

**Rebecca
Sullivan &
Alan McKee**

Pornography

Key Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies

Pornography

Structures, Agency and Performance

Rebecca Sullivan and Alan McKee

polity

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Introduction

Pornography and Porn Studies

What is pornography? Who is it produced for, and what sorts of sexualities does it help produce? Why should we study it, and what should be the most urgent issues when we do? These are the questions that frame our analysis of how pornography is conceptualized as a sexual practice, a media form, and a social issue. This is a book about pornography as a concept, one that is charged with numerous political, social, and cultural concerns about gender roles and sexual relationships more generally. As such, we are largely interested in the debates and discourses that circulate about pornography – how they are organized, what sorts of assumptions lie behind them, who is most deeply implicated in them. The goal of this book is to situate those debates and discourses within networks of competing gender and sexual politics in globalized cultural systems, and to suggest new frameworks for the understanding of pornography. We treat pornography as an integral part of commercial media industries, national and international regulatory discourses, gendered social structures, and subaltern sexual praxis.

Pornography is notoriously difficult to define, and overburdened with assumptions concerning – at the very least – gender, sexuality, power, globalization, desire, affect, and labour. Yet that should not allow us to sidestep this demanding task: it is not good enough merely to repeat the famous dictum by United States Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart, ‘I know it when I see it’ (*Jacobellis v. Ohio*, 378 US 184 (1964)). At stake in the

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definition of pornography is the recognition that sexual pleasure is a highly contested and politically fraught concept, and that media and popular culture have a long history of perpetuating deep-set gender and sexual inequities and making them appear pleasurable. At the same time, we also appreciate that many of us create and consume media entertainment to enhance our sexual freedoms and pleasure-seeking. In so doing, the boundaries of what can and cannot be seen, spoken, or performed are challenged and redrawn. That is why pornography is such an important concept for anyone concerned with the role of media and popular culture in everyday life. It deserves to be studied in ways that take into consideration its multiple possibilities and in the context of who is making it, who is watching it, and how.

This book engages with some of the most well-known and current strands of public debate on pornography. We pay particular attention to Anglo-European countries including Australia, Canada, Great Britain, and the United States. At the same time, we recognize that, like all media, pornography is being transformed by forces of globalization: industrialization, labour migrations, technological advancements, and the mingling of cultural forms and symbolic systems. Analysis unfolds across six major vectors: industry, technology, violence, pornification, governance, and performance. Our attention is, unless otherwise clearly stated, on pornography produced in legal contexts by adults for adult consumption. Our reasons for this focus are that this is the most prolific and profitable sector of the pornography industry, and is also the most hotly contested in determining the gender and sexual politics of pornography. While we make reference to child abuse materials (the preferred criminological term for what some call 'child pornography') and to criminal acts such as 'revenge porn', our attention to these is in the context of their outright unethical and illegal practices. As such, the issues they raise are substantially at odds with consensual adult pornography and require a radically different approach from the one we take in this book.

We approach the concept of pornography from our positions as media and cultural studies scholars with passionate commitments to feminist, queer, and pleasure-positive politics. One of our goals

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is to reveal the historical and political underpinnings of contemporary concerns about pornography's place in the media entertainment matrix. That term refers to the wide range of production, distribution, and consumption practices of entertainment content – commercial, amateur, and anywhere in between – occurring on multiple and intersecting media platforms. We further seek to position pornography within a larger network of cultural and sexual politics that draws attention to and claims greater rights and freedoms for non-normative, pleasure-based sexual performances and practices. To that end, we insist that pornography is neither inherently good nor bad, neither necessarily transgressive nor oppressive. Rather, we acknowledge media's ability to inform ideas about gender and sexuality, and to provide or withhold resources that assist audiences in making sense of their own media consumption. We are therefore interested in the ways that pornography is produced, obtained, consumed, debated, and defined; and how these practices help shape attitudes about gender and sexual roles and relationships more generally.

We emphasize pornographic performances and practices in this book for two reasons. The first is to draw attention to the ways that performers make sense of and gain value from their labour. Second, we seek to conceptualize the theoretical potential for some pornography to inspire consumers to expand their interests beyond personal sexual pleasure to a politicized embrace of new public sexual cultures. Performance and practice are acts of agency and skill, rarely fully empowered nor fully exploited but negotiated and self-determined based on existing contexts of everyday life. While the former term is particularly relevant for the analysis of labour and production and the latter helps frame how audiences engage with pornographic materials, they are not exclusive to either production or consumption. Rather, they reference a cycle of mutually reinforcing engagements with pornography that foregrounds the real bodies at stake.

