

Porn and Its Uses

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As a proliferating subfield of sexuality studies, porn studies has become a larger framework to understand sexually explicit media. The growth of the discipline has been supported through debates and disagreements that allow for teasing out radical ethics and politics which, in turn, enable certain reading practices and representational schemas to persist. The growth and solidification of porn studies notwithstanding, the field maintains a marginal status in academia. Porn scholars routinely attend conferences where fellow attendees are embarrassed by their topics, and stories abound of young scholars who are advised to repackage their work in order to be taken more seriously or seem more “hireable.” In other words, assumptions exist that pornography studies are either too limited in scope or too contentious for the academy. The three co-editors of this issue all study porn from radically different perspectives: Darshana researches transnational porn cultures with a specific focus on South Asia, Nikola employs a queer historicist approach to adult media within a larger discourse on urban masculinities, and Rebecca studies the cultures and technologies of digital pornography. Through our discussions, which were originally occasioned by the Society for Cinema and Media Studies’ Adult Film History Scholarly Interest Group where the three of us met, it became evident to us that adult media allows for a confluence of different ideas, sensibilities, and political perspectives even as it represents a point of departure from more traditional objects of study. With that in mind, we wanted this special issue on “Porn and its Uses” to wrestle with critiques, both institutional and popular, that had questioned and challenged pornography on the grounds of its use value or as “pointless” deliberation while at the same time meditating on our own sense of porn’s usefulness as an object of study.

Fantasy is pornography’s mother tongue, as well as its utterance. Lauren Berlant reminds us that fantasy is the crystallization of ideals and ideologies that they might assume a readable, representational shape (2011, 2). It follows, then, that fantasy engenders a profusely *useful* space. Pornography—as either an object with finite values perennially attached to it (good or bad, empowering or debilitating), or as a value unto itself (the pornographic as indelicate, obscene and exploitative, or indeed subversive and exciting), is thus called upon to contain, and respond to, the cultural anxieties of any given moment. Accordingly, this collection of peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed essays, artworks, conversations and panels, puts critical pressure on the perceived serviceability of “smut” as a point

of access to tensions around attitudes and aesthetics of desire, identity, well-being, diversity and infrastructure, to name only a few.

The special issue does not shy away from porn's functional usefulness, as the theme cheekily gestures towards the happy endings broadly associated with the pornographic. However, use is also employed as an anchoring conceptual framework to describe why we, as editors, believe the study of pornography plays a vital role in the humanities. Porn is ubiquitous as both an object and a framework for understanding other objects and processes. It is often because of pornography's capacity to act as a mirror to institutional adherences to modesty and congruity that it remains neglected in academia. Objects that are everywhere and nowhere all at once often slip from analytical grasp; that which intrusively cuts to the core of institutional and decorous limits runs the risk of retaining only symbolic value. And yet, studying pornography means asking vital questions about sexuality, desire, and the self that porn articulates. Similarly, we might consider pornography as a centre around which larger questions and fears about the Internet surge, or how pornography is deemed answerable to discussions around sex work and labour conditions.

As university instructors who include pornographic material in our syllabi, we look at the privileged practice of teaching anew whenever we ask students to think about adult content. In our teaching, we have reflected on the necessity of showing explicit material alongside discussions on pornography as a filmic and cultural institution, while being conscious of our precarious position as first-time lecturers/international graduate students/junior scholars. Whether we are teaching queer cinema, South Asian cinema, or the histories of the internet, there is no question for us that our syllabi would have to include sexually explicit visual material in the spirit of intellectual honesty and rigour. Without a doubt, screening explicit material in the classroom requires careful management, which may include content warnings and increased attention to facilitating discussions. However, at their core, these practices are responses to anxieties around adult media that are conditioned by the question of "use value" in the humanities. Thus, even introducing adult content into the classroom to address questions around form, genre, history, industry and spectatorship is unto itself an argument for the tangible use value of otherwise devalued objects of study.

