

Feminist Theory

<http://fty.sagepub.com>

Strange bedfellows: Pornography, affect and feminist reading

Susanna Paasonen

Feminist Theory 2007; 8; 43

DOI: 10.1177/1464700107074195

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://fty.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/8/1/43>

Published by:

 SAGE Publications

<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Feminist Theory* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://fty.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://fty.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Strange bedfellows

Pornography, affect and feminist reading



Feminist Theory
 Copyright © 2007
 SAGE Publications
 (Los Angeles, London,
 New Delhi, and
 Singapore)
 vol. 8(1): 43–57.
 1464–7001

DOI: 10.1177/1464700107074195
<http://fty.sagepub.com>

Susanna Paasonen *University of Jyväskylä, Finland*

Abstract Feminist debates on pornography have relied on articulations of affect, from anti-pornography rhetoric of grief, anger and disgust to anti-anti-pornography claims to enjoyment and pleasure. The complexity of reading, the interpenetration of affect and analysis, experience and interpretation tend to become effaced in arguments both for and against pornography. This article argues for the necessity of moving beyond the affective range of disgust versus pleasure in feminist studies of pornography. Drawing on theorizations of reading and affect, particularly Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's discussion of 'paranoid' and 'reparative' reading, it investigates the possibilities of analysing commercial email porn spam without reducing the outcome to the literal and the self-evident. This involves taking seriously the power of pornographic texts to move their readers, scholars included. Since affective encounters with porn are ambivalent and often contradictory, their status as basis of knowledge over pornography remains highly unstable.

keywords *affect, pornography, reading*

Pornography aims to arouse its readers and viewers, 'to turn them on'. While these addresses regularly fail, all kinds of gut reactions revolve around porn. For the past three years, I have been doing research on online porn and the possibilities of reading it without reducing the outcome to the literal and the self-evident. This methodological project has meant negotiating my position in the histories of feminist studies of pornography that tend to be dominated by North American debates on censorship and freedom of speech. As these debates have made evident, people get passionate over porn in their expressions of disgust, pleasure, grief and empowerment alike.

This article is part and parcel of my attempt to make sense of feminist porn debates in relation to articulations of personal feeling and affective force of texts. My investigation is guided by Eve Sedgwick's (2003) discussion of 'paranoid' and 'reparative' reading, as well as Lynne Pearce's (1997) call for understanding reading as an interactive and implicated process. Using my own research on online porn as a starting point, I

address the possibilities for, and challenges involved in, reparative and implicated readings of pornography.

Starting with numbers

Pornography has been one of the 'killer applications' on the World Wide Web, as is evident from the mass and diversity of available online pornographies from image galleries to live shows, videos and short stories, from independent, amateur and subcultural productions to mainstream commercial imageries. Online porn – like porn in general – comes in all shapes and forms, and studying one set of materials says little of others. For good reasons, any study of pornography is bound to face the question of why certain texts and genres were chosen for analysis while others were excluded. My own investigation into porn began by archiving unsolicited email messages advertising porn sites. This was a pragmatic solution: rather than seeking out any particular kinds of porn, I focused on the porn spam sent to me during a period of 17 months in 2002–4. I thought that the material would help in outlining representational conventions of porn and provide a springboard for further research. After deleting doubles and messages with faulty image or text files, I was left with 366 porn spam messages. Faced with this volume of material, I started considering ways of reading that would enable me to address the mass of it rather than individual messages, images or terms. I wanted to get an overall feel of the material, which would be impossible to accomplish by picking some adverts for analysis and disregarding others. In order to understand the range of pornographic representation involved, I conducted a content description of the visual and textual motives, genres, terminology and forms of address employed in the messages (Paasonen, 2006). While I found this approach rather unimaginative, it did help in mapping out the general gendered choreography of commercial heteroporn.

Content description also made it possible to produce pie charts visualizing the material. I found the charts simply mesmerizing: they made strikingly visible the generic conventions of porn spam that tends to be rather narrow in its choice of characters, acts and terminology. I experienced the charts as somewhat absurd in the sense that they transformed explicit representations into neat graphic charts, wedges and percentages, thus effectively creating a sense of distance. The charts summarized the material but also rendered invisible those examples that did not quite fit in.

Reading involves sensations and associations that shape ways of interpreting and understanding the text. While content description does not equal analysis, it is already an interpretation. Counting erect penises and trying to figure out hair colour in hundreds of small and fuzzy images is monotonous to say the least and this form of reading works effectively to distance the reader from the text, and vice versa. Given that porn aims to create far more fleshy encounters, such a numerical approach is severely limited. Content description foregrounds a text–reader relationship lacking in interaction and limiting readerly access to different relationships with

the text in question (Pearce, 1997: 14). Content description implies imagined mastery over the material and works to efface possibilities of surprise from the act of reading. Posing the charts as a general account of the sample inevitably limited my possibilities of elaborating contradictory readings of the material. Rather than opening up routes for alternative interpretations, my initial approach eliminated the kinds of affective reactions, sensations and experiences I was interested in investigating.

