



PROJECT MUSE®

---

Porn Star as Brand: Pornification and the Intermedia Career of Rakel Liekki

Kaarina Nikunen, Susanna Paasonen

The Velvet Light Trap, Number 59, Spring 2007, pp. 30-41 (Article)

Published by University of Texas Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/vlt.2007.0005>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/212711>

## Porn Star as Brand:

### Pornification and the Intermedia Career of Rakel Liekki

**R**akel Liekki (“Rachel Flame”) is probably the best-known Finnish female porn performer. Her career has ranged from painting to hard-core videos, Web presence, mobile phone services, newspaper and magazine articles, and television shows. She is a performer, host, producer, and writer who has both appeared in various adult productions and realized her own visions of pornography. As a vocal public discussant on pornography and commercial sex, Liekki has exceptionally flexible media agency.

Liekki’s career is representative of the blurred boundaries between pornography and mainstream culture. No longer confined to the realm of shabby sex shops, pornography slides from one representational space to another and shifts increasingly toward mainstream popular culture. Porn’s general visibility has increased in a process termed *pornographication* (Driver) or, for simpler spelling, *pornification*: the expansion and success of the porn industry and play with hard-core representations in fashion, advertising, and other fields of popular culture. In what follows we explore pornification as a reorganization of pornography’s cultural position through analysis of Rakel Liekki’s career. With pornification we do not refer to “pornication” or envision a contemporary culture of fornication in the throes of moralistic nostalgia toward some bygone days of chastity. Rather, we aim to figure transformations in the cultural position and status of porn that require a rethinking of its very concept (Nikunen, Paasonen, and Saarenmaa, *Pornification*).

Doing research on contemporary pornography necessitates stepping away from film as the dominant medium and considering the “cross-platform” nature of pornography. Intermediality—“intertextuality transgressing media boundaries” (Lehtonen 71)—and multimodality characterize contemporary media at large, and pornography is

no exception. Liekki’s star image (Dyer 60) is intermedial by definition, yet some of her media appearances (television shows, interviews, and one adult film in particular) have been more pivotal in its construction than others. Focusing on Liekki’s key media appearances (the television shows *Porn Star* and *Night with Rakel*, the DVD film *Mun leffa*, newspaper and magazine articles, as well as Liekki’s Web presence), we argue that pornification is not merely a question of proliferating pornographic representations. Rather, Liekki’s star image demonstrates the ways in which the intermedial ties of pornography both blur the boundaries of the genre and add to the general availability and visibility of pornography. In our reading of Liekki’s star image the operations and implications of pornification are twofold. First, pornification provides spaces for media performances subverting the generic conventions of porn and facilitates novel representational spaces, ideas, and agencies. Second, and perhaps paradoxically, pornification also implies reiteration and recycling of representation conventions that are telling of the generic rigidity of porn. In this sense pornification has implications for pornography different from those for mainstream media.

#### Porn Edutainment

Liekki (born in 1979) started her career in pornography at the age of eighteen on a phone sex line. According to Liekki’s Web site, her route to porn films was nevertheless paved by her education and practice in the visual arts: she began performing in porn videos in order to understand the world she was painting. Since graduating from a polytechnic art school in 2001 Liekki has held a few exhibitions, mostly addressing erotic themes. Although films were initially a side product of painting, Liekki eventually made eleven of them. Currently work-

ing as a television host and freelance writer, Liekki retired from porn films at the age of twenty-five. An ironically self-titled “porn-pensioner,” she remains in the business as a producer, presenter, and host of events and exhibitions. She has an online video and image gallery and various mobile phone services.

Liekki’s versatile productions aside, her celebrity status is primarily the product of mainstream media appearances. Interviews with Liekki were published shortly after the premiere of the late-night television show *Pornostara* (*Porn Star*) on the cable channel MoonTV in 2002. The interviews depicted an intelligent, ambitious, and cheerful porn star, something of an exception in the Finnish publicity to date. With her straightforward, uncomplicated, and even naturalizing views on pornography, Liekki soon became a spokeswoman for Finnish pornography and female porn professionals in particular. Wearing her red hair in braids, Liekki constructed her star image as youthful, simultaneously trendy and vaguely schoolgirlish. Her ability to flirt with media soon paid off, and she became a celebrity in 2002 at the age of twenty-three. Liekki’s fame is clearly due to appearances in mainstream media such as talk shows, newspaper interviews, and current affairs programs. All these appearances referred to Liekki’s performance in *Porn Star*, which has in this sense become a “primary text” for her star image.

Liekki hosted two regular segments of *Porn Star*: in *Välinetesti* (*Tool Test*) she tested sex toys such as dildos, and in *Rakelin ja Lassin Panokoulu* (*Rakel and Lassi’s Shag School*) she guided heterosexual couples in sex techniques together with a male partner, Lassi Lindqvist. *Shag School* had a key role in defining Liekki’s public image, which has since been developed in television, print media, Web, DVD, and live performances. Her star image is carefully constructed but also explicitly artificial: the artist name Rakel Liekki is a constructed character, a media persona, and a self-named brand. Liekki refuses to discuss her private life in the media and promotes herself with brand-name logos available on her Web site.

As a low-cost cable channel MoonTV had approximately 440,000 viewers in the main urban areas, and it addressed a primarily young, urban male audience with its diet of gaming and music shows. Yet *Porn Star* was part of a broader mainstreaming of pornography on Finnish television. In the early 2000s another cable channel, SubTV, targeting young viewers with retro and cult TV shows, sitcoms, science fiction, and fantasy, aired a reality show called *Räsyypokka*



Figures 1, 2, and 3. Rakel Liekki interviewed on the national television show *Persona Non Grata* in October 2003 (YLE TV2). Liekki comments on her role as a sex educator and a porn star in *Shag School* (figure 1), her artwork (figure 2), and her appearance on the national Saturday night talk show *Utisvuoto* (figure 3).