In *What's the Use? On the Uses of Use*, Sara Ahmed expounds on the philosophical underpinnings of the notion of utility, or what she calls the logics of selection that animate "*the strange temporalities of use*" (2019, 9), wherein values such as "useful" and "useless" map legitimate areas of inquiry by judging what counts as improper or appropriate, relevant or anterior; in a similar vein, the contributors to this special issue recognized and grappled with pornography's advantageous position to question these hermeneutics. Elsewhere, John Champagne has established continuity between queerness and pornography as two cultural forms that represent "nonproductive expenditure," and thus share a subversive potentiality to "not overthrow disciplinary means of subject production, but rather respond to their force with a counterforce, attempting to reverse the strategic relation of discipline to body" (1995, 30). Conversely, this special issue gives space to discus-

sions on the pornographic as a way to index precisely this counterforce of the defiantly nonproductive, in spaces and structures such as academia (but also: museums, parks, the postal system, film festivals, various media platforms, etc.) that themselves represent arenas where the obscenely personal wrestles with bureaucratic prudence. In their own ways, the papers collected in this issue respond to the provocation that pornography, whether as genre or subject matter, routinely occupies what Wasson and Acland have dubbed “useful cinema,” or “one defined by film’s ability to transform unlikely spaces, convey ideas, convince individuals and produce subjects in the service of public and private aims” (2011, 2). Repetition, functionality, and appropriation in disparate contexts make “use” a matter of relative conditioning.

Finally, the special issue on “Porn and Its Uses” mirrors in large part the experiences, discussions, and challenges around introducing pornography into the academic context aggregated into the landmark 1996 special issue of *Jump Cut* by editor Chuck Kleinhans. Twenty-five years later, the concerns that animated that special issue—namely, the proliferation of academic and artistic inquiry into visual pornography as an intervention into “the ongoing controversy about sexual representation in the public sphere” (Kleinhans 1996, 103)—feel urgent again. While our contemporary context is certainly our own, those controversies have persisted with the COVID-19 global pandemic reframing the very notions of public and private, the hysteria around sex work resulting in oppressive legislature such as FOSTA/SESTA, social media-enabled forms of ostracism policing formal and informal discussions of sex and sexuality—which is to say nothing of the scrutiny that divergent sexual praxes continue to attract. While the pornographic image itself remains central in our research, the unequivocal status of pornography as a globally recognizable and contested *articulation* of desires and anxieties which may or may not have anything to do with sex per se, allowed us to propose a theme for this issue that would appeal to porn specialists, enthusiasts and dabblers alike.

The first section of the journal, titled “Historic Obscenities,” collects papers interested in tracing the significance of adult media as it has responded to particular moments in history, and opens with Quinn Anex-Ries’ examination of pornography’s role in shaping cultural and procedural definitions of private versus public space. In “Prohibitory Order: Postal Regulation, Citizen-Surveillance, and the Boundaries of Obscenity,” Anex-Ries analyzes the United States Post Office Department’s mobilization of Anti-Pandering statutes in 1967 and 1970 as mechanisms that censored and criminalized erotic media. By outlining this context, Anex-Ries spotlights how ideals of “free speech” and “the right to privacy” have operated as ploys to reinforce heteronormativity and moralism in the public discourse. Finley Freibert continues in the same time period with his account of Joseph and Michael Anthony, a father-son entrepreneurial team based in Houston who produced and distributed gay pornography in the 1960s and 1970s. Freibert’s research on the Anthonys reads in equal parts as a compelling queer microhistory and a consideration of how gay pornography and its attendant cultures reflected

and animated the ideologies engendered by the gay liberation movement. His paper, titled “Distribution, Bars, and Arcade Stars: Joe Anthony’s Entrepreneurial Expansion in Houston’s Gay Media Industries,” bends Wasson and Acland’s conception of “useful cinema” in order to arrive at the term “gay useful media” to describe gay media’s historic role in facilitating communication, community formation and cultural convergence. Finally, Bobby Noble’s paper “Harbord Street Histories” offers a “radical contextualization” of the Feminist Porn Awards through a historiography of brick-and-mortar feminist businesses located along Harbord Street in Toronto. Noble’s interviews with the organizers of the Feminist Porn Awards throw into relief tensions both familiar and specific, from antagonistic positions that pornography has invited in certain feminist circles to discussions around nationhood, queer legacies, and feminist intergenerationalities that the Awards generated. Noble situates these discussions in a historical stroll down Harbord Street, reorienting the history of the Feminist Porn Awards around Canadian sex wars, as indexed by past and present feminist businesses on this particular Toronto strip.