Making visible normative scripts of porn, content description can be seen as a variation of *paranoid reading*, as discussed by Eve Sedgwick. Paranoid reading refers to the compulsive will to knowledge through uncovering and revealing the hidden workings of power which have been known from the start (since 'paranoia requires that bad news be always already known', Sedgwick, 2003: 130). Paranoid reading generalizes and tends to be tautological as it can only 'prove the very same assumptions with which it began' which 'may be experienced by the practitioner as a triumphant advance toward truth and vindication' (Sedgwick, 2003: 135). To the degree that my pie charts – pointing to the normativity of body shapes, ethnicity and age, the reproduction of a binary gender model and the exaggeration of gender differences – reiterated common knowledge understanding of pornography, my enterprise was indeed one of such 'triumphant advance'.

In an alternative formulation, Sedgwick (2003: 145–6) suggests *reparative reading* that is more geared towards positive affect, imaginative close reading and surprises in encounters with texts. Paranoid and reparative readings produce clearly different relationships between the reader and the text: as opposed to paranoid reading's generalizations, reparative reading is partial in perspective and does not present unequivocal outcomes. This conceptual division parallels Lynne Pearce's (1997: 11–15) discussion of 'hermeneutic' and 'implicated' reading. The former focuses on the ways that texts position readers and on the meanings interpreted from the texts. The latter considers reading as an interactive activity that includes a wide range of emotions and is far less certain in its outcomes. Paranoid and reparative, hermeneutic and implicated readings are all recognizable in my studies of pornography. I would not describe this as a narrative of 'progress' but rather as one of increased self-reflexivity. In terms of reading, this means less a shift from one reading to another than a *discomforting commute* (Pearce, 1997: 23) between different modes of reading.

Sensitive readers

Studying porn, I was struck by my tendency to fight the possibility of the texts touching me. I became at once self-conscious and removed as if sheltering myself from surprising responses. This dilemma is an interesting one since I generally have little problem with being touched by any kinds of media texts. Neither do I have aversion towards pornography as such. My reluctance may have to do with the specific research material in question. Since the spam messages are unsolicited, they remain somehow external to me. Not of my own choosing, they do not represent my personal

fantasies or preferences, nor do they depict or even hint at the variety of available online pornographies. The bulk of porn spam makes it difficult to address individual images, texts or their attraction. Bulk email seems exactly that – a mass of repetitive images and bits of text. Yet all of this explains only part of the question, since my initial tactic of distanced content description was also a means of protecting myself against the affective force of porn.

It is likely that the analysis of any mass of representations – such as the over one thousand email adverts that I began my study with, or the archive of tens of thousands of amateur porn stories on *Literotica* (<http://www.literotica.com/stories/index.php>) that I have since begun to investigate – eventually distances the reader from the texts and loosens their affective ties. Repetition makes things familiar and displaces the element of surprise: the reader becomes numbed. Students in my 2005 seminar on feminism and pornography expressed similar experiences. The film *Deep Throat* (USA 1972) was initially experienced as off-putting, offensive, sexist and generally ‘gross’ but subsequent viewings made it seem humorous, camp, and even sympathetic. As gut reactions abated, they gave rise to considerations of narrative form, character building and multiple interpretations. This is not to say that either the initial or the latter interpretation would be more ‘true’ or that this ‘truth’ would lie in either gut reactions or more conceptualized viewings. Rather, these transformations in ways of experiencing pornography make evident the *dynamics of reading*, the interpenetration of affect and analysis, experience and interpretation. As argued by Isobel Armstrong (2000), affect can be understood as a dynamic relationship between the text and the reader that stems from the analytical process and refuses to be congealed or fixed. Hence sense and sensibility are impossible to tell apart in acts of interpretation.

While all texts involve affect, they do so in obviously different ways. Pornography, like other so-called ‘body genres’ (Williams, 1991) such as slasher horror films, melodrama or comedy, aims to evoke similar responses in their viewers as the ones they depict. These texts are felt in the body. Pornography functions with the logic of attraction, spectacle and affect that does not fully translate into semantic models of explanation. It relies on a spectacular display of genitalia and sexual acts while narrative development of character construction remains a secondary concern that tends to hinder, rather than facilitate, arousal (Bell, 2001: 41–2). Porn draws from easily recognizable types and scenes that do not require identification. Viewer sensations do not necessarily result from engagement with characters and their assumed emotions but can be generated by far more random and fleeting encounters with scenes, genres and characters, or even music and dialogue (cf. Sobchack, 2005). Bodily sensations are central to workings of a whole range of media texts beyond the body genres investigated by Linda Williams. They exemplify the ways in which media structures and produces emotion, as well as the complexity of viewing experience as a mixture of reflection, cursory observation and often conflicting emotional responses. Tears, sweaty palms or sexual arousal evoked by media texts tend to be sources of embarrassment especially if

these reactions are public and observed by others. Bodily responses are not confined to given aesthetic or moral norms (Williams, 2004: 165), they are not necessarily under control and they are evoked through acting, framing, editing and use of music. Such carnal reactions characterize encounters with pornography from films and videos to online galleries and stories. Porn scenarios try to stick to people's fantasies and evoke different kinds of gut reactions in the process.