(*Strip Poker*), magazine programs with erotic content, and humorous German porn films from the 1970s. Helsinki-based ATV also aired hard-core films at night for no cost and featured nude newscasts in 2001, with Liekki as one of the newsreaders (Korppi 318). Due to columns and TV critiques addressing this programming, *Porn Star* in particular gained fame outside the circle of porn aficionados. The cable company HTV eventually censored the sexual content and ended its contract with both MoonTV and ATV. Instead, it gave airtime to a Christian channel. It is noteworthy in terms of the Finnish context that this was due less to public outcry than to the relative popularity and visibility of *Porn Star* (as well as ATV's programming). HTV saw these as soiling its public image as well as drawing customers away from its pay-per-view services such as TV1000 and Canal+ that feature adult content. According to an ATV producer, the motives for censorship were financial rather than moral (Hänninen 13–14).

*Porn Star* consisted of film and video reviews and reports on current events such as adult entertainment expos and S-M parties. The show celebrated new releases with introductions by the host, Sami Hernesaho, whose smiling Boy Scout charm and flurries of excitement made him a popular television performer. Making no effort to hide his enthusiasm or occasionally flushed cheeks, Hernesaho promoted as much as evaluated the latest releases. All in all, *Porn Star* framed porn as recreational fun, detached it from notions of secrecy and shame, and brought sexual acts into the open and under the bright lights of TV cameras. The show packaged porn to its young urban audience in a format reminiscent of lifestyle programming.

*Shag School* followed the overall popular educational tone of the show and enlightened its viewers in a seemingly thorough and matter-of-fact manner. In each episode Liekki and Lindqvist presented and taught a sexual technique such as fellatio. The “school” was set in a bedroom-style milieu, with Liekki and Lindqvist posing on a yellow bedcover with a floral pattern. A bookshelf, houseplant, and fluffy toys implied a domestic environment of everyday sex. There were no dimmed lights, red curtains, or black lacy underwear. Instead, the lighting was bland and the sexual performances were perky, even sporty, and accompanied by clarifying narration. The teachers addressed their audience looking straight at the camera while explaining their moves and describing the acts. The direct look disturbed the play of voyeuristic pleasures that often lie at the core of mainstream pornography while still featuring the thrills

of “meat shots” central to hard-core (Williams, *Hard Core* 93–94). *Shag School* broke the conventions of mainstream porn by denying the necessity of money shots. In its shift away from climax toward pleasure as process *Shag School* bent the structural dictates of hard-core representation.

As Jane Arthurs points out, educational purposes have been one means of legitimizing representations of sex on television and detaching them from pornography (40). Soft-core pornography—the only kind of porn generally acceptable on national television—is aired late and has low status as programming. Contrasted with this, lifestyle guidance programs that both entertain and educate their viewers in performances of gender and sexuality (including programs investigating different lifestyles, such as HBO's *Real Sex* and Channel Four's *Sex Inspectors* as well as fictions like the *Queer as Folk* series) enjoy higher prestige (Arthurs 45). Aired late, *Shag School* can be seen as a comment on or appropriation of these hierarchies of taste and program formats. As a parodic representation it both legitimizes and subverts, both reiterates and transforms that which it parodies (Hutcheon, *Politics* 93; Hutcheon, *Theory* 38). Taking on educational discourse and mixing it with hard-core acts, *Shag School* created a playful mixture of cultural hierarchies with an apparent camp sensibility (Sontag 278). Its vigorous sexual performances directed ironic laughter equally toward educational discourses, the props and conventions of porn, and the romantic aesthetics of “feminine” erotica targeted at heterosexual couples (cf. Kipnis 140). The result was something different and quite striking.

*Shag School* parodied normative educational discourses that label pornography as shameful, disgusting, and other to “regular,” “healthy,” or “normal” sexual practices (Kipnis 164, 174; Warner). Sex education is one of the discourses regulating the normative criteria of “good sex,” namely, socially acceptable forms of sexual expression and practice that tend to be drawn apart from pornography and other commodified forms of sex. Discussing Swedish discourses of sexuality, Don Kulick defines the dominant understanding of good sex as “socially approved, mutually satisfying sexual relations between two (and only two) consenting adults or young adults who are more or less sociological equals. It must not involve money or overt domination, even as role-playing. It should occur only in the context of an established social relationship” (208). Conjoining “naughty” porn with “decent” domestic privacy, *Shag School* worked to deconstruct porn as Douglasian dirt and to redefine it as a feature of familial life.<sup>1</sup>

In their discussion of national heterosexuality in the United States, Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner identify intimacy as its ideological support. Intimacy relies on the assumption of sex as something private, while pornography stands for public mediation and representation of sexuality that confronts tendencies to silence or demonize sexualities—and queer sexualities in particular (Berlant and Warner 313–14). *Shag School* seemed to follow the dictates of intimacy and privacy in its domestic settings and regular performers yet obviously broke against them in turning sex into public acts and the bedroom into a TV stage. Advising couples in positions and acts, the show represented heterosex as a matter of skill, learning, and education rather than some natural attraction or inborn instinct (Warner 177–79). This sex was public and—given Liekki and Lindqvist’s casual, athletic performances and matter-of-fact narrations—hardly emotionally intimate. *Shag School* bent the boundaries of the public and the private and brought acts associated with the realm of intimacy into the public eye. The show exhibited a variation of “good sex,” of merrily copulating heterobodies in the confines of the bedroom, and connected it to conventions and norms familiar from mainstream porn. Hard-core porn was meshed with education, and the boundaries between “good sex” and pornographic representation were blurred.

