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Pornification and the Education of Desire

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From the hypersexualized star image of Paris Hilton to Madame Tussaud's wax modelling of porn star Jenna Jameson, texts citing pornographic styles, gestures and aesthetics – and to a degree pornography itself – have become staple features of popular media culture in Western societies as commodities purchased and consumed, as individual self-representations and independent porn productions. This phenomenon has been discussed and diagnosed as the mainstreaming of pornography, pornographication (McNair 1996; Driver 2004), pornification (Paul 2005; Aucoin 2006), normalization of porn (Poynor 2006), porno chic (McNair 2002; Duits and van Zoonen 2006) and the rise of raunch culture (Levy 2005) by scholars, journalists and representatives of the porn industry.

Pornography is an issue of genre, industry and regulation. The category of pornography has been defined in terms of content (sexually explicit depictions of genitalia and sexual acts), lack thereof (materials without any redeeming artistic, cultural or social value), intention (texts intended to arouse their consumers) and effect (texts arousing their consumers). Definitions of pornography are notoriously ephemeral and purposely used when marking the boundaries of high and low culture, acceptable and obscene, 'normal' and commercial sex. Porn is a dirty word, which is often replaced with the terms adult entertainment or erotica: the former is a concept preferred by the porn industry and journalism whereas erotica is used in separating the artful from the artless, the beautiful from the ugly. The category of pornography is equally divided into hardcore and soft-core, in addition to endless sub-genres and fringes. Soft-core texts lacking in explicitness and featuring simulated sex have probed the limits of the acceptable at least since the 1950s. While such probing is not a novel issue, the boundaries separating the pornographic from the non-pornographic have become increasingly porous and difficult to map. Women's open, moist and lipstick-red lips, half-closed eyelids or hands suggestively placed on a bare bosom or stomach are staple elements in pornography, but also in music videos, cosmetics ads and fashion photography (Juvonen, Kalha, Sorainen and Vänskä 2004; Railton and Watson, Rossi in this volume). As a set of styles, scenarios and conventions, the pornographic cuts across media culture.

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Analyses of pornification risk being associated with diagnoses of contemporary culture as one of ‘pornication’ (in the sense of fornication). Discarding references to degeneracy, this book makes use of the concept of pornification in investigating the intertwining processes of technological development, shifts in modes of representation and the cultural visibility of cultures of sexuality. *Pornification* figures transformations in the cultural position and status of both soft-core and hardcore pornographies, which require a rethinking of the very notion of the pornographic. For the sake of conceptual clarity, pornification can be roughly divided into three levels.

Three Levels of Pornification

Media Technology and the Porn Industry

Firstly, pornification concerns developments in media technology and the expansion of the porn industry. By the 1990s at the latest, porn business became a global industry while the World Wide Web facilitated unprecedented visibility and accessibility of pornography – including various amateur, alternative, independent and niche pornographies that challenge not only the aesthetics of commercial pornography but also its ideologies of capitalist accumulation and centralization (Jacobs 2004a; Paasonen in this volume). The Internet has brought forth considerable transformations in the production, distribution and consumption of pornography: it enables anonymous access to porn without the need of visiting a newspaper stand or a sex shop. Live performances, pornographic images and narratives once available in print or on VHS are now online alongside imageries and practices more specific to the Internet.

Pornography, as understood in this volume, is a phenomenon of media culture and a question of mass production. The ‘birth’ of pornography can be traced back to the development of print technology: relatively inexpensive print technologies of the eighteenth century made pornographic texts and images available to a wider public beyond the elite, although questions of affordability, availability and literacy continued to limit the consumption of porn (Hunt 1993). It was photography in the nineteenth century – and more specifically, inexpensive and mass-produced postcards in the 1880s and 1890s – that made pornography available to the members of the working classes who had already been established as familiar objects of pornographic representation (Sigel 2000). ‘Artistic’ nudes were distributed as postcards, stereoscope images and transparencies. Building on already established representational conventions, they also worked to institutionalize colonialist imagery of sexualized and exoticized ‘natives’, and women in particular (Yee 2004; Sigel 2000: 861–4). Techniques of othering have since been employed in a wide range of pornographies, especially in terms of class, gender and ‘race’ (see Miller-Young in this volume).

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In the context of cinema, films such as the French *Le bain* (1896), featuring a nude woman entering a bath, were produced already in the nineteenth century (Hoffman 1965). Underground ‘stag movies’ and ‘loops’ formed the market of hardcore porn from 1908 to 1967, including variations such as the ‘nudie cuties’ of the 1950s, various educational materials and ‘beaver films’ of the late 1960s (Schaefer 2004: 371; Williams 1989: 96–8; Johnson 1999; Wyatt 1999). These developments were tied to transformations in film technology. The 1920s saw the standardization of 16 mm film as a medium for the amateur market, in contrast to the professional format of 35 mm. As 8 mm film was introduced in the 1950s (Fig. 1.1), 16 mm became the ‘semi-professional’ format widely used in the making of exploitation films (Schaefer 2004: 375–6; Zimmermann 1995: 29, 117). The 1970s saw pornographic feature films shot on 35 mm film whereas the introduction of home video later in the decade marked the beginning of porn productions shot and distributed on video (Paasonen and Saarenmaa; Miller-Young in this volume).



