

Epilogue: Porn Futures

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The proliferation of alternative, independent, queer, artistic and amateur pornographies on the Internet has given subcultural products and tastes unprecedented visibility. From the activists collecting funds for the preservation of tropical forests with the 'Fuck for Forest' project (Fig. 13.1) to the naturally hairy graces of 'Hippie Goddesses', the tattooed and pierced post-punk models of alt porn sites, hot grannies and image galleries on (virtually all kinds of) shoe fetishism, online pornography has captivated the attention of Internet users, journalists and researchers alike. Such sites do indeed support Michael Warner's (2000: 185) view of porn as possibly enabling 'unpredicted forms of experience', surprises and discoveries that work to broaden one's understanding of sexuality and desire beyond preconceived identities, labels and categories (also Chun 2006: 104–6; McLelland 2006; Mowlabocus in this volume).

Alt porn (also referred to as 'alternative', 'indie' and 'alt.porn'), a term coined as a means of differentiation from mainstream commercial porn, has become a well-recognized category for pornography featuring subcultural styles – most notably tattoos, piercings, punk and Goth coiffures on sites produced in the USA. Compared to so-called mainstream porn, alt porn models are mostly non- or semi-professionals (in the sense of coming from outside the industry) lacking in silicone implants and other standard porn star enhancements. The sites insist on the authenticity of their model biographies and interviews as well as the centrality of community building – in terms of music, lifestyle and attitude – for their principles of operation (Mies 2006). In addition to post-punk influenced styles, a variety of non-mainstream pornographies are distributed online from fat porn to BDSM. Independent porn producers (not necessarily but possibly producing alternative porn) are making use of the Web as a publishing platform and hence questioning the forms and limits of porn as an industry (Tola 2005). All in all, the increasing specialization of porn sites catering to particular sexual preferences, fetishes and niches is a trend recognizable even on the level of governmental reports (Thornburgh and Lin 2002: 82–3; also Lane 2001: 223–7). Independent, artistic and amateur productions have been invested with possibilities of redefining the conventions of sexually explicit representation outside the confines of mainstream



Figure 13.1 Porn as activism: Fuck for Forest. Image courtesy of FFF.

porn marketed in print and on video, and diversifying the available economies of desire. To the degree that new media in general is seen as indicative of things to come, future pornographies have been seen as diverse, alternative and distributed on the Internet (e.g. Jacobs 2004b; Patterson 2004; Villarejo 2004; Halavais 2005; Dery 2006).

In his studies of Usenet amateur alt.fetish groups, Sergio Messina (2005) has coined the term *realcore* to describe their displays of sexual acts and desires. Separating digital amateur photography (as featured and distributed on Usenet) from the familiar concepts of hardcore and soft-core, Messina argues for the realness of the performers, settings and events depicted. Distributed mostly for free, realcore is a gift economy for various highly specialized interest groups, published without the aim of financial gain (cf. Jacobs 2004b). Unlike websites identified as personal projects of individual amateur women but actually run by far less amateur companies, Usenet porn seems to offer more than a fantasy of amateur sexual self-

expression (Lane 2001: 209–12). Porn exchange economies have been equally active in peer-to-peer (P2P) networks, although these practices have also been heavily regulated. Katrien Jacobs identifies P2P practices in general as ones having the potential to challenge the normative codes of porn as well as the divisions separating porn performers from their audiences (Tola 2005). Furthermore, sexual experimentation and more or less playful interaction online – via chat, instant messaging, web cameras, etc. – similarly enable novel kinds of sexual experiences and relationships in which one is simultaneously performer and audience, and which stretch the notions of sex and sexual acts (Attwood 2006: 79–81). Doing this, they also stretch the notion of the pornographic. Porn may provide templates for expressing arousal, desire and pleasure in cybersexual exchanges, and the ensuing messages and chat logs can be identified as pornographic: in this sense they are exemplary of the blurred boundaries between porn and sexual self-expression. However, to the degree that porn is not only an aesthetic category but also one denoting a certain logic of capitalism and commodification, non-material exchanges seem to slip from its confines.