Making sex public redefines the dictates of intimacy, but it does not democratize sexuality—although this has also been argued (McNair). Presented in an educational framework, *Shag School*’s public representations of sex also worked to regulate and define sexuality by emphasizing some elements and acts over others and constructed specific gender relations in the process. As pornographic edutainment, *Shag School* provided guides and aphrodisiac for heterosexual couples, and it also drew a horizon of possibility concerning what is or is not included in a sex act. *Shag School* did rework ties between porn, secrecy and shame, public sex and sex education, but it also reiterated the normative position of heterosex.

Liekki has stated that one of the main purposes of *Shag School* was to help women find pleasure in sex. In other words, she has framed the show as sexual-pornographic education for women (Räty; Parhi). Hardly limited to schools or other educational institutions, discourses of sexual education operate in various arenas of popular culture, pornography included (Driver). The eagerness to educate women has been an essential element in sexual discourses from the eighteenth-century narratives of ro-

mance to contemporary stories of justified sexual pleasure (Nead; Oullette). Such discursive shifts are also illustrative of transformations in the cultural visibility of female sexuality and in ways of organizing it (Tincknell et al.; Duits and van Zoonen). Educators are no longer men of the church or medicine but women appearing in the media and making careers in the sex industry. The emphasis has shifted from restraining and regulating female pleasures toward gaining (deeper) satisfaction, yet normativity has hardly disappeared as such. Women’s magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* guarantee sexual satisfaction that seems to be synonymous with the capability of satisfying a male partner. Female sexual competence often seems to equal skillful performance of sexual techniques for the purpose of male pleasure.

Gaining better knowledge over sex techniques was an explicit theme of *Shag School*. According to Liekki, the show was successful, and she received letters from women expressing their gratitude for helping them improve their sex lives and relationships. Liekki herself stresses the importance of women being confident in their own sexuality. Her proclaimed expertise nevertheless supports the governing assumption that “ordinary” women’s sexuality is either underdeveloped or lost in comparison to their more seasoned sisters.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, as edutainment of a kind, *Shag School* also seemed to imply that it is not so much competence in *sex* as in *porn* that women need to attain.

### Porn Celebrity and My Film

Soon after the premiere of *Shag School* Liekki began to appear in various magazines and newspapers and on TV shows. Her public appearances produced discourses of similarity (Jones) that heightened certain aspects of her brand name, such as her view of pornography as a tool of female emancipation. Although Liekki’s public figure may be exceptional, the discourse emphasizing the delights of pornography is not isolated or sporadic (cf. Foucault 97). Presented in the context of expansion of the porn industry, it participates in the mainstreaming of pornography. The “delights of porn” approach also tends to simplify questions of power, sexuality, and gender related to the production and consumption of pornography. These questions are crucial when exploring the mainstreaming of pornography, especially since female performers and consumers tend to play a key role in this process. Women doing and consuming porn argue for their right to sexual fantasy and pleasure and, in doing so, promote porn as beneficial to women (McElroy).

In this sense, pornification runs along the discourses of postfeminism that produce “a new feminism geared toward female sexual activity” (Negra; also Projansky; Duits and van Zoonen) and identifies “old feminism” as antisexual and archaic (Negra). Sexual activity alone seems sufficient to mark representations as progressive, even if they represent gender in predictable and heteronormative ways. Representations of active female sexuality may actually be ones of conventional feminine looks, youthful body styles, and celebrations of heterosexual competence. Such a version of postfeminism offers sexual agency and sexual freedom for women but does not grant the possibility to define its terms. It is not surprising, then, that in the mainstream media active female sexuality easily translates as sexual availability (cf. Tincknell et al.).

Liekki’s public figure connects to postfeminist celebrations of female sexual agency. For Liekki, porn stands for the sexual freedom to which women are entitled, and she writes of making porn on her own terms. Conflating porn with sexual fantasies and sex in general on her Web site, Liekki manages to efface the generic specificity of porn: “Also women have the right to fantasies, role play, and fetishes. I think porn is fun, and one should be able to discuss sex openly: female pleasure and masturbation should not be taboo. I want to represent women as agents comfortable with their own sexuality and capable of expressing it in different ways. *My principle*: I don’t do anything for a living that I wouldn’t do happily for free in my own spare time” (emphasis in the original).

As a freelance writer Liekki has also explored questions of porn and female agency in journalistic forums. In a 2004 interview with Eva Biaudet, member of the Finnish Parliament and former secretary of social affairs, published in a city guide magazine, Liekki covers a variety of issues, ranging from the definition of the liberal to clothing styles, the planned criminalization of the purchase of sex (prostitution as such is not penalized in Finland), domestic porn production, and feminism. In the article Liekki accuses Biaudet of patronizing women doing sex work, identifies herself as a feminist, and argues for answerability for the kind of porn one produces.

All in all, Liekki’s vocal public image is associated with playful, smart, and witty porn, as presented in interviews and on personal Web sites. This promise is not, however, quite fulfilled by her hard-core film *Mun leffa* (*My Film*, 2002), for which she both wrote the screenplay and performed the leading role.



Figure 4. Rakek Liekki introducing her story of pornography in *My Film*.