Figure 1.1 Porn loops were also viewed privately in homes. Super 8 mm film projector and reels of German films from the 1970s. Photograph by Susanna Paasonen

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Pornography has been identified as an engine driving the development of media technology, soon adapted to novel platforms and generating fast profits (see O'Toole 1998; Lane 2001; Perdue 2002). The case of VHS and Betamax is often referenced in this respect: Sony introduced Betamax VCRs in 1975 and while they were better in terms of image and sound quality than their competitor, VHS, it was the latter that became the industry standard in the late 1970s. The victory of VHS has been attributed to Betamax not licensing pornography due to which – following the principle 'sex sells' – VHS reigned victorious. While pornography may have played its part in this battle of formats, it certainly was not the only factor contributing to it. The Betamax system was more expensive and its tapes were only one-hour long (as opposed to the longer play time of VHS); Betamax was intended for recording TV programmes for later viewing, while VHS was also oriented toward pre-recorded tapes (Wasko 1994: 40–1; Winston 1998: 128–9). The example of VCR suggests that porn is a factor in the history of media technology (especially so since the early twentieth century), but also that considering the history of technological transformation through the lens of porn is likely to lead to twists in perspective.

More or less affordable tools for the making of amateur porn have been available since the marketing of still and 16 mm film cameras to private households in the late nineteenth century (Slater 1991; Zimmermann 1995). These media, however, involved potential embarrassment since film required developing and exposing the shots to the gaze of others. The introduction of portable video cameras (first in the late 1960s, more affordable amateur models in the 1980s) made it possible to view one's films directly, to efface and redo shots. Similarly, the relatively expensive Polaroid cameras became a medium for amateur porn in the 1960s precisely due to the absence of necessary outside involvement in the imaging process. In the 1990s, digital cameras (both still and video) further effaced third parties from the process. Amateur porn is certainly not a new phenomenon, but the distribution, participation and interaction possibilities of the Internet have given it unprecedented visibility since the 1990s.

The story of porn is often narrated as one from print to film, video, DVD and the Web, and with primary focus on the visual. The development has not, however, been this definite. Print pornographies remain popular and they were the primary format of pornographic consumption in the 1970s and 1980s due to their accessibility and the possibility of private use (in contrast to cinemas screening porn films or peepshow parlours presenting 8 mm loops). In countries such as the Soviet Union where pornography was heavily censored and distribution forms therefore limited, imported pornographic images were distributed in imaginative ways – for example, by photographing them and then distributing playing cards made of the black and white prints (Fig. 1.2).

Technical innovations have been crucial to the growth of the porn industry, which has branched out into new platforms from print media and film to video,



Figure 1.2 Playing cards made with collage-style photographic prints (and with liberal copyright practice) in the last years of the Soviet Union. Image by Susanna Paasonen.

cable television and online distribution. The industry makes use of corporate strategies based on convergence. Content and distribution are developed in order to market the same product in different formats (DVD, Web, print media, pay-per-view TV, mobile media applications, podcasts). Furthermore, companies aim to control both production and distribution. Companies that first made their profits in porn magazines (Larry Flynt Publishing, *Playboy*) have branched out into DVD and Web production and distribution, pay-per-view TV and retailing. Company strategies also include fusions, as demonstrated in Playboy's move to buy its competitor Spice Entertainment in 1998. On the Internet, pornography has been one of the most successful forms of content production that suffered little from the dot.com collapse of 2000 (Lane 2001).

Social and political transformations such as the deregulation of pornography in Western societies since the late 1960s and the shift to post-socialism in Eastern Europe in the 1990s have – in obviously different ways – facilitated the rise of the porn industry. In addition to France, Germany and Italy, European productions are centred in countries such as Hungary and the Czech Republic, attracting business partners across national boundaries. While technological development has facilitated the operation of small companies, the trade seems to glide more and more to the hands of large multinationals such as the Private Media Group in Europe, or the US-based Vivid and VCA. San Fernando Valley – as featured in the semi-reality TV series *Porno Valley* depicting lives around the Vivid studio – is the hub of American porn production. If Hollywood releases approximately 400 films annually, the valley produces over 10,000 DVD titles for the global market. The US porn industry is estimated to be a three to ten billion dollar business annually whereas the estimates of the size of the global industry vary from fifty to sixty billion dollars (Rosen 2006; Ackman 2001; BBC 2005).

The actual profits of the industry remain somewhat unclear since 'legitimate' corporations are unwilling to disclose their involvement in porn distribution. X-rated films are part of the diet of pay-per-view television in hotel chains around the world while major media, software and telecommunication companies provide bandwidth, infrastructure, software and distribution systems for adult companies (Lane 2000: 34; Perdue 2002: 28–59). Porn is an integral part of the media economy, which makes the revenues of the porn industry difficult to isolate. Major corporations generating high profits with porn are likely to downplay its significance in terms of their overall turnover.