If body speaks through affect, as Isobel Armstrong (2000: 117, 121) suggests, then affect enables points of exit from binary models of thinking that detach interpretation from sensation and the mental from the corporeal. As Eve Sedgwick indicates (2003: 2), it is far easier to argue for the need to dismantle the power of binary thought than it is to articulate alternative forms of thought and location – and the legacy of the mind–body split in Western thought is certainly not easy to overturn. Nevertheless, the 'affective turn' (Koivunen, 2001) recently diagnosed in feminist thought has been a significant step towards a more embodied understanding of reading. While there has also been renewed interest in studies of pornography, the seemingly evident connections of affect and pornography have not been addressed in much detail. This may seem odd at first glance but perhaps less so when considered in the context of previous feminist debates on pornography.

Objects of sorrow

The rhetorical force of Anglo-American anti-pornography writing has relied largely on articulations of personal experience. Andrea Dworkin (2000: 40) has discussed her feelings of anger, fury and sorrow that characterized her readings of pornography to the degree that she could only address her readers in grief:

If a woman has any sense of her own worth, seeing pornography in small bits and pieces can bring her to a useful rage. Studying pornography in quantity and depth . . . will turn that same woman into a mourner. (Dworkin, 2000: 39, emphasis added)

Anti-pornography feminism has associated porn with feelings of hurt, sadness, anger, frustration, fear and nausea as well as the adjunct political arguments of exploitation, sexism, racism and misogyny as innate to pornography (Griffin, 1981; Kappeler, 1986; Dworkin, 1989). This work has produced a *discourse of negative affect* that is posed as the acceptable reaction towards pornography. After all, expressions of different kinds of affect would imply that the woman in question has no sense of her own worth or that she is otherwise misguided.

The well-known anti-pornography documentary film *Not a Love Story* (Canada 1981) is saturated with expressions of feeling. Linda Lee Tracey, stripper and key character, watches violent porn and explains her feelings of violation ('That hurts, that really hurts a lot'), but also her experiences of power and pleasure performing as a stripper; former porn star Marc Stevens discusses his discomfort with displays of physical domination

required in porn films and his feelings of sadness and anger in making them; the group Men Against Male Violence discuss the emptiness, alienation and violence generated by porn; feminists picketing porn theatres express their anger over the exploitation of women; live-show performers Patrice and Rick Lucas discuss their feelings of boredom and rather unflattering views of the audience; and feminist author Robin Morgan is moved to tears while describing the rage that she feels is inseparable from feminist consciousness and the pain of awareness.

Not a Love Story speaks of pornography in a wider emotional range than its title would suggest and certainly the experiences voiced in the film are more diverse than it has often been given credit for. These manifestations of personal experience follow the principles of consciousness-raising central to radical feminism since the 1970s. Consciousness-raising became a means to practise Carol Hanisch's notion of the personal as political, to share experiences among women and to connect individual feelings to social structures of inequality (Kitzinger, 1996: 92, 95). This laid ground for the articulation of experience – seen simultaneously as individual and collective, characteristic of a class of people – as a valid argument concerning social reality, an expression of a certain subject position as well as an epistemological stance. In her discussion of feminist standpoint, Nancy Hartsock (1997: 230–1) saw pornography as symptomatic of a decidedly masculine experience of aloneness, autonomy and violence and therefore as symptomatic of a gender-specific way of being in the world. *Not a Love Story* seems to depart from this fixed gender binary by presenting both women and men as agents in the sex industry and by addressing commercial sex as both a social phenomenon and personally mediated experiences. Yet no consumer or fan of porn steps forward to explain her fascination with porn – and confessing to feminist fascinations with porn would be rather oxymoronic in this context. Experiences of porn voiced in the film ultimately connect to feelings of violation and hurt and produce a specific basis for knowledge over pornography.