*My Film* is an episodic film that has no actual plot and consists of a series of sexual acts set in different fictional scenes. The narrative structure is also generic to porn in the sense that no special motivation is needed for sexual acts to take place—they merely occur wherever the protagonist goes (Williams, *Hard Core* 130–34). Liekki introduces transitions from one episode to another, lying on a bed in green underwear and making use of a repertoire of porn gestures (throwing inviting glances, licking her lipstick-red lips). The introductions, disclosed to the camera in the privacy of a bedroom, are confessional in style and like diary inserts. Here the film follows the confessional tradition developed in eighteenth-century pornographic literature (Tambling; Hunt; Saarenmaa) and employed already in Annie Sprinkle’s *Deep Inside Annie Sprinkle* (1981). The episodes are framed as incidents from Liekki’s personal life in ways that support her public image as a “mundane” porn star.

As the narrator Liekki promises an alternative perspective, a “herstory” of pornography. The title, *My Film*, underlines the subjective point of view and provides an (auto)biographical framing that sets the film apart from the abundance of sexual acts and bodies often featured in porn films. The title refers to its well-known protagonist and perhaps also attracts the curiosity of a wider audience. The potential audience is also broadened by the domestic production’s claims of good work conditions and the strong presence of female producers, writers, and performers. In a sense, Finnish porn is promoted as a “fair trade” product.

*My Film* consists of five episodes overall. The first of these makes use of documentary footage from a Spanish sex exhibition and mixes this with a fictional girlie three-



Figure 5. Footage of Emilia's, Rakel Liekki's, and Sabina's performances in the Spanish sex exhibition as introduced in *My Film*.

some. Since this is the opening episode, viewers may have a momentary sense of the film being more biographical than fictional in style. Documentary feel is created through an overview of the sex exhibition, its audience, various merchandise, shops, and events. Together with another performer, Emilia, Liekki mimics news reporters with the microphone and an introduction to the girls' upcoming stage show. The opening sequence lays claims to realness through an autobiographical framing and documentary style, thus strengthening hard-core pornography's more general "graphic imperative" (Black).<sup>3</sup>

The episode continues with a floorshow by Liekki, Emilia, and Sabina and a sequence set in their hotel room. Chatting casually in the shower, the girls start kissing and fondling each other with the aid of various dildos. Orgasms are verified verbally: the performers state whenever orgasm is reached and affirm that it was not cut short. The scene follows the conventions of "girl-on-girl" sex that offer bountiful possibilities for male viewing pleasures.<sup>4</sup> The closure, however, is not achieved by a male performer joining the action. Instead, the lesbian scene culminates in a decision of a girls' night out looking for "dark meat" in what reads as both a reiteration of the racialized dynamics of mainstream porn and a reestablishing of the penis as the primary means of female satisfaction. The episode consists of a public show catering to a male gaze and private session among women that creates a peephole possibility of witnessing female sexual indulgence. Viewers gain access to numerous potential voyeuristic pleasures, including the possibility of "looking behind the scenes" of commercial sex work. Juxtaposing private and public stages, the film



Figures 6 and 7. *My Film* contains an episode of a family quarrel to be solved by rough bondage sex. Both the setting and Liekki's partner, Lassi, are familiar from the *Shag School*.

aims to evoke a sense of authenticity and desire in the sexual act. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the back stage looks very much like the front stage.

The following episode takes place in a body-piercing shop, where Liekki gets her nipple and clitoris pierced. After the seemingly painful operation she has sex with the piercer, who has—"naturally"—been aroused by his task. The scene ends with male orgasm and a money shot, sperm ejaculated on Liekki's breasts. The third episode is also set in a semipublic space, namely, a sex shop. Here Liekki performs as a saleswoman who eventually has sex in the back room with a male customer while tied in chains. The episode ends with a money shot, this time targeted at her face. The remaining two episodes are set in a private apartment, mostly the bed already familiar from *Shag School* that provides a mundane framing for sexual scenarios. In

the first of these Liekki goes to a supermarket, buys vegetables, returns home, and masturbates with the aid of a cucumber and other groceries. She then receives surprise guests, a woman and a man, who join in the party. The final episode depicts sex as both the scene of and the cure for a family quarrel; it—once more—ends with a money shot hosed on Liekki's abdomen.

With a variety of lesbian scenes, group sex, masturbation, rough heterosex, and bondage the film aims to cover multiple porn styles and genres. Nevertheless, the sexual acts in *My Film* follow the conventions of mainstream heterosexual pornography, the obligatory money shot included, hence illustrating what Linda Williams has aptly defined as the frenzy of the visible. Preceding the orgasm, the film introduces an assortment of positions, cutting close-ups of genitals alternately with those of the female performer's face—with her mouth half-open, eyes closed, and gasping—following the generic conventions of conveying pleasure.

All in all, *My Film* does not challenge the representational conventions of porn. This is surprising, given the public presence of Rakel Liekki as a figure questioning the male dominance of pornography with an intellectual and parodic approach. The biographical framing and female narration of the film merge with familiar imageries in ways that point to the generic rigidity of porn. As Arthurs argues, popular genres such as pornography act “as residue of past social and aesthetic norms, which are relatively resistant to change” (43). Similar permanence of generic conventions is evident also in the productions of other successful Finnish female porn performers.

During the early 2000s several female porn performers—the term “star” being somewhat grandiose in the Finnish context—established their careers. Women owning their own companies ran a large part of Finnish porn production, and this phenomenon has also gained mainstream publicity. In 2002 the leading current events magazine, *Suomen Kuvalehti*, did a feature on the porn industry as women's choice and portrayed women as independent and successful entrepreneurs (Räty). ELS, a company formed in 1999 by three women, Emilia, Laura Lee, and Sabina, was one of these success stories. ELS became the leading company in domestic porn videos, and its founders were all experienced performers in the international porn industry, with work experience in the United States, Brazil, Spain, and Sweden. ELS produced not only films but also phone entertainment and live performances. At the time of writing, however, it was not publishing new titles, and its Web

site was no longer in operation. The site for Productions 69—the producer of *My Film* and several other of Liekki's films—had been turned into an adult portal.