Regulation and Media Policy

Technology is by no means the only factor enabling the growth of the porn industry. As suggested above, technological developments have gone in tandem with changes in regulation and media policy. These can be seen as forming the

second layer of pornification. Porn is no longer something situated at the boundaries of the public: on the contrary, it is manifest in mainstream publicity, media and (semi)public spaces of various kinds – from wax museums to convention centres, newspapers, magazines, television and department stores. This development is linked to gradual transformations in media regulation and legislation since the 1960s. Denmark was the first European country to legalize pornography in 1969, followed by West Germany in 1970 and Sweden in 1971. This enabled the rise of ‘Scandinavian porn’, as encapsulated in the productions of Lasse Braun. In the United States, the markets were first opened to pornographic material in 1957 but legislation limited (and banned) the production of pornography well into the 1980s (Williams 1989: 88). The US law on obscenity was written mainly in 1973 and has been constantly challenged since then: *Hustler* producer Larry Flynt waged war against censorship from the 1970s to the late 1980s, while the antipornography movement fought for censoring pornographic materials (Kipnis 1996: 124; Dworkin 1989). Governmental regulation diminished in the late 1980s and new technical solutions resulted in the passing of a series of laws regulating online materials in the mid-1990s (Kleinhans 2004; see O’Toole 1998 for an overview of developments in the UK).

One of the substantial changes in terms of media industry concerns television regulation – television being perhaps the most domestic of media, embedded in the rhythms of everyday life. European television regulation has been transforming in the course of harmonizing the regulatory structures of the EU, following the more global trend of relative decline in the regulatory power of nation states over media content. At the same time, technological convergence is making it more difficult to set regulation on a media-specific basis (Arthurs 2004: 30). Moreover, the emergence of digital TV channels has multiplied the supply of pornographic content – even more so than satellite and cable channels since the 1980s. This has mainly meant the incorporation of porn films into the night-time programming of pay-per-view television. In television, the boundaries of the respectably mainstream and the (soft-core) pornographic can be blurred in quality drama and lifestyle series (legitimized through their educational or aesthetic value) while the more avant-garde or hardcore pornographies remain excluded and pushed to the margins (Arthurs 2004: 24).

In addition to media deregulation, the shifting boundaries of the pornographic and the mainstream can be associated with other diagnoses of contemporary media culture, such as tabloidization and intimization, namely the prioritization of the personal, the emotional and the sexual over information and education – examples of this including reality TV, confessional tabloid stories and celebrity sex scandals (Glynn 2000; Calvert 2000; Attwood 2006). This development has often been lamented as the victory of bad taste over quality media. Brian McNair (2002), however, considers deregulation as a path to pluralization and eventual democratization of desire: increasing accessibility of sexual representations and self-express-

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sions alike. The last decade has witnessed a pluralization of hardcore pornographies and their sexual imagery, yet soft-core porn and its mainstream variants have tended to reproduce rather predictable depictions of gender, desire and sexuality. As Jane Arthurs (2004: 12–13; 41–2) argues, pluralism does not guarantee democracy. The increased visibility of sexual representations previously unaccepted in the national media is not merely a question of democratization through the workings of capitalist market economy. Mainstream applications of porn aesthetics are also efficient in establishing new kinds of norms and regulatory effects. In this sense, deregulation can also be seen as giving rise to new regulatory systems, such as ones based on privatization (Lehtonen 2001: 81).

Porno chic

The third layer of pornification – in practice inseparable from the two addressed above – connects to the general sexualization of culture, or the mainstreaming of sexuality: ‘contemporary preoccupation with sexual values, practices and identities; the public shift to more permissive sexual attitudes; the proliferation of sexual texts; the emergence of new forms of sexual experience; the apparent breakdown of rules, categories and regulations designed to keep the obscene at bay; our fondness for scandals controversies and panics around sex’ (Attwood 2006: 78–9; also Attwood, Brunt and Cere, forthcoming).

The sexualization of culture refers to a fairly wide range of cultural phenomena while pornification is a more specific term pointing to the increased visibility of hardcore and soft-core pornographies, and the blurring of boundaries between the pornographic and the mainstream. McNair (2002: 61) identifies such increase in sexually explicit representations as porno chic: involving depictions of pornography in non-pornographic contexts in art and culture; pastiche or parody of porn; homage to porn or explorations into it and the incorporation of porn in mainstream cultural products (Fig. 1.3). Examples of porno chic are not difficult to come by: the individual chapters in this volume address the ways of remembering and referencing 1940s’ and 1950s’ pin-up culture (Epley) and the 1970s’ ‘golden age of porn’ (Paasonen and Saarenmaa), the uses of pornographic elements in online self-representations (Mowlabocus; Nikunen), music videos (Railton and Watson), visual arts (Mey) and street advertising (Rossi). As Kevin Esch and Vicki Mayer, writing on the blurred boundaries of porn and celebrity culture in this volume note, pornography is being defined by its constant reappraisal, both from within (amateur vs. corporate porn; alternative vs. generic) and without (porn vs. ‘mainstream’ media). The relationship between porn and mainstream media can be seen as symbiotic: ‘by covering porn, the media borrows some of its dirty glamour and sense of danger, while in turn it confers legitimacy, making porn a topic of interest and discussion like any other’ (Poynor 2006: 132).