The discourse of negative affect is part and parcel of the paranoid reading that lies at the core of anti-pornography feminist rhetoric – or, to rephrase, the paranoid stance figures pornography as a monolithic text embedded in negative affect. This paranoid stance relies on generalizations over pornography, gender and sexuality and insists that as bad as things are, this state of affairs comes as no surprise and is certainly not getting any better (cf. Sedgwick, 2003: 142). Anti-pornography critique and its articulations of sorrow, pain and grief rely on the view of pornography as a form or even an institution of female objectification and silencing (Griffin, 1981). As Gayle Rubin (1995: 246) argues, anti-porn writers and the film *Not a Love Story* have tended to address violent pornography and S/M materials taken out of context and these representations have then affirmed the presupposition of porn as violence. This is a convenient tactic in the sense that – following the maxim of paranoid reading – the outcome of the analysis is knowable beforehand and no surprises are welcome or even possible. Michael Warner (2000: 181) also points out how anti-porn rhetoric relies on 'conceptually vacuous' terms such as 'sleaze', 'filth' and 'smut' that

mark the object of discussion as disgusting and undeserving of defence. This terminology aims to evoke shame in those consuming pornography and leaves little space for articulations of different kinds of affect.

Two decades of critiques of anti-pornography feminism have made evident that researchers need to address the production, distribution, consumption and representations of porn and to account for the diversity of pornographies in the process. Reducing all porn to mainstream hetero-porn – let alone to violent pornography – catered to male viewers makes it impossible to address the diverse practices, definitions and attractions of porn and ultimately makes it impossible to understand or discuss different pornographies and their interconnections. Furthermore, a symptomatic reading of pornography as masculine or misogynistic makes it impossible to discuss experiences of porn (be these ones of arousal or disgust) as little else than predictable functions of ideology.

Michael Warner (2000: 185) sees porn as enabling ‘unpredicted forms of experience’, surprises and discoveries that may broaden one’s understanding of sexuality and desire. If one understands reading in general as unexpected experiences and encounters, then the sensations aroused by texts or one’s eventual readings cannot be known from the start. Texts are inseparable from acts of reading and their possible moments of surprise. Psychologist Silvan Tomkins (1995: 54–5) notes that any affect can be – and probably at some point has been – linked to any object. There is no guarantee that a certain object or text will evoke any particular response, and certainly these reactions cannot be reduced to the experiences of an individual scholar.

Bodily surprises

In her introduction to *Hard Core* (1989: x–xi), Linda Williams notes that while not every moment of watching porn films discussed in the book was unpleasant and while she acknowledges the power of pornography to move its viewers to arousal as well as anger, a female researcher admitting to pleasures derived from (mainstream heterosexual) pornography risks her scholarly authority. Here feminist critique of and personal enjoyment in pornography are seen as impossible bedfellows to the degree that a confession of pleasure erases or at least waters down the critical agenda. As Michel Foucault has famously argued, Western technologies of the self have positioned the assumed truth concerning the individual in the realm of sexuality. Confessing one’s desires and acts has meant exposing one’s innermost self or ‘soul’ (Foucault, 1990: 58–9). Following this idea of sexuality as some kind of truth concerning the self, the stakes involved in Williams’ discussion are evident: confessing to pleasure renders feminist critique an act of double-thinking, a vacuous gesture that conflicts with one’s ‘inner desires’ that are assumed to articulate the truth concerning the self.

The theme of the female body uncovering its true desires is already familiar from porn narratives. Even a cursory reading of the thousands of ‘non-consent’ amateur porn stories available on the *Literotica* site reveals

the popularity of a script where a woman may say no to the idea of sex, certain acts or choice of partner(s), but her treacherous body reveals that her 'no' actually means 'yes'. Erect nipples, moisture between the legs and thrusting hips mark the female body as out of her control and receptive to advances towards her. Isabelle of *Isabelle's Awakening* finds herself 'powerless to stop her body from reacting' while the main character of *The Concert* is 'horrified' to realize the wetness of her vagina, and the female protagonist of *Flat Tire* describes her bum 'lifting involuntary up and down off the bed'. Eve of *Awakening of Eve, Ch 01* finds herself in a similar situation: 'Goosebumps covered her arms, her breathing became labored and, despite her best efforts, her nipples constricted into taut nuggets.' The protagonist of *Just A Tease*, again, surrenders her bodily struggle: 'My nipples were hard as rocks now as my body betrayed me and I just lay there letting whatever happened happen'. Being thus 'betrayed' by their bodies, the women may curse their flesh but ultimately have no choice other than to stop fighting the battle they are incapable of winning. As the stories emphasize, this is what they wanted and needed in the first place. Trapped in the immanence of their bodies, women in porn stories recurrently curse their unruly and weak bodies and uncontrollable desires that go against their more sober self-presentations. This carnal language is indisputable and overrides conscious action.