As *My Film* exemplifies, Finnish female porn performers are networked and collaborate in film projects and floor shows alike. The porn performers of the 2000s emphasize the independence and power of female entrepreneurs. They accentuate porn work as ordinary, whereas the porn celebrities of the 1990s tended to depict pornography as a scandalous realm of crime, dirt, and secrecy. Before the 2000s the media appearances of female porn performers were rare, sporadic, and accompanied by sensational headlines. This shift from clandestine and menacing to forthright and commonplace is illustrative of pornification more generally.

The rise of small production companies was facilitated by developments in media technology—mainly, digitization in its various forms—and the decrease in distribution costs. The success of female porn professionals was also supported by a certain (post)feminist ethos emphasizing their independence and agency through a neoliberal discourse of freedom of choice (Penttinen; cf. Cronin). The strong presence of women may suggest the integration of feminist elements in the pornographic texts themselves. In addition to Liekki, Mariah, another performer and producer with a decade-long career, has discussed her aesthetic principles, interests in unconventional porn, and emancipatory experiences within the porn business both in interviews and on her Web site. Nevertheless, as we have argued above, the question is more complex, since commercial heteroporn production tends to be controlled by rigid conventions and norms that ultimately leave little space for repetitions with a difference if the product is to reach a wider audience. Liekki's films alone give little reason for enthusiasm over alternative female pornography, but, considered in the context of her other media appearances, they are not “just more of the same.” Mainstream media appearances reach wide, occasionally nationwide, audiences and construct a horizon of expectations concerning the hard-core productions that have comparatively limited circulation. This results in assumptions concerning the subversive or radical edge of hard-core productions that remain both unrealized and largely unrealistic.

### Night out with a Porn Star

In 2005–06 Liekki hosted a television show titled *Yö Rakelin kanssa* (*Night with Rakel*) on SubTV. In each



Figure 8. Liekki's television show *Night with Rakel* as promoted by the channel SubTV in 2005.



thirty-minute episode Liekki met a Finnish male celebrity, visited bars, restaurants, and clubs, and discussed the guest's private life from about 8:00 P.M. to 2:00 A.M. Guests ranged from designers to writers, actors, poets, ice hockey players, and musicians. The show's Web info promised "confessions, people opening up in the night, where anything can happen" in a tone suggesting intimacy and potential sexual undercurrents. Although Liekki defines herself as bisexual, a heterosexual reading of her star image is taken for granted: no female guests were included, and the possibility of an erotic encounter between two women was therefore structured out. After the show programming continued with a TV chat (accessible with SMS) during

which members of the audience could make their own confessions on-screen.

In the opening titles of the show Liekki was seen stalking the streets of Helsinki after dark. The camera zoomed in on her black high-heeled shoes before revealing more of the host, dressed in a black skirt and a body-hugging leather jacket, sporting some cleavage and evening make-up. Texts appeared on a background of red lace, and Liekki's logo, a cartoon-style self-portrait familiar from her home page, winked an eye.

Given the degree of sexual innuendo in the framings of the program and the intertexts of Liekki's previous TV appearances, one might imagine a show loaded with the

double entendre of spending the night with a porn star, of suggestive glances and close-ups of moist lips. Although cameras did zoom in on Liekki's chest and the drinks consumed during the night, the discussions tended to focus on the men's personal histories, career development, goals, and the meaning of certain urban spaces for their lives. Liekki was informal and chatty, yet she kept her distance and let the guests decide what they wanted to disclose of themselves—confessions were seldom seen. Since each episode took numerous hours to shoot, the atmosphere was, especially after some drinks, quite relaxed. The element most reminiscent of Liekki's career in porn was the lighting: bright enough to make performers squint, it revealed the pores and oiliness of their skin, particularly in the early morning hours. Cameras recurrently came up close and panned away in ways that contributed to an aesthetic feel of reality TV mixed with art student video.

*Night with Rakel* was exemplary of ways in which Liekki tries to balance art and porn, journalism and celebrity status in her public image. She succeeds in this to the degree that publicity surrounding her has been primarily positive. Liekki's porn fame has given her visibility and public agency. Yet the status and label of a former porn star is also potentially derogatory, as was evident in an online debate at *Suomi24* (*Finland24*) on the quality of her show in December 2005. The first posting (by nickname "New Fan") characterized the show as a positive surprise. "Savant84" agreed but desired more action: "[N]o shagging in the night's broadcast . . . one has to like look online . . . this in evening show would be good!!!" Later the discussant suggested that the male guests of the show were expecting sex: "OF COURSE one has to get some from an ex porn star." Later the same month discussions in the online forum of the largest daily, *Helsingin Sanomat*, protested a recent column critiquing Liekki's professionalism and broadened into a tirade against the assumed feminist-leftist antisex stronghold in journalism.

The *Helsingin Sanomat* exchange points to a central feature of Finnish discussions on pornography, namely, the labeling of any critique as misplaced moralizing and backwardness, as well as to a popular understanding of feminism as antisex, antifun, and antifemininity. Liekki's own feminist identifications disappear in the online debate, which draws on an image of feminism as monolithic. This general antifeminism may seem surprising in a country with a century of equal political rights and a female, self-proclaimed feminist president currently serving her second

term. While the principles of gender equality are widely endorsed, feminism remains something of a dirty word. Popular understandings of feminism have little to do with the Finnish history of predominantly equality—rather than radical—feminism in which "sex wars" have never really taken fire (cf. Kulick 212). Compared to the heated and complex debates on pornography carried out elsewhere, the lack of discussion in Finland is noteworthy. Nevertheless, feminism seems to be understood as antipornography by default in ways that parallel the privileging of pornography as a key feminist issue in the spirit of the late Andrea Dworkin (Segal; cf. Attwood).