Figure 1.3 Porn Star designs – an example of porno-chic. Photograph by Susanna Paasonen

One indication of such symbiosis is the entrance of some porn stars – perhaps most famously Jenna Jameson – into mainstream celebrity status. The first successful example of such crossover was Ron Jeremy, the overweight and middle-aged veteran hero of the American adult business. Emily Shelton describes Jeremy as a figure with ‘liminal positioning between the mainstream and its seamy celluloid underbelly’ (2002: 177). According to Shelton, Jeremy’s secret lies in his repulsiveness: unlike the average fit, groomed and tanned porn star, Jeremy exceeds the bodily requirements and points to pornography’s tendency to celebrate the low, the disgusting and the obscene. Moreover, Jeremy’s star image indicates a shift in porn’s cultural position – not as harmful or repressive but as fun, hilarious and camp. As an old-time porn proletarian, Jeremy’s unruly body speaks of camp sensibility (Sontag 1964a: 278) that deliberately re-values the low and the out-moded. Jeremy enjoys a motile form of celebrity that allows him to traverse a range of popular media from *Beavis and Butthead* to Conan O’Brien’s sofa. However, as male, American and heterosexual, Ron Jeremy represents the very centre of mainstream pornography, just as his films represent the mainstream of adult film-making.

The question is both similar and different with the young and female Finnish porn star Raket Liekki who holds an exceptionally flexible, yet far more local intermedia career spanning from hardcore films to television talk shows and art museum performances (Fig. 1.4). Compared to Jeremy, Liekki’s performances flirt

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with the aesthetics of alternative porn and are representative of the more experimental forms of heterosexual hardcore. Liekki's fame owes to the late night cable TV show *Shag School* (2002), which mixed hardcore porn with educational discourse, resulting in a playful mixture of cultural hierarchies. Her other productions have equally contributed to a renegotiation and redefinition of pornography in terms of recreational fun and artistic experimentation while detaching it from notions of shame (Nikunen and Paasonen 2007). Being in charge of her own productions and collaborating with other female porn stars, Liekki represents the 'fair trade' of porn business. Porn made by women for women has, for the past two decades, been seen as possibly offering alternative spaces of agency for both female performers and consumers. The amount of female producers has increased and there are markets for women straight and queer (Juffer 1998; Carnes in this volume), even if women remain a marginal target group in terms of the porn industry as a whole (cf. Attwood 2005) (Fig. 1.5).

The examples of Jeremy and Liekki point to a flux between porn stardom and mainstream celebrity status while also pointing to crucial differences shaped by genre, gender, markets and geography. The move from hardcore porn to prime time lends performers certain legitimacy. The other direction of the flux, namely porno chic in mainstream media or the shifting of mainstream celebrity towards porn stardom, has somewhat different effects. This kind of flirting with porn can be illustrated through the changing star image of Britney Spears. As the former



Figure 1.4 Finnish porn star Rakel Liekki on television interview discussing her show 'Shag school'. Copyright YLE/TV2/ Kaarina Nikunen

Mickey Mouse Club performer made her breakthrough with the hit song *Baby, One More Time* (1998), her star image was a mixture of a sexy cheerleader, girl next door and abstinence from premarital sex. In Joel Lockard's (2001) view, Spears's hymen was established as a central element of her brand-name chastity,



Figure 1.5 Merchandise for women. Photograph by Laura Saarenmaa

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yet her virginity did not simply signify innocence. On the contrary, low-riding pants, generous cleavages and a perpetually uncovered navel – in Lockard's terms, her 'open-air substitute vulva' – marked her body as firmly and actively heterosexual. Spears eventually gave up her vows of chastity, kissed Madonna in an MTV gala, gained inspiration for her choreographies from strip clubs, married drunk in Las Vegas, divorced quickly and remarried briefly. Gossips of lesbian desires abound, Spears – now mother of two – has since flashed her waxed vulva to the paparazzi and performed an impromptu solo dance on the stage of a topless club.

The development of Spears's star image seems a textbook example of pornification as a media cultural trend. This trajectory is by no means exceptional in the sense that oiled bodies and rhythmic pelvic thrusts have very much become 'the air that we breathe'. In other words, the imageries of commercial sex leak into other realms of media culture without being actual porn (McNair 2002). As several chapters in this volume point out, not all porn acquires similar visibility but pornification largely revolves around predictable gendered poses and scenarios: the soft-core influenced repertoires of music videos and advertising tend to centre on heterosex and largely standard bodily forms (cf. Reichert and Lambiase 2006; Juvonen et al. 2004: 72–3; Rossi in this volume). As the example of Britney Spears illustrates, mainstreamed porno chic draws on conventionally heteronormative imageries. There is indeed little to be considered transgressive in the public/pubic acts of Spears or Paris Hilton (Esch and Mayer in this volume). Contrary to such soft-core references, hardcore pornography has, in its directness and extensiveness, been recognized as the site of the radical potential of porn (Arthurs 2004: 47). The proliferation of hardcore pornographies – queer and straight, kink and vanilla – provides spaces for various tastes, desires and modes of production. Explicit sexual representation escapes the confines of 'good taste' in its focus on bodily orifices, liquids and discharges. Defining hardcore categorically as radical or transgressive is nevertheless simplifying, given that the area of porn culturally most visible and financially profitable, namely commercial heteroporn, relies on highly generic body shapes, styles, acts and scenarios (Paasonen 2006).