All in all, the categories of amateur and professional, alternative and mainstream, non-commercial and commercial are hardly self-explanatory when discussing online pornographies. Alternative pornographies have – from kink sites to subcultural pornographies – fed back to the imageries of commercial pornography that they seem to subvert. If independent porn productions appropriate poses and elements from mainstream porn while abandoning or disregarding others, this is also the case vice versa. The notion of the mainstream is porous and contingent. New categories and sub-genres are introduced and mainstreamed and they undergo transformations in the process. Transgender porn – known as ‘she-male’ or ‘chicks with dicks’ – is one example of a sub-genre shifting from the margins of porn towards its mainstream. Produced in South America (Brazil) and South East Asia (Thailand), she-male pornography used to be consumed by highly specialized niche audiences whereas in the 2000s it has become mainstreamed to the degree of being a key category (along with straight, gay and SM) in the online video service of the largest Finnish adult portal, Seksi.net. She-male porn, as featured on sites such as ‘Tranny Ranch’ or ‘Tranny Surprise’, remains a specialized genre and in this sense also an ‘alternative’ one. The degree of commodification at play, however, suggests it having a far less alternative position. The increased popularity of *hentai*, pornographic Japanese anime, is another example of such oscillation. Considered too extreme for video distribution in the 1990s, *hentai* – featuring BDSM and non-consensual sex involving alien/demon tentacle-penises – has become part of the diet of mainstream porn websites as a ‘taste, genre, or preference’ presented to wide audiences (Dahlquist and Vigilant 2004: 93). In sum, it seems that the body of ‘mainstream porn’ leaks towards niches and paraphilias, incorporates them and becomes transformed in the process – no matter how gradual or slow such transformations may be.

There is little doubt as to the Internet contributing to the politics of visibility of various sexual tastes, the diversification of porn imageries and understandings of the very concept of pornography. As Ginny Mies (2006) points out, alt porn sites are 'known for countering the porn industry's images, ethics, and business practices', yet the category of alternative has also become to signify the aesthetic rather than the economical or the ethical. As alt porn became business, 'SuicideGirls', one of the most successful alt porn sites launched in 2001, was repositioned as a point of reference that radical and queer porn sites use for marking themselves apart (Mies 2006; also Cramer 2006).

Porn in Media New and Old

Novel distribution possibilities have facilitated the creation of a conceptual chasm separating online porn from other kinds of pornographies, following the familiar divisions of new and old media. In such formulations, the digital format of pornographic images, texts and videos, as well as the distribution and interaction possibilities of information networks, mark a clear departure from older pornographies, their aesthetics and consumption practices. Anna Reading (2005: 125–6), for example, sees the increased accessibility of porn, along with the anonymity of its online use, as reconfiguring articulations of sexuality within and between private and public spaces. The success of online porn has increased the range of available pornographies while also enabling exchanges between performers and users (even to the degree that these are blurred, as suggested above). In addition to image galleries and videos, alt porn sites such as 'DeviantNation' or 'SuicideGirls' include journals and blogs by the models introducing users to their thoughts and ideas, rather than just sights of their bodies (Epley in this volume). Amateur erotica writers can publish their stories on sites with massive story archives and receive feedback from readers and other authors and, if they so desire, provide self-made illustrations for their texts. Before registering as a member of a pay site, users can familiarize themselves with free introductory materials, or search for content evaluations published by those who are already members.

The general division of new and old media has been specified with a conceptual division separating 'netporn' (or net.porn) from 'porn on the Net': netporn refers to pornographic specific to the Internet – including peer-to-peer porn, realcore and alt porn – and the latter to the recycling of pornographic images and texts from print media, video and film, on the Internet (Shah 2005).¹ Defined in this vein, netporn refers to media specificity, the ways in which online technologies restructure the pornographic impossible in other media. However, it also risks creating a hierarchy between netporn (as networked, interactive, novel, intellectually and aesthetically challenging) and porn on the Net (as representative of the logic of the same, commercial, predictable and dull) that renders the latter as a secondary

concern in studies of the Internet. Such a media-specific framework accommodates only certain examples of online porn, foreclosing many and leaving yet others in a liminal category of the in-between.