We challenge any argument that regards pornography solely as a social ill to be eradicated by giving primacy to performers and sexually marginalized groups in our analysis. We draw awareness to the perpetuations of racist, sexist, homophobic stereotypes in

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much commercial pornography (as is common in most media entertainment). We also note similar attitudes in some anti-pornography discourses. Too often, warnings of pornography's destructive force are encumbered with assumptions that a 'normal' or 'healthy' sexuality proceeds from heterosexual romantic relationships between two individuals committed to both monogamy and (eventual) child-rearing. This, we refer to as 'heteronormativity'. In an early salvo against anti-pornography feminism, radical pro-sex feminist Gayle Rubin harshly critiques the 'sexual essentialism' of heteronormativity. She outlines the ways that psychology, biology, and even cosmology have been marshalled to prove that such human sexual behaviour is innate, and that outside influences such as pornography are dangerous contagions to be resisted (1984, 275–6). Rubin distinguishes between the 'charmed circle' sex based on the heteronormative principles outlined above; and 'outer limit' sex, a presumed 'bad, abnormal, unnatural, damned sexuality' that includes pornography (1984, 281). We share her critique of this arbitrary sex hierarchy, and examine the ways that different contexts for pornography can either reinforce or disrupt it in imperfect and uneven ways. Thus, while we write pornography in the singular, we see it more as a complex set of media engagements that can help force a reckoning with the concept of pleasure in our gender and sexual politics.

Pornography and pleasure

At its most fundamental, pornography refers to the graphic depiction of sexually explicit acts made available for public consumption on a media platform. Moreover, those acts are deemed pornographic because their intention is understood to be primarily for the sexual pleasure of the audience member. These three criteria – explicitness, public mediation, and pleasure – require some unpacking. First, we recognize that pornography incorporates explicit sex. We do not insist that the sex on display be 'real' because even if the acts on display did actually occur, they were created in a context of performance. Too often 'real' is used

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to refer to pornography as if it is a documentary or even clinical recording of sex and not a highly constructed act by individuals with varying levels of skill, mindfulness, self-determination, and experience. We recognize that the sex on display has been created with differing attention to both artistry and artifice, dependent on its industrial and labour contexts, and its intended audience. We therefore define 'explicit' as offering a high level of graphic depiction of the genitals or primary sexual characteristics of any given body engaged in acts that are represented as providing sexual pleasure. We think this is a workable definition which captures the majority of material that is understood by its producers and consumers as being pornography, although it may exclude some rarer sexual fetishes where pleasure is taken from non-genital interactions – sneezing fetishes, balloon porn, or an attraction to women's shoes, perhaps.

Second, pornography is mediated and available for public consumption. By that we mean that pornography is experienced through some kind of cultural technology that makes it available to a vast potential audience who is, through various and diverse means, physically separated from the act on display. That can be through asynchronous time, as in a pre-recorded film or image, or published text. Or, it can refer to the spatial limitations placed on live performance in streaming or social media. Regardless, the point is that pornography is offering a sexual experience but one that constructs a physical distance between performer and audience. Some claim that mediation renders the performer 'two-dimensional' and therefore objectified and somehow dehumanized (Mason-Grant 2004, 125). Such arguments rest on psychoanalytic claims that the viewer enjoys a sadistic, voyeuristic gaze over performers, reducing them to spectacular, desired objects (Mulvey 1975). Treating the performer as something less than human because they work within a mediated environment is, we contend, problematically dismissive of creator and consumer alike. We appreciate the skill required by performer and audience to produce meanings and values out of media – good and bad and mostly somewhere in the middle – that are then used in the work of individual identity formation and collective social practice. In

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that regard, pornography is no different from any other media practice.

Finally, we readily acknowledge that a major intent of pornography is to incite sexual pleasure. That can be for the performer but it is predominantly for the consumer. In legal definitions, pornography is often accused of being 'solely' for the purpose of inciting pleasure, as if that is an uncivil act that negatively affects the social good. We do not consider pornography to be 'solely' about sexual pleasure because we refuse the idea that bodily and sexual pleasure are divorced from either a sense of social accountability or intellectual self-understanding. Mind/body dualism is a hallmark of patriarchal thought that denigrates and denies the body as a source of knowledge and power. It then aligns the body with the feminine and then rather dubiously claims that as proof that women and non-normative sexual subjects are sexually deviant and intellectually feeble. While bodily and sexual pleasure may be foremost in pornography, there is no justification to claim it as therefore a lesser or debased form of pleasure. Additionally, we recognize that many pornography producers, especially contemporary feminist/queer performers, clearly include activist and educational intentions within their work that merit critical exploration. Thus, we define pleasure broadly and inclusively to recognize it as integral to gender and sexual politics.