Pornification involves a commodification of sexuality: sex is used in selling a variety of products both material and immaterial; the markets of pornography seem to be in continuous increase while porno chic has become part and parcel of youth cultures and the stylization of the self (also Duits and van Zoonen 2005). Framing the question as one of increased sexual self-expression and democratization of desire erases from view the codes and norms that such expressions tend to confine to. In amateur pin-up galleries and music videos alike, bodies repeat sexualized, standard poses and positions. Self-representations straight and queer borrow from the imageries of hardcore and soft-core porn, implying involvement of commercial sex in the processes of self-commodification (see Mowlabocus in this volume). Writing on gay video porn, Richard Fung notes that 'there is such a

limited vision of what constitutes the erotic' (1991: 160). The same goes for the proliferating sexual imageries of popular media culture, as well as a large part of hardcore choreographies. Such proliferation should not, however, lead to analytical blindness towards the shifts and transformations simultaneously taking place in their aesthetics and circulation. In other words, while commodification connotes standardization, it cannot be reduced to it. On the one hand, pornification implies reiteration and recycling of representation conventions that are telling of the generic rigidity of porn. On the other hand, and perhaps paradoxically, it also gives rise to media performances subverting the generic conventions and boundaries of porn, facilitates novel representational spaces, ideas and agencies.

Pornography and 'Good Sex'

Porn is a question of genre and embodied practice, not simply sex or sexual expression – although it is often naturalized as such. Generic porn scenarios, stylized displays and iterative conventions teach us moments and movements of pleasure. As Richard Dyer (1992) argues, porn educates desire in highly corporeal ways. The convention of the cum shot (a.k.a. money shot, male ejaculation on a partner's face or body) is a highly literal example of such education. Established by 1977 as a necessary element in porn films gay and straight, the cum shot is a visible verification of sexual gratification: semen functions as indexical evidence of climax while providing closure, a sense of ending, to the act (Williams 1989: 93). Through perpetual repetition, the cum shot – largely a technical convention related to the possibilities of conveying the 'realness' of the acts filmed and the pleasures derived from them – has become a staple feature also in porn stories and amateur erotica. On the Internet, endless image galleries are dedicated to cum shots. In such instances, the sign of male climax becomes *the* focus point of sexual acts, a fantasy figure in itself. If amateur stories and online discussion forums are anything to go by, cum shots have become part of private fantasies and desires – and hence part of everyday sexual practices. This kind of iterative imagery suggests, defines and shapes understandings of sexual acts: what they are and how they can be done (Nikunen in this volume). This implies a certain schooling of desire, as well as the inseparability of public and social fantasies.¹

As argued by Michael Warner (2000: 177), pornography, with its growing visibility, offers knowledge on the practices, styles and typologies of various sexual cultures. In this sense, porn can be seen as offering means to resist the notion of 'good sex' as monogamous heterosexual and private, produced through regulation and sexual stigmas (Warner 2000; Berlant and Warner 2000). Inherent in the construction of 'good sex' – namely socially acceptable and normative forms of sexuality – is the shame of sex, which is organized in various sets of hierarchies segregating the good from the bad, straight from gay, marital from promiscuous,

private from public and non-pornographic from pornographic (Warner 2000: 24–5; also Kulick 2005). The word public (from the Latin *publicus*) refers to that which is considered as the common good, what can be seen, what is on view. Hence it also refers to the cultural understanding of what *should* be seen. Public displays of sexuality, including non-normative intimacies, entail the possibility of reorganizing the boundaries of respectability and normalcy. Making sex public, pornography confronts tendencies to silence or demonize sexualities – and queer sexualities in particular. Seyla Benhabib (1998: 86) argues that morality and religion, commerce and intimacy have traditionally shaped the realm of the private: hence the various modes of pornification stir the lines of the public and the private. As the traditionally intimate has become more visible and public both indoors and outdoors (through confessional media discourses; celebrities flashing their nipples; private people disclosing their lives and bodies in online journals and on Web cams), the meanings of intimacy are obviously under redefinition.

Due to the growing visibility and indeed the ‘presentability’ of commercial heteroporn, the lines of good sex may have become redrawn. Porn is catered to couples as a means to spice up their sex life, used as reference for various heterosexual techniques as well as source material in sex ed programming (Arthurs 2004: 45–6; Nikunen in this volume). In these instances, porn becomes incorporated in the realm of good sex. All this leads to the necessity of defining the pornography discussed – whether this be straight, gay, bi or trans, locally produced or imported, soft-core, educational or one involving variations of gender-fuck. As a general point of reference, ‘pornography’ tends to suffer from the assumption of homogeneity and it is the mainstream, the heterosexist and largely the American that become its defining factors. Different pornographies, however, contest each other’s aesthetics and understandings of things sexual. Commitment to figuring the inner diversity of pornography means that critiques of porn can be specific rather than categorical.