Bodies speak in porn stories and they do so in the language of *pornotopia* – a fantasyland of freely flowing desire, abundance of sexual acts and bodily displays envisioned in pornography (Marcus, 1974: 268–9). The pornotopia created in amateur stories is one of endless desire, insatiability and experimentation that is nevertheless narrated in highly generic terms. *Literotica* stories repeat familiar scripts, tropes, positions, acts and fantasies: in 'first time' stories, older women seduce younger boys, older boys or men seduce younger boys and older girls or women seduce younger girls; women, men and people of undefined gender find pleasure in submission (as the route to uninhibited expression of, and enjoyment in, sexuality); they enjoy domination and non-committal sex; bosses and teachers of different genders pressure employees and students of different genders to submit to their wicked wills; categories of 'race' and class are reinstated by transgressing them in a desire to 'do it' with the other. Control is a central dynamic in pornography where characters are not necessarily attracted to each other as much as to the idea of sexual experimentation.

Fantasy scenarios of non-consensual sex and women betrayed by the speech of their bodies are explicitly about control, submission and passive female desire. Projecting sexual aggressiveness and activity on the partner, they express a will to be pleased while relieving the subject from feelings of guilt or responsibility (Cowie, 1993: 142–8). Fantasies of control are not automatically reiterations, representations or let alone evidence of social relations of power. Reading them as such leads to a kind of automatism where power is positioned as the self-explanatory outcome of analysis independent of the text analysed. Locating control as central to the dynamics of porn does not assume these relations as predetermined, as one-way or as somehow fixing their viewers or readers. The roles of the

active and the passive partner, 'the master' and 'the slave', are repeated and characters may shift between these positions. This provides possibilities for the viewer's desire and perspective to travel from one position to another and back, while also producing the safe feeling of familiarity, of genre, of porn choreography recognizable in an instant.

Compared with *Literotica* stories, porn spam features considerably more frozen scenarios. In their still images, short video clips, looping banners, brief texts and invitations, unpredicted desires are rarely awakened or relations of control negotiated – although this might be the case with the actual sites advertised. The adverts aim to evoke the reader's interest to visit the sites by featuring their highlights and general concepts. All in all, they are rich in scenarios of control and instrumental use of women. Positions available to men and women are strikingly asymmetrical and I see a great preponderance of the messages as sexist, racist and classist. They are abundant in the terminology of sluts and bitches and scenes where 'tight pussies and asses [are] dilated by monster sized cocks' ('Big Dick Mania', 13 December 2003), 'hot young Latinas will do anything to get their citizenship' ('8th Street Latinas', 12 December 2003) or 'girls are so naive they just need to be . . . EXPLOITED' ('She Got Conned', 25 August 2003). In such instances, scenarios of control intertwine with social power relations, work to reinforce and eroticize them: I find myself unwilling to engage in imaginative close reading or readings against the grain and am unable to explore the representations across a broader affective spectrum. In other words, a shift towards implicated reading is more easily accomplished on a conceptual than practical level when working with porn spam.

Big White Sticks

The advert titled *Big White Sticks* (3 February 2004) consists of a collage of five images and text against an ochre frame. The background image features a man, cropped from midriff to upper thigh with his notably thick, erect, and upright penis supported by a female hand dominating the layout. Behind him a woman – visible from head to shoulder – is staring at the penis with an expression of wonder. Next to her mouth opened in astonishment a text reads, 'Ohh shit'. The woman's face appears oily and is partly shadowed by the towering penis. Text sprinkled on top of the image sketches out the pleasures of the site, including the exclamations 'Explosive cocks'; 'Abnormal white men'; 'Girls who take it all!!!'; 'See the biggest cock recorded'; and 'More movies then (*sic*) Hollywood'. In the bottom, four smaller images present more of the site contents. The first image features the same performers: only now the man is standing with one hand on his hip and the other behind the woman's head. The woman is giving him oral sex with a stretched jaw and looking at the camera with a notably awkward expression. In the following two images, women are licking large penises. The fourth image shows a man, cropped from midriff to knee, spreading his legs and exhibiting his large penis. In front of him, a woman is kneeling and looking over her shoulder towards the camera with a puzzled expression. The women's expressions are not ones of

arousal or desire. They seem startled and taken aback, and invite viewers to share their puzzlement while anchoring the spectacular display of male genitalia in a heterosexual framework. This is implied already in the background image that is focused on the face of the astonished woman, rather than the (ever so slightly blurred) penis hovering in the foreground.