Importantly, the division of netporn and other kinds of porn disables analyses of pornography's fundamentally intermedial nature. Print magazines have been marketed with free bonus VHS tapes and DVDs since the 1980s; video and print publishing companies have branched out to online markets; online distribution has led to DVD production; the same companies are involved in the production of websites, mobile entertainment and digital television channels; the same images are recycled in print and electronic formats while old porn films make their comeback as collector DVD editions. Pornographic texts and products transgress the boundaries of individual media, and content is recycled from one platform to another.² In other words, a clear-cut division of 'old' and 'new', 'offline' and 'online' pornography is ultimately simplifying in terms of porn economy and representational conventions alike. In a media historical perspective, the question could be phrased as one of both continuity and change.

In Alan McKee's (2005: 277) empirical study on the use of pornography in Australia, over 63 per cent of respondents used DVDs to view pornography, in comparison to 42 per cent accessing porn online. Less than 6 per cent of McKee's respondents were members of pay sites that tend to feature 'non-mainstream' or high production value materials. The question of membership fees and quality in online porn is, however, more complex than this reference implies: niche pornographies are widely published for free on both Usenet and the Web while much visited free sites may also be representative of anti-normative, premium content (McLelland 2006). Nevertheless, McKee points out two important things: that the Internet is not automatically the most popular of contemporary distribution forms, and that addressing and defining online porn through the more artistic and experimental examples may lead to myopia towards the continuing dominance of mainstream, commercial heteroporn. As conceptually and aesthetically interesting as alt pornographies are, they should not be conceptualized as the norm when considering online or future pornography. A visit to the site 'PornFuture.com' would suggest that the porn of tomorrow looks fairly much like that of yesterday: with blonde feminine female performers, promises of hardcore videos, amateurs, teens, blow-jobs, 'pussy shots', XXX action and the requirement of a membership fee.

Internet: The Empire of Smut?

Media technologies function as a horizon of possibilities that condition available forms of expression, interaction and circulation. Yet pornography is also extremely slow to change in terms of its generic conventions that travel from one medium to

another. Porn futures are not altogether novel but echo past decades, familiar poses, styles and looks. The Internet has been heralded as a realm of possibilities in terms of small-scale productions that can gain as much attention and popularity as ones backed up by heavy corporate machinery (Lane 2001: 140–3). While the publication of numerous ‘how-to’ books on adult site publishing and quick financial gain might suggest otherwise, the position of small companies and independent producers is not necessarily easy. Well-established adult entertainment companies have bought alt porn sites and small companies continue to struggle with their distribution and finance. My conversation with a Finnish adult site producer points to a centralization, rather than diversification, of the porn industry in terms of companies in operation (see also Thornburgh and Lin 2002: 79).³ Within the European Union, legislative differences between the different countries have obvious benefits for porn distribution as contents unacceptable in one country can be uploaded to a server located in another one. International networking and centralization of ownership has increased with both digitization and the expansion of the EU. Venture capital pays an active role in the porn economy and large international companies own shares of smaller ones. European porn distribution is both internationally networked and somewhat centralized – and the dominance of large companies is equally evident in the United States (Esch and Mayer in this volume).

There has been convergence for decades in the production and distribution of print and video porn. Portals, mobile services, image galleries, chat services and DVDs merely represent newer stages of the development. Nevertheless, it is the Internet (even more so than video) that has been associated with pornography in both public debates and journalism. Porn has been seen as integral to the development of the Internet as a commercial medium and even as its driving force (O’Toole 1998: 285). The Internet has been envisioned as saturated with smut and populated by porn addicts at least since the notorious 1995 *Times* article that liberally categorized 83.5 per cent of all photographs online as pornographic (see Chun 2006: 77–80). The availability – real or imagined – of pornographic content has given rise to various moral panics, most of which concern children’s access to porn and possibilities of paedophile networking. Filtering software and age verification systems have developed in synch with local regulation practices in Europe, North America, Asia and Australia (White 2006: 20–2) and efforts such as the Bush administration’s ‘war against pornography’ in the United States. Filtering software makes little differentiation between hardcore porn, sex education and information resources for sexual minorities (equally filtering all) while Internet regulation in countries such as China, Singapore or Iran concerns political discussions as much as displays of sexuality.