Diagnoses of Pornification

The ubiquity of the pornographic has inspired polemical diagnoses of contemporary North American culture. In her *Female Chauvinist Pigs* (2005), Ariel Levy analyses the spread and implications of porno chic and ‘raunch culture’ in the lives of women. From *Girls Gone Wild* videos to pole-dancing as a recreational hobby, Levy argues that commercial sex has gained such a normative status that women no longer distance themselves from it but rather apply its aesthetics in their everyday lives in order to present themselves as strong, sexual and independent. The rise of raunch culture, as recounted by Levy, is one with new kinds of disciplinary effects that may in fact make it more difficult for women to define their views on the sexual. In another widely read non-fiction title, Pamela Paul (2005)

identifies contemporary American culture as pornified. Focusing on the impact – in her terms, the damage – caused by the increased accessibility and acceptability of pornography on American men, women, children and families, Paul maps pornification in terms of compulsion and alienation while ultimately failing to account for the diverse aesthetics and practices involved (see also Paasonen in this volume).

The last few years have seen the publication of two books with titles similar to this one, namely Paul's *Pornified* and *Pornification* (2006) by Andrew Benjamin. Both books are targeted at a wide audience, the first one in the category of social sciences/relationships and the second in that of humour. Considered together, they make evident some dominant traits in public debates on pornography: while some discuss pornography as a social problem, others de-politicize it as hip and fun. There is little in terms of middle ground.

Benjamin's *Pornification* is a pocket-sized book including listings of 'pornified' film and TV series titles – *The Great Dictator* is transformed into *The Great Dick Taster* and *Freddy Vs. Jason* into *Freddy Does Jason*. In this context, pornification signifies a verbal skill and practice already well established in the porn industry. It is also a social skill, and the book proposes different kinds of games to play with the pornification of familiar film titles. In obvious opposition to Paul's book, pornification is defined as fun and camp and this feel is complemented by the extensive use of pin-up cut-outs, breasts and buttocks in the book layout. According to Rick Poynor (2006: 133–4), visual references to porn on the level of design tend to be explained through the notion of satire or irony. However, if the object of irony remains obscure, satire amounts to little else than a means of framing pin-up imageries as fun and cool. The framework of irony, camp and cult works to mark porn as a question of taste, style and sensibility: as suggested above in a discussion on Ron Jeremy's star image, porn becomes something to be watched and discussed with an attitude. Porn is seen as auto-deconstructive, always reflecting its own artificiality and excess. Those taking porn seriously, then, are the ones who 'don't get it' and fail to understand its carnivalesque dimensions. Camp sensibility seems to go well with pornography since camp serves to create distinctions and celebrate the inappropriate and the low while being aware of the cultural hierarchies at play. The loving and conscious laughter of camp also functions as a means of dismantling possible critique (see Epley; Railton and Watson in this volume).

This volume neither celebrates nor laments the changing status of pornography. In contrast to the publications of a similar title, *Pornification* argues against any simplified generalizations concerning pornography and its status in the contemporary mediascape while insisting on the necessity contextualization. While discussions on pornification are carried out across national borders, they involve different tones and political investments. Debates on porn in Finland, for example, become understandable in relation to Nordic histories of the production and distribution of porn, generally permissive public opinion on commercial sex, the

semi-celebrity status of domestic porn stars, subdued conservative Christian perspectives in the media, as well as a history of equality feminism in which the 'sex wars' never took fire (Paasonen 2007a; Nikunen and Paasonen 2007; Kulick 2005 on the Swedish context). In India, again, where media censorship and sexual representation are topics of intense debate, state regulation connects to a variety of issues from Hindu nationalist politics to the history of colonialism and resistance towards Western cultural dominance (Bose 2006; Ghosh 2005; Bose 2005). In these debates, 'The word "pornography" has rarely been used to denote the *genre* of pornography, that is, sexually explicit material produced specifically for sexual arousal. It has been used to describe material that *connotes* sex, like film songs, advertisements, cover girls, rape sequences, consensual sex and even beauty pageants.' (Ghosh 2006: 273) Meanwhile, the 'porn laws' recently debated in Indonesia have less to do with pornography and more with the regulation of individual – particularly female – clothing and demeanour, such as public displays of affection (Lim 2006).

As anecdotal as these examples are, they do make evident that what pornography means and what is understood as pornification internationally is not reducible to some 'general' framework. Debates on pornography – academic and not – have nevertheless been dominated by North American conceptions and political divisions in ways that help to render such differences invisible. Although certain global trends are recognizable, questions of regulation, policy and public opinion should not be generalized.

From Antiporn to Porn Studies

In the United States, debates on pornography have been both polarized and polemical for the past three decades. Discussants seem forced to choose sides either for or against pornography, which is telling of the continuing influence of the 'sex wars' of the 1970s and 1980s. Antipornography feminists from Gloria Steinem (1983), Susan Griffin (1981) and Robin Morgan (1980) to Andrea Dworkin (1989) and Catharine MacKinnon (Dworkin and MacKinnon 1988) defined pornography as degradation of and violence against women. Postulating a causal link between porn and violence – in accordance with the famous slogan coined by Morgan, 'porn is the theory, rape is the practice' – antiporn activists protested against commercial sex and aimed at banning it. While the stances of individual antiporn feminists towards censorship and sexuality varied, they shared the view of porn as an industry oppressing women and reproducing male hegemony. Porn was seen as made by men for men and representative of violent masculine sexuality. Assuming porn to be enjoyed by straight men, antiporn perspectives did not engage with female and non-heterosexual fascinations as other than expressions of pornography's general objectifying ideological function.