The online exchange also interprets critiques of the public visibility of sex as leftist ranting and draws the axis of sexual conservatism and liberalism in terms that are quite different from what is customary in the United States, for example. Christian overtones are relatively seldom heard in Finnish discussions on commercial sex. Parties on the right operate on a dual agenda of emphasizing individual freedom of choice while also holding on to moral conservatism, whereas parties on the left tend to lay more emphasis on human rights and possible trafficking and exploitation in sex work. Consensus occurs primarily on limiting children's access to hard-core materials.

Studies of pornography have tended to be dominated by North American and, to a lesser degree, British voices and perspectives, as is evident from recent anthologies of feminist research (Cornell; Church Gibson) and "porn studies" (Williams, *Porn Studies*). Debates over censorship, freedom of speech, and North American legislation as well as histories of porn production in the United States form a seemingly transparent framing even on an international level. Meanwhile, little has been published on the history or current state of pornography in the Nordic countries (Paasonen). We believe that Liekki's intermedial career is decidedly representative of the Finnish context: of generally permissive if not positive attitudes toward commercial sex as well as the availability of diverse media agency for people with careers in pornography (Anttila). Contrasted with North American examples such as Sprinkle, Liekki stands out due to her youth as well as her approach to feminism. She has promoted veganism and the interconnectedness of art and porn, yet she, unlike Sprinkle, is hardly inclined toward New Age philosophies or self-discovery of inner goddesses (Chapkis). Nevertheless, both Liekki and Sprinkle promote humoristic and parodic approaches to porn, especially in their playful displays of pornographic sex

education. Liekki's version of pornography is hip, trendy, associated with urban subcultures, and acknowledged in mainstream forums—her career is simultaneously illustrative of pornification as a cross-national trend and of Finnish media discourses on sexuality.

### Pornification in Context

Liekki's multimedia career has been enabled by developments in the regulation, production, distribution, and consumption of pornography. All in all, the Finnish media landscape has undergone radical transformations in two decades. Since the television premiere of *Emmanuelle* (1974) in 1986, soft-core pornography has become part of the diet on national television, while cable channels have featured hard-core porn. Due to changes in censorship legislation, films previously forbidden such as *Deep Throat* (1972) have become available. Since 2001 X-rated films can be sold and rented freely, and hard-core materials are available in kiosks and shops nationwide (Nikunen, Paasonen, and Saarenmaa, *Jokapäiväinen pornomme*). The increase in sexual content ties in with a shift toward entertainment programming and the increase of commercial TV channels and tabloid magazines. It is fair to say that pornography has become part of the everyday media environment and is more accessible than ever, while Finnish porn production experienced something of a renaissance in the early 2000s.

Transformations in legislation are one cornerstone of pornification. Another one involves distribution. Due to technological convergence, companies can make use of the same material on various distribution channels, offering films on VHS, DVD, and online, publishing photographs or texts in print and online, or branching out into mobile entertainment. Developments in media technology increase both the accessibility of porn and the lifespan of pornographic texts. *Tool Test*, the 2002 *Porn Star* segment with Liekki testing sex toys, is now available online for a fee, and viewers can also access pay-per-view episodes of *Night with Rakel* on SubTV's site. Liekki herself has two Web sites. Her home page, [www.rakelliekki.com](http://www.rakelliekki.com), features biographical information and advertises Liekki photos and logos for mobile phones. More graphic material is hosted by [seksi.net](http://seksi.net), the largest Finnish adult portal (see Paasonen). The front page shows Liekki in bondage, and the site promises hard-core action: "Rakel Liekki offers her perfect body and tight stuff in images and videos just for you." Liekki may have finished her career as porn

performer, but her images and videos have longevity that is supported by her recurring media appearances.

Pornification also involves aesthetic convergence, flirting with porn in mainstream media. Brian McNair discusses such aesthetic convergence as porno-chic that is not porn "but the *representation* of porn in non-pornographic art and culture; the pastiche and parody of, the homage to and investigation of porn; the postmodern transformation of porn into mainstream cultural artifact for a variety of purposes" (61). Elements of porno-chic are evident in music videos, advertising, and cinema, in *Porn Star* and Liekki's intermedia career.

On her Web site Liekki defines herself as a bisexual visual artist who wants to blur the boundaries between high and popular culture as well as those between the artists and her work. Liekki's public persona is one manifestation of "body art" and is a knowingly constructed brand. Liekki appears in various projects that she finds artificial to separate among—and, as should be evident at this point, she has gained broad access to media publicity while doing so. Central in terms of pornification, these publicities range from hard-core films to television discussion shows. Liekki has, in most cases, had the opportunity to define herself and her actions. As her interview with Eva Biaudet shows, Liekki has enough intellectual credibility to challenge a politician's views on commercial sex, at least in a popular forum.

Liekki attaches herself to the tradition of "bad girls" in the visual arts who make use of pornographic elements in their work and explore the aesthetic and political possibilities of porn/art (McNair 199–204). McNair identifies this as one feature of "striptease culture" and the democratization of desire. This is, however, not exactly the point we want to make on pornification. Like Arthurs (30, 41–42), we believe that the increased visibility of sexual representations previously unaccepted in national media is not merely a question of democratization through the workings of capitalist market economy but also one of establishing new kinds of norms and regulatory effects. Our discussion of Liekki's intermedia career points to how some soft and hard-core representations gain visibility whereas others remain in the margin: *Shag School* bent the dictates of intimacy without disturbing the transparent norm of heterosexuality, and Liekki's star image defined femininity as sexually active and savvy without challenging the normative position of young, white, fit, and conventionally gendered bodies under the age of twenty-five. Popular

media culture and commercial pornography in particular seldom experience radical shifts and transformations in representational conventions. Changes are gradual and often ambiguous. This, however, does not imply that no transformations are possible, as the example of *Shag School* illustrates.