The vocal, insistent linking of porn and the Internet has also worked to feed user interest towards online pornographies: if the Web is assumed to be awash with pornography, it makes sense to make use of it for accessing porn. Pornography takes up a considerable amount of bandwidth in web traffic due to the use of

images and video (Thornburgh and Lin 2002: 72–3; Perdue 2002: 33–5). Nevertheless, the volume of so-called adult material in terms of active websites as a whole has been decreasing since the mid-1990s – in spite of impressions created by public exclamations and ungrounded arguments on the mass of pornographic material on the Internet. While new porn sites are launched with vigour, existing ones are closed down and bought up. Web searches for sex and pornography have, according to a recent study by Amanda Spinks, Helen Partridge and Bernard J. Hansen (2006), decreased from 16.8 per cent of all searches in 1997 to 3.8 per cent in 2005. Out of the approximately 100 million sites currently available, an estimated 1.5 to 5 per cent are pornographic – although some sources, including ones associated with filtering software and conservative Christian groups in the US, offer numbers as high as 12 per cent or 260 million pages. Since such inflated figures are enthusiastically circulated and presented as statistical facts, they are also referenced as objective findings in overviews on online pornography.⁴ Internet porn is financially profitable and plentiful, yet hardly as ubiquitous as public discourses and moral panics would suggest.

As the lack of reliable statistical information on the uses of porn, the amount of pornographic sites or the total volume of the porn industry on a global scale makes evident, discussions on pornography and its role in media culture continue to be marked by assumptions, ideological and political interests rather than empirical knowledge. Pornography has been politicized for the past three decades in various ways by religious groups (be these Christian, Muslim or other), queer, anti- and anti-antipornography feminist activists, freedom of speech lobbyists, moral conservatives and various parties speaking in the name of children: for some, porn represents a moral dilemma and a symbol of unacceptability while others identify porn with individual and collective self-expression and radical transformative potential. In both instances, porn comes to stand for certain values and is tied to certain political aims and goals. Search engines routinely exclude pornography from their published listings of the most popular search terms while scholarly overviews on media economy or media history pay equally little attention to porn. This aversion towards porn owes perhaps to the history of its politicization – the implication being that this is a topic best avoided. Consequently, online pornography seems to be simultaneously everywhere and nowhere to be seen, ubiquitous and a public secret.

Forms and volumes of available pornography have increased with the Internet while soft-core aesthetics are enthusiastically recycled in the imageries of popular culture across a wide range of media. The diversity of specialized images, videos and texts categorizable as pornographic calls for analytical reconsiderations of the category in question – as in the case of ‘balloon people’ (enjoying confinement in large rubber/plastic balloons), velvet or sneaker enthusiasts addressed by Messina. It is increasingly difficult and problematic to pin down the meanings of ‘pornography’ as a point of reference, be this in terms of aesthetics or gender politics.

Meanwhile, porn debates remain dangerously simplified in their accounts of the meanings of pornography.

Problems with Generalization

Diagnostic texts on the role of pornography in contemporary culture, such as Pamela Paul's *Pornified* (2005), hint at ever-pornified futures in which hardcore porn is increasingly accessible and porno chic a naturalized component of popular media culture. As important as such diagnoses are in stirring public debate on contemporary culture and politics, they tend to be marked by a level of simplification that renders them ineffective in tackling the nuances involved. Paul references a 'major study' according to which 'with each iteration in technological advancement, pornography has become increasingly violent and nonconsensual' (2005: 58). This reference would seem to imply that, according to authoritative research, technological development feeds violent pornography and that the more advanced the technology, the more violent and non-consensual the pornography is bound to be. Doing so, it frames developments in both technology and pornography in definitive and deterministic terms.

The study in question is Martin Barron and Michael Kimmel's 2000 article comparing violent pornography in porn magazines, videos and Usenet (with fifty examples from all three platforms). According to Paul, Barron and Kimmel concluded that 'as new pornographies technologies emerged, pornography would become increasingly violent' (2005: 59). The authors, however, rebuke such explanation as partial while arguing for more contextual and content-based analyses (Barron and Kimmel 2000: 165–6). Barron and Kimmel did indeed find out that violent and non-consensual content had increased from print to Usenet (the increase between magazines and videos not being considerable). Magazines and videos depicted women more often than men as the victimizers and violence as consensual, while the case was the contrary in Usenet stories. Barron and Kimmel (2000: 166–7) explain the rise in violent content with the specific features of Usenet as a non-commercial homosocial forum where competition over the raunchiest of stories results in the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity. In this context, the non-consensual nature of the stories is a product of specific social practices and technical platforms. Usenet is historically and economically a different kind of publishing forum than the Web. Hence analysis of one Usenet group says little of online pornography as a whole.