The theoretical and political shortcomings of antipornography feminism have since been addressed at length. Critics have pointed out that antiporn feminism relied on ephemeral definitions of the pornographic, the oppressive and the obscene while simplifying questions of representation, desire and fantasy (Rubin 1995; Duggan and Hunter 1995; Warner 2000). The problems of censorship have become evident especially in cases where regulative actions have been taken against lesbian and gay porn – tellingly, also antiporn materials have been censored (Kipnis 1996: 189). Drawing on radical feminist gynocentric tradition, antiporn feminism postulated a fundamental, binary gender division in which porn was equated with male sexuality, and patriarchal oppression was located in the realm of the embodied, the personal and the sexual. Antiporn feminism relied on ideological readings of porn and sexuality as operations of power and female oppression. While ultimately simplifying – and disempowering in terms of encounters with different kinds of pornographies – antiporn feminism, as presented in the writings of the late Andrea Dworkin, aimed at denaturalizing porn and questioning its gendered power dynamics.

Countering antiporn feminism, anti-antiporn writings of the 1990s laid emphasis on sexual differences, radical sex and the dangers of censorship as acts of normative normalization. Anti-antiporn authors conceptualized gender and sexuality as social and cultural constructions while opposing the reduction of sexuality and desire into binary models (e.g. Califia 1994; Hunter and Duggan 1995; Rubin 1995; Kipnis 1996). In other words, anti-antiporn authors also made evident the normativity inherent in antiporn feminist writings. The essential aim of anti-antiporn feminism was to support sexual freedom and diversity, especially to defend queer representation. As the titles anti- and anti-antiporn already imply, these debates have been founded on the principle of writing against. Both camps have tended to regard the other as monolithic while short-circuiting some of the more difficult questions: Antiporn feminism has steered clear of issues of porn as site of self-expression, diverse representations or subcultural productions. Anti-antiporn feminism, again, has emphasized the radical potential and imagery of pornography while omitting potential problems involved in its production or representational conventions.

The 1990s saw a wave of academic studies of porn, from Linda Williams's *Hard Core* (1989), a study of the genre of porn films, to anthologies such as *Sex Exposed* (Segal and McIntosh 1993) and *Dirty Looks* (Gibson and Gibson 1993). While distancing themselves from the binary logic of the porn debates to date, these studies built on anti-antipornography perspectives, aiming both to question the notions of gendered power relationships associated with porn and to theorize questions of desire, fantasy and sexuality. In the 1990s, pornography was introduced in academic curricula in cinema studies, women's studies and cultural studies, primarily in the USA and some European countries. In the following decade, 'porn studies' has been further established as an arena of interdisciplinary investigation in

anthologies (Williams 2004a; Gibson 2004; Lehman 2006), journal special issues (recently *M/C*, *The Velvet Light Trap*, *Texte zur Kunst*), conferences, as well as articles addressing ways of teaching porn in the university classroom (Driver 2004; Jenkins 2004; Reading 2005). This 'third phase' of porn debates – by no means a synthesis of the two previous – has focused on questions of genre, interpretation, heteronormativity, taste and style. Porn studies has examined subcultural and countercultural representations, highlighting the playful and queer dimensions of porn with case studies ranging from lesbian, gay and avant-garde porn to amateur productions (Williams 2004a). Such investigations successfully illuminate the heterogeneity of pornography and question any generalizations concerning the field – yet, in doing so, they risk downplaying the continuing popularity, visibility, tenacity and economic dominance of mainstream heteroporn. In their focus on the departure from the norm, they may support the view of mainstream porn as undeserving of serious analysis, or even as something disgusting, as suggested in anti-porn writings (cf. Cramer 2006).

Despite the growth in studies of porn, certain areas remain little researched: studies have been most focused on specific texts and their distribution while far less attention has been paid to the practices of their production and consumption. Porn production remains under-researched and, as Pamela Church-Gibson (2004) states, the question of global sex markets tends to be a source of uneasiness and ambivalence within porn studies. In a global perspective, pornography is difficult to tell apart from other fields of commercial sex: porn production is interlaced with sex clubs as well as the international movement of (female) workforce, neo-liberal labour politics and geopolitical transformations. Pornography concerns material practices, economic and embodied ones alike. In terms of usage, porn is inseparable from physical sensations and acts (be these auto-erotic or other). There are, however, as few empirical studies of the reception and use of porn as there are of its production. As pointed out by Alan McKee (2006), the perspectives of consumers have been virtually effaced from considerations of pornography in the academia, policy-making and journalism.

From Porn Histories to Porn Futures

This volume can be seen as part and parcel of the 'academization' of porn studies. Stepping away from (the largely North American) debates over censorship and freedom of speech, as well as ones concerning child protection, *Pornification* addresses the flux between the pornographic and the mainstream while stressing the contingency of porn as a genre and category.