Liekki's persona can be used to illustrate the increased visibility of hard-core porn and the reframing of porn as recreational fun—or even as educational leisure entertainment—that does not automatically increase the visibility of different sexualities, fantasies, and identifications. But whereas Liekki's version of porn may be generic, as attested in *My Film*, her public figure and brand are unique. She has managed to detach porn from notions of shame and strict norms concerning female appearance while her status as porn celebrity has since given way to a more diverse media career. The brand Rakel Liekki is a knowingly constructed *Gesamtkunstwerk* that differs from porn star names and fits few prevailing stereotypes of adult performers. In this sense, her intermedia career is novel and telling of shifts in the cultural status of porn and the agency of female porn professionals.

## Notes

All translations are by the authors. All websites were accessed on 5 January 2006.

1. Laura Kipnis discusses porn as a Rabelaisian form of political theater where the use of the lower body works as a symbolic attack on serious highbrow culture (164–65). Kipnis regards porn ultimately as a transgressive space for confronting shame and fantasy exiled from mainstream culture (see also Warner). This may be the case in certain subgenres of pornography, but the context of mainstream pornography produces a different perspective. The normative functions and repetitiveness of mainstream pornography are apparent and necessitate careful consideration.

2. The tendency to see women as sexually underdeveloped actually contradicts extensive sociological studies on sexual behavior in Finland (Kontula and Haavio-Mannila, *Suomalainen seksi*), showing that women have fairly satisfying and diverse sex lives. Nevertheless, the most recent study (Kontula and Haavio-Mannila, *Seksin trendit*) also reveals that while the appreciation of sex has increased, dissatisfaction seems to grow. Paradoxically, this may have to do with accentuated expectations due to the overall increased visibility of sex and pornography in popular culture.

3. Pornography aims to show sexual arousal, acts, and climax and often verifies these visually through the use of the male money shot to the degree that pornography has been identified as presentation rather representation, as sporting an authentic presence of arousal and orgasm (Falk).

4. Lesbian scenes for lesbians are, according to Heather Butler, authenticated usually with the figure of the butch, who “in her very

being offers proof, wearing her sexual preference the way most of us wear clothes” (168–69). Moreover, these scenes do not have to be obsessed with the visual (or verbal) verification of the orgasm and may preoccupy themselves with articulations of desire outside the conventions of heterosexual pornography.

## Works Cited

- Anttila, Anna. “Seksimarkkinoinnin vaikutus lasten ja nuorten asenteisiin” (The Impact of Sex Marketing in Attitudes among Children and Youth). *Lapsuuden muuttuva maisema: puheenvuoroja kulutuskulttuurin seksualisoinnin vaikutuksista* (The Changing Landscape of Childhood: Perspectives on the Impact of Sexualization in Consumer Culture). Ed. Anna Anttila. Helsinki: STAKES, 2004. 63–77.
- Arthurs, Jane. *Television and Sexuality: Regulation and the Politics of Taste*. London: Open UP, 2004.
- Attwood, Feona. “Pornography and Objectification: Re-reading the Picture that Divided Britain.” *Feminist Media Studies* 4.1 (2004): 7–19.
- Berlant, Lauren, and Michael Warner. “Sex in Public.” *Intimacy*. Ed. Lauren Berlant. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000. 311–30.
- Black, Joel. *The Reality Effect: Film Culture and the Graphic Imperative*. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Butler, Heather. “What Do You Call a Lesbian with Long Fingers? The Development of Lesbian and Dyke Pornography.” *Williams, Porn Studies* 167–97.
- Chapkis, Wendy. *Live Sex Acts: Women Performing Erotic Labor*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Church Gibson, Pamela, ed. *More Dirty Looks: Gender, Pornography and Power*. 2nd ed. London: BFI, 2004.
- Cornell, Drucilla, ed. *Feminism and Pornography*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.
- Cronin, Anne M. “Consumerism and ‘Compulsory Individuality’: Women, Will and Potential.” *Transformations: Thinking through Feminism*. Ed. Sara Ahmed, Jane Kilby, Celia Lury, Maureen McNeil, and Beverley Skeggs. London: Routledge, 2000. 273–87.
- Driver, Susan. “Pornographic Pedagogies? The Risks of Teaching ‘Dirrry’ Popular Cultures.” *M/C Journal* 7.4 (2004). <[http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0410/03\\_teaching.php](http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0410/03_teaching.php)>.
- Duits, Linda, and Liesbet van Zoonen. “Headscarves and Porno-Chic: Disciplining Girls’ Bodies in the European Multicultural Society.” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 13.2 (2006): 103–17.
- Dyer, Richard. *Stars*. 1979. London: BFI, 1998.
- Falk, Pasi. “The Representation of Presence: Outlining the Anti-aesthetics of Pornography.” *Theory, Culture & Society* 10 (1993): 1–42.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*. Trans. Robert Hurley. 1978. London: Penguin, 1990.
- Hänninen, Hannamari. *Pornon rahavirtoja* (Flows of Money in Pornography in Finland). Helsinki: TANE-moniste, 2002.
- Hunt, Lynn. “Introduction: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500–1800.” *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500–1800*. Ed. Lynn Hunt. New York: Zone Books, 1993. 9–45.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. New York: Routledge, 1989.