We frequently use variants of the phrase 'publicly mediated forms of sexual expression' to refer to what some may call pornography. In doing so, we are raising awareness that much anxiety over pornography is intricately related to a more permissive and open-ended attitude towards sex in media and popular culture. Not all publicly mediated forms of sexual expression bring with them the level of explicitness or sexual arousal associated with pornography, yet some critics insist that 'the pornographic' is becoming ubiquitous in even mainstream media. Certainly, increased levels of sexual openness and what Anthony Giddens (1992) has termed more 'plastic' attitudes about sex have blurred the lines between pornographic and mainstream media. Pornography's increased prominence in the media entertainment matrix, and the concomitant concerns about that, demand questions about what

forms of sexual pleasure are deemed acceptable for public consumption. For some, the answer is to hivel pornography off from the rest of media and popular culture and regard it as anything that goes 'too far' with its sexuality. That kind of othering fails to take into account how pornography is deeply interconnected to other forms of media entertainment at all levels from the industrial to the symbolic.

Pornography in the media entertainment matrix

In this book, we focus on those discourses concerned predominantly (but not exclusively) with visual forms of pornographic production, both live and pre-recorded. These are the most prevalent forms of pornography in circulation today and therefore form the bulk of our examples and examinations. We readily admit that, in the interests of focus and clarity, we are perpetuating a neglect of explicit sexual representation in literary or non-visual forms. Helen Hester further notes that any affectual representation of disgust and excess is often called pornographic: 'food porn', 'trauma porn', and the like (2014, 14). She argues that 'pornography' has been appropriated as a rhetorical device to the point that it actually displaces sex from its own descriptor. Such a claim is provocative and intriguing. However, we argue that sexual pornography itself is alive and well, offering up explicit sex primarily intended for sexual pleasure, and that is our interest here.

Pornography is often called the 'driver' of technological and industrial innovation in the media. As we discuss in both Chapters 1 and 2, it is frequently the testing ground for new business models since production values tend to be much lower, thus dropping barriers to entry for new producers, and its subcultural status allows for more flexibility in the trial-and-error stages. With enhanced convergence and concentration of media, it is increasingly difficult to treat pornography as distinct from other parts of the media entertainment matrix. For example, the television industry includes service providers that offer pornographic channels, which are often subsidiaries of large media conglomerates, and

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purchase content from production houses that employ individuals who work on both pornographic and non-pornographic sets. Consider that Internet and cellular data service providers are also usually connected to television providers, and it would be nearly impossible to determine where the line separating pornographic from mainstream media begins, at least from a technological or industrial standpoint.

Yet, pornography is usually studied as something unique from any other media form. It is treated simultaneously and often incoherently as a genre, industry, ideology, and subculture. No other element of the media entertainment matrix receives quite the same treatment. We point this out as something that can potentially reinforce pornography as outside regular or 'mainstream' media practices. At the same time, its convoluted status offers some interesting opportunities to examine the dynamics between text and contexts, production and form, politics and practice that are transforming the media landscape of gender and sexuality. Pornography does have distinct aspects to its industrial organization, the occupational status of its performers, its representational and generic schema, and its audience engagement. Thus, we regard pornography as a particular set of media practices operating within social structures that position 'individuals in relations of labour and production, power and subordination, desire and sexuality, prestige and status' (Young 2005, 420). As Iris Marion Young notes, such positions are multiple, varied, and changeable in accordance with interconnected social structures and the individuals contained therein (421). Thus pornography deserves its status as unique but not to the point that it can be regarded as qualitatively different from other forms of media and culture.

Media and cultural studies of pornography

This book contributes to the growing field of media and cultural studies of pornography. What distinguishes the field is its interest in both the generic and formal qualities of a pornographic text, the social and historical conditions of its creation, and the meanings

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and values it engenders among varying audiences. Feona Attwood claims that media and cultural studies has helped produce a 'paradigm shift in pornography research':

It represents a new interest in contextualizing pornography by situating particular texts in relation to issues of cultural categorization and classification, cultural value and hierarchy, and to the articulation of sexual discourse in a variety of genres, forms and media. (2002, 102)

Media and cultural studies presume that any given text is open to diverse (but not endless) interpretations and meanings. They therefore take into consideration the ability of both producers and audience members to make certain interpretations and meanings more possible than others (Duits and Van Zoonen 2011, 492). At the same time, they recognize that media production and consumption takes place in the context of large, interconnected social structures that impose hierarchical and inequitable relations of power that are felt and reiterated by individuals in their everyday lives.

As Attwood readily points out, advances in feminist theory and increasing attention to both gender fluidity and sexual agency also have had enormous impact on the way pornography can be studied (2002, 93). While the earliest feminist concerns about pornography were overwhelmingly pessimistic and saw pornography as emblematic of women's oppression by men, such claims were quickly and vociferously opposed by activists and scholars who saw in pornography the potential to liberate sexuality from patriarchal, misogynist, and heteronormative social structures. The advent of queer studies in the 1990s transformed the way that both gender and sexuality are studied. This academic approach insists that the articulation and experience of gender and sexuality are neither fixed nor co-dependent but are instead open-ended and interrelated. Queer studies was heavily influential on contemporary feminist theories of sexual agency and pleasure. Still, feminism brings to queer studies reinvigorated attention to the oppressive and inequitable ways that sexual pleasure is valued when experienced by differently defined bodies.