The anthology opens with the section *Porn Histories* that offers historical perspectives on the twentieth-century mainstreaming of pornography while also considering texts that look back in time and cast nostalgic and ironic gazes towards

previous porn productions. Susanna Paasonen and Laura Saarenmaa address contemporary popular films reminiscing the 'golden age' of porn cinema of the 1970s, and the kinds of effacements that they accomplish. Framing the era as one of innocence and anti-censorship struggle, they depict the hardcore porn of the 1970s as avant-garde and radical while re-enacting its making with neat and well-shaved bodies – as inevitably mainstream and soft-core. Theatre releases in the 1970s opened the mainstream markets for hardcore porn but it was home video technology that truly facilitated the expansion of porn film audiences. In her chapter, Mireille Miller-Young investigates the development of interracial video as a specialized market category during this 'silver age' of pornography. Articulating the racial desires of their primarily white male producers, directors and writers, the films mythologized black women as sources of both fetishist fascination and disgust. As Miller-Young points out, the flipside of the democratic potential of hardcore porn is the repetition of cultural stereotypes sustaining social inequality, which, however, does not mean that their meanings would be fixed. Audiences produce their own interpretations and interventions and imageries and generic conventions are open to change as they travel from one text to another. This is also noted by Nathan Scott Epley in his chapter on the soft-core aesthetics and the contemporary resurgence of the pin-up. The idealized and sexualized classic pin-up iconography of the 1940s and 1950s has become increasingly popular and is consumed ironically as part of the retro culture of the 'hipsters', well-educated members of Generation X. As both Miller-Young and Epley illustrate, pornification does not only concern the politics of representation and circulation but also those of consumption.

The second section, *Porn Cultures*, addresses the shifting boundaries between porn, art, commercial media and practices of everyday life. Analysing the largest British gay male website Gaydar, Sharif Mowlabocus notes how categories familiar from porn are circulated as points of identification and self-definition to the degree that porn is written into the codes of gay men's everyday lives. Mowlabocus considers the position of mainstream gay porn in relation to mainstream heteroporn, illuminating both the role of pornography in gay male cultures as well as the normative functions of its ubiquitous presence. The question of porn as an element of everyday life, as well as a site of sexual learning and conflict, is also addressed by Kaarina Nikunen. Investigating the online discussion forum of the Finnish *Cosmopolitan* magazine, Nikunen shows how online sex talk makes use of pornography as reference material for sexual techniques, defining it as casual and fun but also as a disturbing presence in heterosexual relationships. Both Mowlabocus and Nikunen analyse pornification as the blurring of the boundaries of sex and porn. Reading the uses of pornography in photographic works by Thomas Ruff and Ann-Mie Van Kerckhoven, Kerstin May emphasizes the significance of context for separating the pornographic from the non-pornographic in the realm of the visual arts. Works referencing pornographic imageries can be seen as

capturing the ongoing cultural negotiations on what is considered highbrow or mainstream and that which is considered obscene, low or belonging elsewhere than the art gallery. In their chapter on the intertwining of amateur pornography and celebrity culture, Kevin Esch and Vicki Mayer address the reappraisal of porn aesthetics in mainstream media culture. Drawing on research conducted at the Adult Video News (AVN) expo, Esch and Mayer consider the history of amateur porn and its commodification, as well as its relationships to celebrity culture.

The third section of the book, *Porn Media*, considers both the position of porn in mainstream commercial media and hardcore porn as a media cultural field. Music videos, and hip-hop videos in particular, are often used as reference when describing the penetration of pornographic imageries – or at least ones connoting commercial sex – in popular culture. Reading two different versions of Khia's video *My neck, my back (Lick it)*, Diane Railton and Paul Watson consider pornification as concrete choices that redefine female, sexed authorship and the meaning of the song in question. Rather than generalizing on the basis of pornification, as implied in Khia's video, the authors claim that it is not the removal of clothes but rather the removal of agency that one should be concerned about when considering the politics of sexual representation. In her chapter on street advertising, Leena-Maija Rossi explores how porno chic is put in use in a Christmas campaign by H&M as gestures and postures ultimately promoting heteronormativity. Rossi discusses the possibilities of queer feminist engagement and intervention with pornified imageries, framing porno chic as an issue of standardization rather than democratization of sexuality.

The two other chapters in the section look at hardcore pornography as different kinds of 'education of desire'. Jenny Kangasvuo analyses depictions of bisexuality in porn magazines. While women labelled as bisexual support the familiar porn trope of insatiable female sexuality, bisexual men pose a challenge to normative heterosexuality: in porn, female desire must be fluid but male desire fixed. Hence potentially bisexual men are categorized as closeted homosexuals desperately trying to deny their desires. Porn magazines support the vernacular notion of bisexuality as hypersexuality whereas Michelle Carnes's reading of anal sex videos for women considers the possibilities of porn educating its viewers to think and act in novel ways. Simultaneously de-mystifying anal sex as something messy and painful, and re-mystifying it as an ultimate pleasure, the three video series discussed by Carnes encourage their female viewers to find the joys of anal sex while redefining the categories of sex education, women's porn and couples' videos.

In the concluding chapter, Susanna Paasonen addresses the Internet as a site of alternative pornographies as well as one of envisioned porn futures. Considering the porous categories of the mainstream and the alternative, old and new media, the conclusion argues against simplified readings of technological development or pornification as a media cultural trend.



Part I

Porn Histories