- . *A Theory of Parody: Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2000.
- Jones, Sara Gwenllian. “Starring Lucy Lawless?” *Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 14.1 (2000): 9–22.
- Kipnis, Laura. *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America*. Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 1996.
- Kontula, Osmo, and Elina Haavio-Mannila. *Seksin trendit meillä ja naapureissa* (Trends of Sex Here and Elsewhere). Helsinki: WSOY, 2001.
- . *Suomalainen seksi. Tietoa suomalaisten sukupuolielämän muutoksesta* (Finnish Sex: Transformations in Finnish Sex Life). Helsinki: WSOY, 1993.
- Korppi, Timo. *Lihaa säästämättä: 30 vuotta suomalaisen pornobisneksen etulinjassa* (Without Sparing Meat: 30 Years at the Forefront of the Finnish Porn Biz). Helsinki: Johnny Kniga, 2002.
- Kulick, Don. “Four Hundred Thousand Swedish Perverts.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 11.2 (2005): 205–35.
- Lehtonen, Mikko. “On No Man’s Land: Theses on Intermediality.” *Nordicom Review* 22.1 (2001): 71–84.
- Liekki, Rakel. “Rakel Liekki vs. Eva Biaudet.” *Nöjesguiden* May 2004. <<http://www.nojesguiden.fi/fi/article.asp?newsID=29193>>.
- . Rakel Liekki’s Web page. Accessed 7 January 2006. <<http://www.rakelliekki.com/suomi/base.html>>.
- McElroy, Wendy. *XXX: A Woman’s Right to Pornography*. New York: St. Martin’s P, 1995.
- McNair, Brian. *Striptease Culture: Sex, Media and the Democratization of Desire*. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Nead, Lynda. *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1988.
- Negra, Diane. “Quality Postfeminism? Sex and the Single Girl on HBO.” *Genders Online Journal* 39 (2004). <[http://www.genders.org/g39/g39\\_negra.html](http://www.genders.org/g39/g39_negra.html)>.
- Nikunen, Kaarina, Susanna Paasonen, and Laura Saarenmaa. “Anna meille tänä päivänä meidän . . . eli kuinka porno työntyi osaksi arkea” (Give Us Each Day Our Daily . . . or, How Pornography Penetrated the Everyday). Nikunen, Paasonen, and Saarenmaa 7–29.
- , eds. *Jokapäiväinen pornomme—media, seksuaalisuus ja populaarikulttuuri* (Our Daily Porn: Media, Sexuality, and Popular Culture). Tampere: Vastapaino, 2005.
- , eds. *Pornification*. Oxford: Berg, forthcoming.
- Oullette, Laurie. “Inventing the Cosmo Girl: Class Identity and Girl-Style American Dreams.” *Media, Culture & Society* 21 (1999): 359–83.
- Paasonen, Susanna. “Structures Pornotopias: Online Pornography and the Nordic Context.” *Cyberfeminism in Northern Lights: Digital Media and Gender in Nordic Context*. Ed. Jenny Sundén and Malin Sveningsson Elm. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars P, forthcoming.
- Parhi, Katariina. “Rakel Liekki—iloinen porno-Rakel” (Rakel Liekki—Perky Porn Rakel). *Kaltio* 5 (2002). <<http://www.kaltio.fi/index.php?41>>.
- Penttinen, Elina. *Corporeal Globalization: Narratives of Subjectivity and Otherness in the Sexscapes of Globalization*. Tampere: Tampere Peace Research Institute, 2004.
- Projansky, Sarah. *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture*. New York: New York UP, 2001.
- Räty, Panu. “Pornotähti ja ylpeä siitä” (Porn Star and Proud to Be). *Suomen Kuvalehti* 18 (2002): 32–39.
- Saarenmaa, Laura. “Käsi sydämellä, povi paljaana: Iltapäivälehtien kansikuvatytöjen avomieliset tunnustukset” (Hand on the Heart, Bare Bosom: Cover Girls’ Intimate Confessions in Tabloid Newspapers). Nikunen, Paasonen, and Saarenmaa 113–35.
- Segal, Lynne. Introduction. *Sex Exposed: Sexuality and the Pornography Debate*. Ed. Lynne Segal and Mary McIntosh. London: Virago, 1–11.
- Sontag, Susan. *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. New York: Delta, 1964.
- Tambling, Jeremy. *Confession: Sexuality, Sin, the Subject*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000.
- Tincknell, Estella, Deborah Chambers, Joost Van Loon, and Nichola Hudson. “Begging for It: ‘New Femininities,’ Social Agency, and Moral Discourse in Contemporary Teenage and Men’s Magazines.” *Feminist Media Studies* 3.1 (2003): 47–63.
- Warner, Michael. *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000.
- Williams, Linda. *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible.”* Berkeley: U of California P, 1989.
- , ed. *Porn Studies*. Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 2004.

### Rakel Liekki’s Videography (in chronological order)

- Igor’s Vol. 1*. Igor’s Extreme Productions, n.d.
- ELS—Behind the Scenes*. ELS Productions, n.d.
- Pure Porn: Cockhawks from the Woods (Silkkaa Pornoa: metsikön muna-haukat)*. Productions 69, 2001.
- Red Exit (Punainen lähtö)*. NVC, n.d.
- The Best of ELS*. ELS Productions, n.d.
- Best of 69*. Productions 69, 2002.
- My Film (Mun Leffa)*. Productions 69, 2002.
- Little Dick’s Lessons of Life (Pikku-Kallen oppivuodet)*. Productions 69, 2002.
- Want to Be a Porn Star? (Haluatko pornotähdeksi)*. Turun Exhibition Oy, 2004.
- Blondes Have More Fun*. Laura Productions, 2004.
- Want to Be a Porn Star 2 (Haluatko pornotähdeksi 2)*. Turun Exhibition Oy, 2005.