In a paranoid reading, the arm-sized penises of *Big White Sticks* might be interpreted as phalluses, erect symbols of power, with its explicit emphasis on whiteness making visible the racialized codes of porn. The advert seems to work a certain denaturalization in its colossal penises that render the sexual acts displayed awkward and even unlikely. It also thematizes 'race' through its figures of 'abnormal white men' in ways that make it unnecessary to read between the lines. Exaggerating in its punch lines, exclamation marks and penises presented, *Big White Sticks* stands out in its layout and style, even if its main ingredients – large penises, predominance of oral sex or feminine female performers – are hardly exceptional as such. The advert is simultaneously generic and exceptional, predictable and puzzling, both conforming to porn conventions and recycling them in excess. While the majority of adverts in my sample of 366 involve the display of female bodies, *Big White Sticks* invites the reader to visit its galleries of penises-as-spectacle ('Explosive cocks') with men spreading their legs for viewer gratification. Its intended reader is ambiguously gendered and the visual pleasures available to male viewers are marked by certain homosexual titillation.

When first opening the advert for *Big White Sticks* in an email titled 'You Forgot Me Baby', I was quite taken by surprise, even bewildered by its degrees of excess and fleshy display. Having since often revisited the message, I still have not become used to it. My recurring readings of the text have been marked by puzzlement, amusement, titillation and dislike and these sensations have been difficult to tell apart: the reactions oscillate but the message remains at a distance, an object of wonder. I have been upset by the advert in various ways but these reactions are not best described as ones of either arousal or disgust. Unlike most adverts in my sample, this one refuses to become part of the bulk – it stands out and remains surprising in its exhibits of much flesh and little desire. Following Isobel Armstrong's (2000: 94–5) invitation to close reading, sensations and interpretation cannot (and should not) be uncoupled in acts of reading. Neither should close reading assume readers' mastery over the text. With its spectacle of shiny flesh, dissonant sexual acts and added comic exclamations, *Big White Sticks* is 'too much' and 'in your face', and its meanings ultimately impossible for me to pin down.

Addressing moments of surprise and unpredictability in online pornography, I have tended to turn toward independent, amateur and avant-garde pornographies, rather than spam material. Porn spam is exemplary of the less innovative areas of online pornography: primarily addressing an audience of heterosexual men, it seldom breaks the codes and conventions of mainstream porn. Attempts at creative reading appear deliberate and knowingly selective as the straightforward and stylized adverts provide few points of departure for imaginative enterprises. Working with spam

makes evident that close reading is not merely a question of reader intention or desire – after all, this would only be a variation of readers' absolute mastery over the meaning potential of the text. Encounters with texts are equally about the texture and depth of the texts themselves and their power to 'physically arouse us to meaning' (Sobchack, 2005: 57). The spectrum of meanings aroused in and by porn spam surpasses the literal but is also resistant to imaginative probing.

Articulations of feeling create and structure relationships between people, texts and values, bring them together or draw them apart (Ahmed, 2004: 8, 11) – and it is easier to bring some texts closer to oneself than others. Perhaps for this reason, feminist authors writing of their own porn watching have found it easier to account for disturbing, rather than arousing experiences (McClintock, 1993: 111–12): porn is not something openly desired by feminists as too close to oneself. Generic, theatrical and spectacular porn representations both draw the reader closer and push her away again with their displays of bodily orifices, liquids and acts, their extreme close-ups and general observing style. I have been 'touched by the substance and texture of images' (Sobchack, 2005: 65) in porn spam, *Big White Sticks* included, but these moments of textual intimacy have been conflicting ones. When considering such sensations, Vivian Sobchack recalls a number of (highbrow) films from Campion's *Piano* to Powell and Pressberger's *Black Narcissus* and Itami's *Tampopo* – evidently all films that she enjoyed. Yet reparative or implied reading should not assume love for the text, or pleasure derived from it. Reparative reading need not be confined to investigations of positive affect or intimacies with texts delectably stroking the reader. Affective responses are ambiguous, reader sensations shifting, and considerations of affect make evident the uncontrollability of encounters with texts. They point to a rupture between reader sensations and the fantasy of self-control that is deeply embedded in the ideal of modern adult individuality (Laqueur, 2003: 64). Thinking back to my different encounters with, and my conflicting reactions towards, pornography, its disturbing or unsettling elements have to do with what I think I desire and what other things may still move me and arouse me to meaning.

Mixed feelings

In an afterthought to *Hard Core*, Linda Williams (2004: 172) considers the role of affective reactions in criticism and points out that description is always already directed by one's reactions and values, and that revealing one's vulnerability to texts is a means to push studies of mass culture forward. Personal writing makes one vulnerable also in other ways as questions and things considered intimate are made public. In this sense, it goes against the logic of intimacy that aims to normalize sexuality as private, domestic and untouched by commercial sex (Berlant and Warner, 2000).

Feminist epistemology has emphasized the necessity of accounting for one's partial perspectives, rather than laying claims to outside knowledge

or depicting the object of study as otherness of some kind (Haraway, 1991: 189). Nevertheless, there seem to be few viable ways to investigate the gap between one's political stance towards sexuality and gendered power relations, and being vulnerable to pornography that generically features stylized displays of control. This is not a question of 'false consciousness' that can be replaced with 'correct' feminist fantasies, but of the fundamentally unruly nature of desire and the role of embodiment in feminist analysis of texts.

