer for Out magazine said that he was afraid to watch my videos because he actually felt that he might become infected by them, that somehow they had a magical power to either overthrow his personal will and cause

him to imperil himself or to actually introduce the virus into his blood”. How can we reconcile the eminence of death brought about by the presence of HIV virus and the utopian promise of “community, energy, and intensity”?

Paul might put it differently but as I see, his films are about the gay bareback community, the energy and intensity of sex within it. Dyer’s definition of the utopian sensibility of entertainment (that he coined in the context of film musical) can be applied to Paul’s films in the sense that they are about the intensity and immediacy of sex: he doesn’t direct the participants as performers, there is no script and no narrative except for the action that unfolds and which he then edits. At the same time, this utopian sensibility is not about futurity or optimism in being geared towards a better tomorrow that promises energy or intensity - it is about the here and now, and invested with a documentary aura. Paul’s work resonates with Lee Edelman’s antisocial queer theory in its lack of optimism and futurity. “Breeding” and “seeding” the virus is a central element in his films that can be seen as an antithesis to the “HIV closet”.

I find Morris’ work interesting and exceptional on a number of levels. While barebacking has become mainstream in gay porn, his aesthetics or politics are, I would argue, a case apart. These films have a very particular feel. We’re currently continuing the dialogue on porn work and ethics, so there’ll be more to follow.

Finally, what are some of the issues in pornography that you consider to be under-studied?

National and regional pornographies past and present (especially beyond the U.S.) are pretty much under-studied - more so in some regions than others but we generally know little about what has been produced, distributed and consumed, how and by whom, in different parts of the world, and how these activities connect to legislation, regulation, sexual cultures, etc. Histories of amateur pornography are an additional, vast empty zone. Porn is generally excluded from public media archives. Amateur stuff is doubly invisible and hence difficult to study in a historical framework. And while there is some research on porn work and the uses of porn, I wish there was more. The list could go on. My sense is that while there are lots of assumptions concerning what porn is, who makes it, who profits from it, who consumes it, how, where, why and to what effect, there isn’t all that much knowledge concerning this all. Knowing more might just help in coming up with more sensible public discussions on porn as ones going beyond the binary logic (of good vs. bad) that still tends to dominate today.