Such considerations are effaced in Paul's reading through intentionally partial referencing. *Pornified* isolates violent oral sex and bukkake (a Japanese genre in which men ejaculate on a person, usually female, *en masse*, often in scenarios depicted as non-consensual and humiliating) as forms of online porn consumed by her (straight male) informant – and as examples of online porn in general. Scenes

of women drinking semen ejaculated into their anuses by groups of men, as well as simulations of ‘vivid rape and murder scenes of women’ are again argued not to differ ‘substantially’ from more mainstream porn on the Web (Paul 2005: 61, 239–40). Porn sites may be rife with the terminology of ‘cum-drinking sluts’ used to spice up standard videos and images (Kangasvuo in this volume) but this hardly makes extreme scenarios the norm. Paul detaches her perspective from antiporn stances yet seems to draw on their legacy in choosing random, de-contextualized and extreme examples of violent pornography as representative of porn, as has been done by antiporn authors since the 1970s (Paasonen 2007b: 48–9). Such logic invests virtually any isolated example of pornographic material with metonymic abilities that again enable knowledge over pornography as an assumedly singular entity. The creation of this kind of knowledge seems difficult to resist.

As this example illustrates, the polarized legacy of the sex wars continues to obstruct analysis of the forms and meanings of pornography while the lack of reliable data helps to render the discussion into one based on assumptions and pre-conceived attitudes. Also, ‘Ongoing debates about pornography and its place in society tend to hear mostly from those commentators whose expertise is based on not being familiar with the genre’ (McKee 2006: 534). All this contributes to an inability to grasp transformations in displays of sex and sexuality, or their meanings in terms of contemporary culture. The US-centrism of porn debates creates a problem of its own: not only have the lines of battle for and against pornography been largely drawn and contemporary analyses of pornification written in the United States, but studies and theorizations of porn carried out elsewhere also tend to be read in their terms. Independent of the local debates and histories through which authors enter porn discussions, their contributions are easily rendered into ones of either for or against, and understood in relation to the political investments of North American debates. What is needed is both a step away from the polarized logic of debate and increased attention towards differences in local contexts, debates and regulatory practices – and, consequently, the variety of issues that have become discussed under such umbrella terms as pornography and pornification.

Future Pornographies, Porn Futures

The title of this concluding chapter can be interpreted in various ways, as pointing to the future of pornography, future forms of porn or futures marked by porn (in the sense of ‘pornified tomorrows’). Independent of which approach or meaning one chooses, porn futures need to be thought of as plural. Pornography should not be approached as a singular entity, nor should pornification be seen as a definite process with obvious symptoms and outcomes. It is easy to agree with Rick Poyner’s (2006: 136) diagnosis that future displays of sexuality are likely to draw on pornography as a kind of cultural reservoir for sexual imageries (to the degree

170 • *Susanna Paasonen*

that they have become *the* reservoir to draw on) and that such displays are not likely to decrease. The likeliness of continuous proliferation of not only pornographic imageries but also ones blurring the boundaries of porn and mainstream media does not, however, mean that the process will result in an avoidable logic of the same involving only the most generic and heterosexist of texts.

As the individual contributions in this book point out, we need to remain dedicated to contextualization, sensitive to histories, aesthetics, discourses, contexts of production, distribution and consumption when conceptualizing a text or a phenomenon in terms of pornification. This does not translate as relativism but as situated knowledge, answerability of the claims one makes over contemporary culture as well as awareness of their inevitable partiality (cf. Haraway 1991: 188–90). The concept of pornification does not explain anything as such. It should be understood as an analytical tool for figuring out transformations in the cultural status and visibility of different pornographies and aesthetics in a social and historical context, not for conflating the increased accessibility of hardcore pornography and the ubiquity of various kinds of soft-core aesthetics into a single, undifferentiated master narrative. Such a narrative will be effective in blocking views of alternative futures – pornographic and other – that one might actually want to advance.