“Digital Publics” emerges as an overarching theme in the articles by Eric Weichel, Jennifer Moorman, Ruepert Jiel Dionisio Cao, and Samuel Poirier-Poulin, who interrogate how desire, intimacy and art operate across digital locations as varied as Pornhub, Twitter and video games. In his work on Kent Monkman’s subversive oil paintings, Eric Weichel’s “A Particular Kind of Romantic Entanglement: Kent Monkman’s *Nation to Nation* (2020) and the Limits of Canadian Political Pornography” positions the pornographic as not only a language through which to represent the racism that structures Indigenous experience in Canada but also as a privileged vantage point—a way of looking—that coalesces digital and analogue landscapes. In “Flows of Desire: ‘The Pleasure Principle’ (2019), *Shakedown* (2017), and Pornhub’s Political/Libidinal Economy,” Jennifer Moorman follows the unlikely association between feminist art and the world’s most popular digital pornography platform, Pornhub. By focusing on Pornhub’s commission of the feminist art show “The Pleasure Principle,” and its distribution of Leila Weinraub’s experimental documentary *Shakedown*, Moorman grapples with the complexities that emerge through Pornhub’s investments in experimental art and documentary and locates queer and anticapitalist potentialities in the interstices of sex and commerce. If Moorman’s analysis helps us understand how market logics, corporate social responsibility and promotion campaigns govern Pornhub’s expansionist overtures, Ruepert Jiel Dionisio Cao offers us a case study from the Philippines to showcase how cultural and social norms shape digital publics. In “Twitter Porn in Filipino Alter Community: Primitive Aesthetics and Affect,” Cao maps out amateur gay porn production practices of the alter community on Twitter. By means of online ethnography, Cao explores how porn aesthetics intersect with the technical affordances offered by Twitter on the one hand, and larger discourses on masculinity in the Philippines on the other, with a particular focus on anonymity as the dominant impulse that structures this community. Finally, in the paper titled “Beefcakes, Ambiguous Masculinities, and Pornographic Bodies,” Samuel Poirier-Poulin historicizes “dating sim” video

games as examples of recent digital media that advance the crypto-queer tradition of physique culture into the internet landscape. Focusing on the sexually explicit game *Coming Out on Top*, Poirier-Poulin sees in the erotic figure of the beefcake an opportune meeting place for game studies and queer theory, as well as a rich conceptual space for divergent perceptions of masculinity.

In the final section of peer-reviewed works, “Pleasure and Policy,” our authors explore the relationships between policy research and pornography studies, expanding the often limited focus in policy research on porn as a question of legislation. Thus, the articles in this final section intervene in an area of research that is simultaneously undertheorized and overdetermined. Clarissa Smith’s paper, “Putting Porn Studies (~~Back~~) into Porn Literacy,” addresses the idea of porn literacy by looking at media produced to disseminate purportedly “authentic” and behind-the-scenes narratives centered around porn production and consumption. Through an analysis of documentaries about the porn industry, such as the BBC’s *Porn Laid Bare*, Smith considers how the notion of porn literacy is mediated through purportedly sex-educational material and attendant conversations on safety and risk. Pivoting towards questions of public health, Valerie Webber’s article “Crossovers and Consent: Underlying Assumptions in Porn Health Protocol” analyzes health protocols in the pornography industry. Webber balances quantitative data with a sensitive insider approach and interrogates occupational health and risk management in the porn industry. Finally, John-Paul Stadler’s “Pornographic Altruism, or, How to Have Porn in a Pandemic” addresses our most recent global health crisis. Stadler’s analysis of pornography’s response to COVID-19 puts it in the continuity of mutual aid and collective care networks produced in and around porn communities in times of crisis. Stadler’s paper rethinks sexual labor in terms of altruism, arguing that crises throw into relief the oft-neglected connection between pornography and care.