In an early exercise in implicated and reparative reading, Jane Gallop (1988: 18) critiques attempts to try to 'make desire consistent with political discourse' and to contain the body within discourse as a creation of the mind. She remembers reading Marquis de Sade and masturbating at intervals, with her sensations ranging from nausea to arousal. This comment is somewhat cursory in her reflection on physical reactions to texts but probably also the most remembered phrase in the essay (see Laqueur, 2003: 304). Considering that Sade's style of writing is about gut reactions – linking sex and murder, mutilation and philosophical reflection – these reactions are hardly eccentric or exceptional. Still it seems surprising for readers to admit to being actually moved by his texts and being vulnerable to them.

Reactions toward pornography – at least when not unequivocally confined to negative affect – are difficult to articulate also because porn tends to be viewed as distasteful and the lowest of all forms of mass culture. Class-specific notions of taste link to aversion towards pornography that does not follow middle-class paradigms of appropriate taste (Kuhn, 1994: 20–1). Laura Kipnis (1996: 139) argues that the disgust exhibited by many anti-porn feminists springs from a history of bourgeois desire to 'remove the distasteful from the sight of society' that again links to a denial of the body, its orifices and desires. For Kipnis, the tears of Robin Morgan in *Not a Love Story* are exemplary of such distaste. Having first condemned sexual practices from masturbation to kinky sex and the use of sex toys as unnatural, Morgan reflects on her hurt over living in a society saturated with porn and finally bursts into tears, 'the only publicly permissible display of body fluids' (Kipnis, 1996: 137–40).

Feminist distastes towards pornography may work to support the understanding of displayed genitalia, bodily orifices and fluids as disgusting, as well as of pornography as forbidden and therefore exciting and transgressive (Cowie, 1993: 134). Anti-pornography rhetoric has contrasted distasteful pornography with 'natural' human sexuality or eroticism. If pornography lacks artistic ambition or value, erotica explores the richness and depth of sexuality. The sexuality in question is not necessarily human: contrasting erotica and pornography, Diana E. H. Russell (2000: 49) writes of viewing a 'highly sensual and erotic' documentary film depicting snails 'making love'. Othering pornography makes it a forbidden fruit, especially if positive forms of erotica foreclose any play with relations of control or a close look at genitalia, and can be best visualized with invertebrate copulation. Critiques of anti-porn feminism's heteronormativity and bourgeois criteria of good taste do have validity, as preferences, prejudices and

distastes guide reading and interpretation (Rubin, 1995). Feminist critiques of porn conventions and their gendered choreographies should not, however, be reduced to a general notion of 'distaste', for a great deal remains to be critiqued in the scenarios and institutions of porn.

If feminist distaste towards porn produces limited affective range, a focus on pleasure produces an equally, although differently, skewed framing. Women and men, queer and straight, enjoy pornography. Porn performers may enjoy their work and take pleasure in posing for the camera, but this is certainly not all that can or should be said of the matter. There is a danger of posing pleasure – and female pleasure in particular – as a kind of fetish that has the magic power to disarm critique of representational conventions, structures of production and distribution. The idea is similar to the figure of the female body 'betraying itself' in porn stories: as long as there is pleasure, critique is useless, hypocritical, or even a form of intellectual dishonesty.

Focus on pleasure easily frames pornography as automatically gratifying and arousing. Yet porn may just as well disgust, titillate, amuse, bore or alienate its viewers. These feelings and sensations may coexist, they may be difficult to tell apart and they definitely alter in time and space in encounters with pornography. Although classic theories of emotion argue differently, feelings defy clear categorization. There are no clear labels for feelings that are inseparable from the ways in which they are expressed, or fail to be expressed (Campbell, 1997: 5–6, 13). Seemingly simple and direct, gut reactions can be disturbingly complex, open to multiple interpretations and mediations. Hence their status as basis of knowledge over pornography is highly unstable and necessitates careful reflection.

An implicated and reparative feminist reading of pornography can take many routes from description to close reading, analysis of genre and characters: it tries to make visible, and reflect on one's own affective investments in the texts studied without assuming these to be templates for reader or viewer reactions in general. Simultaneously critical and open to the power of texts, implicated analysis does not withdraw to a position of removed distance or assume the meanings of the texts as fixed. Close reading of pornography, being vulnerable to texts and touched by them, enables a more interactive relationship between readers and texts and a more multi-faceted view of the interconnections of the personal and the social. This is one means of making critiques of pornography more situated and writers accountable for their conceptualizations of power, sexuality and representation.

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my thanks to the members of the Disturbing Differences research project at the Centre for Women's Studies, University of Turku, the Women's Studies research seminar at the University of Jyväskylä, as well as the anonymous referees for their insightful comments and suggestions while developing this article.

References

- Ahmed, S. (2004) *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Armstrong, I. (2000) *The Radical Aesthetic*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Bell, J. B. (2001) 'Character and Cognition in Modern Pornography', pp. 36–42 in A. Koivunen and S. Paasonen (eds) *Conference Proceedings for Affective Encounters: Rethinking Embodiment in Feminist Media Studies*. Series A, no. 49. Turku: University of Turku.
- Berlant, L. and Warner, M. (2000) 'Sex in Public', pp. 311–30 in L. Berlant (ed.) *Intimacy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Campbell, S. (1997) *Interpreting the Personal: Expression and the Formation of Feelings*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Cowie, E. (1993) 'Pornography and Fantasy: Psychoanalytic Perspectives', pp. 132–52 in L. Segal and M. McIntosh (eds) *Sex Exposed: Sexuality and the Pornography Debate*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Dworkin, A. (1989) *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, 2nd edn. New York: E. P. Dutton.
- Dworkin, A. (2000 [1987]) 'Pornography and Grief', pp. 39–44 reprinted in D. Cornell (ed.) *Feminism and Pornography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Foucault, M. (1990 [1978]) *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I: An Introduction*. Trans. R. Hurley. London: Penguin.
- Gallop, J. (1988) *Thinking Through the Body*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Griffin, S. (1981) *Pornography and Silence: Culture's Revenge Against Nature*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Haraway, D. J. (1991) *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. London: Free Association Books.
- Hartsock, N. (1997 [1983]) 'The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism', pp. 216–40 reprinted in L. Nicholson (ed.) *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*. London: Routledge.
- Kappeler, S. (1986) *The Pornography of Representation*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Kipnis, L. (1996) *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Kitzinger, C. (1996) 'Therapy and How it Undermines the Practice of Radical Feminism', pp. 92–101 in D. Bell and R. Klein (eds) *Radically Speaking: Feminism Reclaimed*. Melbourne: Spinifex.
- Koivunen, A. (2001) 'Preface: The Affective Turn?', pp. 7–9 in A. Koivunen and S. Paasonen (eds) *Conference Proceedings for Affective Encounters: Rethinking Embodiment in Feminist Media Studies*. Series A, no. 49. Turku: University of Turku.
- Kuhn, A. (1994 [1985]) *The Power of the Image: Essays on Representation and Sexuality*. London: Routledge.
- Laqueur, T. W. (2003) *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation*. New York: Zone Books.
- McClintock, A. (1993) 'Gonad the Barbarian and the Venus Flytrap: Portraying the Female and Male Orgasm', pp. 111–31 in L. Segal and M. McIntosh

- (eds) *Sex Exposed: Sexuality and the Pornography Debate*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Marcus, S. (1974) *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England*. New York: Basic Books
- Paasonen, S. (2006) 'Email from Nancy Nutsucker: Representation and Gendered Address in Online Pornography', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 9(4): 403–20.
- Pearce, L. (1997) *Feminism and the Politics of Reading*. London: Arnold.
- Rubin, G. (1995 [1993]) 'Misguided, Dangerous and Wrong: An Analysis of Anti-Pornography Politics', pp. 244–53 reprinted in G. Dines and J. M. Humez (eds) *Gender, Race and Class in Media: A Text-Reader*. London: SAGE.
- Russell, D. E. H. (2000 [1988]) 'Pornography and Rape: A Causal Model', pp. 48–93 reprinted in D. Cornell (ed.) *Feminism and Pornography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sedgwick, E. K. (2003) *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Sobchack, V. (2005) *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Tomkins, S. (1995) *Shame and its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, ed. E. K. Sedgwick and A. Frank. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Warner, M. (2000) *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Williams, L. (1989) *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the 'Frenzy of the Visible'*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Williams, L. (1991) 'Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess', *Film Quarterly* 44(4): 2–13.
- Williams, L. (2004) 'Second Thoughts on *Hard Core*: American Obscenity Law and the Scapegoating of Deviance', pp. 165–75 in P. Church Gibson (ed.) *More Dirty Looks: Gender, Pornography and Power*, 2nd edn. London: British Film Institute.

Susanna Paasonen, PhD, works as Assistant Professor of Digital Culture at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. Her research interests include feminist theory, popular culture and Internet research. She is the author of *Figures of Fantasy: Internet, Women and Cyberdiscourse* (2005), the co-editor of *Women and Everyday Uses of the Internet: Agency and Identity* (2002) and *Pornification: Sex and Sexuality in Media Culture* (forthcoming, 2007).

Address: Digital Culture, PL 35 (jt), 40014 University of Jyväskylä, Finland.
Email: Susanna.Paasonen@campus.jyu.fi