The non peer-review section opens with a category of work we are labeling “Meditations.” In a conversation on feminist uses of pornography, Lynn Comella and Desirae Embree extrapolate the quandaries between porn and feminism by emphasizing the complex arena engendered by feminism, sex and capitalism. Looking at the sex positive movement and how feminists put porn to various uses, from education to activism and community building, the two interlocutors give the reader a glimpse of how this pans out in their own research on feminist sex toys (Comella) and “dyke porn” (Embree). Alpesh Patel interviews visual artist Wojciech Puś on the project *Endless*, which consists of a non-narrative film as well as spontaneous performances that interrogate the fluid formation of identities. The conversation dwells on Puś’s artistic practice and how he constructs a multimedia assemblage to explore questions of queerness, pornography and aesthetics. Jasper Lauderdale’s article “Make Your Own Neverland, Where Nonfiction Interacts with Lesbian Porn” integrates research at the intersections of porn and documentary. Lauderdale’s focus on Jonathan Harris’ documentary-style project *I Love Your Work*, which explores narratives of producers of lesbian pornography, allows the author to revisit questions of genre within the resonant field of interactive online environments.

The non-peer-reviewed section on pedagogy collects introspections on curating and discussing explicit media in academic and para-academic spaces. Madita Oeming's piece "Porn Poacher—Coming Out as an Aca Porn Fan" outlines the challenges of simultaneously positioning oneself as a porn academic *and* a fan of the genre; the piece ends with a demand that porn scholars be unapologetic about their objects of study in order for the field itself to be reclaimed as pleasurable and complex. In his paper "Going Public with Pornography Studies: Lessons from Creating the *Porno Cultures Podcast*," Brandon Arroyo reflects on the creation of his podcast as an example of public scholarship, or an attempt to outline the work of porn studies—and, as he mentions, to *humanize* porn scholars—for people outside of the field, and even outside of academia. David Church's paper "From the Classroom to the Theater: Public Porn Viewing as Counterpublic Engagement" wrestles with the tensions and potentialities of erotic film programming—in the classroom, in the public movie theatre, and/or as part of a film festival such as SECS (Seattle Erotica Cinema Society)—at a time when adult film viewing is most commonly understood as a solitary, private practice. Finally, Kyler Chittick curates a roundtable titled "Porn and/as Pedagogy, Sexual Representation in the Classroom," discussing the state of the field with Peter Alilunas, Ummni Khan, Laura Helen Marks and Thomas Waugh. Their "transdisciplinary, intergenerational" discussion outlines the scholars' personal histories and stakes in studying and teaching porn. It emphasizes the continued challenges of inserting adult content into academic contexts, where it will invariably and incongruously brush up against discourses surrounding #MeToo, trigger warnings and punitive attitudes around sex and sexuality. The contributions to this section each tackle the complexities of porn pedagogy in public and semi-public spaces, testifying to the thorny and gratifying pedagogical spaces pornography occasions at the university and beyond.

In a nod to the 1996 *Jump Cut* issue, which showcased elements from syllabi and discussed pedagogic practices when it comes to introducing adult media into the classroom, we are proud to round off this pedagogy section by spotlighting three contemporary approaches to teaching pornography at the university level. Further animating the conversation on use and usefulness, the generous gesture by João Florêncio (University of Exeter), David Church (Indiana University) and Madita Oeming (independent scholar) to share their porn syllabi testifies to the variety of possible approaches and strategies to teaching explicit media in different academic contexts.

The issue concludes with artworks and accompanying statements by Martha Muszycka-Jones, and Marius Packbier and Aïlien Reyns. Muszycka-Jones's *Doll* is a compelling piece that layers photographic images with liquid latex. The result is a visual artwork that engages, and challenges, broad conceptions of erotic imagery. Similarly, in his video essay, "Skin Pleasure," Packbier and Reyns layer images of the artist's body with amateur pornography as an exercise in exploring the embodied experience of image-based pornography. The contrasting stances on pornography in the two pieces—as an instrument to question the pornographic gaze that structures geometries of desire or a generative space that

invites unorthodox means of knowledge production, respectively—speak to the polyvalence of the pornographic as an object, framework and method. In this light, these artistic praxes respond to the theme of the issue in their consideration of the central question of porn and its uses, and join a provocative roster of work that represents new interventive strands into the field of porn studies.

References

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