

A vision of new porn:

- How women are revising porn to match a time of greater gender equality¹

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The women's porn market is growing; more women are producing it, and more women are watching it (Goldberg 2003, Achille 2005, Milne 2005, Rutter 2007). At the same time, anti-porn feminists continue to accuse porn of being degrading to women, reducing them to sexual objects for men. Thus the anti-porn and pro-sex debate between feminists continues. In the United States, the two camps are most vocally represented in the popular media by Ariel Levy, author of *Female Chauvinist Pigs* (2005), and the CAKE movement, with its handbook devoted to the sexual pleasures of modern women. According to Levy, the CAKE movement is symptomatic of a current trend equating raunchy with empowered. It all comes down to performance for men rather than pleasure for oneself, argues Levy (Levy 2005). She blames the consumer industry for exploiting the conflation of raunchy with empowered, and for promoting the new porn chic with its simplistic, plastic stereotypes of female sexuality as evidence of the sexually liberated and personally empowered. Her critique of porn is that, as a commercialized superficial version of sex, it can never give you the real thing: "no matter how much porn you watch you will end up with a limited knowledge of your own sexuality because you still won't know how these things *feel*" (ibid., 185, Levy's emphasis). CAKE's critique of porn, on the other hand, is that "there's simply a lack of it tailored to the female eye. We want to see ourselves on-screen and identify with the subject" (Gallagher & Kramer 2005, 180).

In my own investigation of porn made by women, I looked for porn that presents a picture with which women today can identify. I found that some female porn producers *are* successful at re-visioning porn this way,² creating a discourse that reflects a time of growing gender equality in which gender roles are becoming less rigid. Seeing, on the one hand, the

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² I use this term ("re-vision") as Linda Williams defines it to connote the more substantive revisions of porn made by women, that for a woman implies "transforming oneself from sexual object to sexual subject of representation" (Williams 1989, 232).

growing popularity and legitimacy of porn—now that it has joined books and sex-toys on shelves in shops catering to women, and has found its way onto college campuses as an accepted field of study,³—and, on the other hand, the lingering experiences of gender inequality and oppressive gender roles as reported by young women today,⁴ I believe it is worth considering what porn can offer young women (and men) as they try to establish and express their gendered identities in a world that is itself shifting in its boundaries.

In this global mobile wireless-online age, new technologies are connecting the world in new ways. Even so, it is necessary to consider different cultural contexts, and thereby the need for different discourses. As we shall see, the porn that speaks to young women in the United States is not necessarily the same as the porn that speaks to a young female Scandinavian audience. Comparing the two can inform us not only about different pressing issues in different parts of the world; it also demonstrates the significance of provisional discourse, i.e. how new or revised porn, even if imperfect, can provide a stepping stone in a specific time and place to a certain group or population.

In this article, I look at porn made by women in the United States and Europe. In each case, porn is analyzed as discourse and as film. I begin by presenting and discussing these terms in further detail. Then I present my analyses. Finally, I return to the question of the possible negative and positive functions of porn.

Porn as discourse and film: the predicaments of language and pleasure

There is a prevalent suspicion among anti-porn feminists that porn is essentially doomed to

³ As Williams writes, “Where once it seemed necessary to argue vehemently against pro-censorship, antipornography feminism for the value and importance of studying pornography,” porn studies today thrive (Williams 2004, 1). “Feminist debates about whether pornography should exist at all have paled before the simple fact that still and moving-image pornographies have become fully recognizable fixtures of popular culture” (ibid., 1). The statistics are telling: while Hollywood makes approx. 400 films a year, the porn industry makes approx. 11,000 videos, covering a broad range of sexual preferences, reaching out to a diverse market, women included (Rich 2001). Scandinavian studies also address the general increase in the social acceptability of pornography, even among women (Træen, Spitznogle & Beverfjord 2004, Hald 2006).

⁴ Even in Scandinavia, young women report experiencing gender inequality, confining gender categories, and oppressive “kjønnsforventninger” (gender expectations), despite having achieved a considerable level of gender equality (Roggen & Tornes 2006, 118, see also Skugge, Olsson & Zilg 1999, Solheim & Vaagland 1999, Goth, MacLean, Petersen & Schelin 2000). The ‘whore’ or ‘slut’ label remains a threat to overtly sexual young women. At the same time, “å bli stemplet som frigid, det er nesten verre enn å bli kalt hore” (to be labeled frigid is almost worse than being called a whore), as Heidi Sinding-Larsen writes (in Roggen & Tornes (Eds) 2006, 101).

perpetuate historically flawed perspectives on gender and sexuality (Brownmiller 1976, Dworkin 1979, Morgan 1980, MacKinnon 1987).⁵ Simon Hardy, on the other hand, argues that porn, or the erotic discourse that imbues porn with its symbolic meanings, can be “a means of establishing a female subject who might play a decisive role in transforming the traditional balance and pattern of heterosexual eroticism” (Hardy 2000, 91). Hardy acknowledges the historical foundation of anti-porn feminists’ suspicion against porn, but he asks us to consider “the prospects for transformations of the erotic, so that it might more closely reflect recent and ongoing changes in the arrangement of gender” (ibid., 89). According to Hardy, this could be achieved through a “re-signification” of the erotic discourse that, as such, “must have a starting point, any new erotic expression must contain conventional as well as innovative elements if it is to have any purchase on the sexual imagination” (ibid., 92). In other words, we depend on the current hegemonic discourse to create a new discourse that could better reflect and even affect the changing arrangement of gender. Hardy cautions us against thinking that this would imply an elimination of power; “a straightforward, uncritical strategy of expression risks perpetuating the capacity of eroticism to naturalize power relations, whether between the existing genders of hegemonic heterosexuality or among post-hegemonic configurations of gender” (ibid., 92). Instead he advises us to be attentive to the formation of new power patterns. In conclusion, “the respective strategies of critique and expressions need somehow to be combined, since each on its own will encounter serious problems” (ibid., 93).

This poses a challenge for today’s re-visioning porn-makers. In addition to seducing and inspiring the viewer through the filmic medium, she must also maintain a critical eye on how she appropriates and revises the discourse. She could possibly get too caught up in addressing the predicaments of language. Moving-image porn is after all a film genre and as such it seeks to move and affect its viewer through the nuanced qualities of picture and sound. Indeed, like horror films, tearjerkers, and comedies, porn films strive to affect its viewer corporally, by eliciting bodily sensations. Theories of spectatorship and the disembodied gaze fail to address this;⁶ however, film scholars have recently begun to discuss the key role

⁵ Levy essentially repeats the main tenets of the early anti-porn feminists as she presents them in the first part of her book (Levy 2005, chap. 2), criticizing porn in the second part of her book for exploiting, violating, and dehumanizing women with degrading plastic sexual stereotypes, ultimately reinforcing a culture of male domination (ibid., chap. 6). In Scandinavia, similar arguments are voiced by the Women’s Front organizations in Norway and Sweden, and by other radical feminist groups such as Ottar (Norway) and ROKS (Sweden).

⁶ Analyzing horror films, Carol Clover therefore rejects the detached gaze of phallic mastery discussed by Laura

corporal engagement of our bodies plays in making sense of all moving-images (Sobchack 2004). This calls for a consideration of the quality and kind of the visual and visceral pleasures of moving-image porn as well (Williams 1999).⁷ In my following analysis of porn made by women, I consider its capacity to speak to a new generation of women; its potential to move its viewer; and its ability to do so while maintaining a critical eye on its appropriation of language.

Under the Covers: Sex in the United States

Candida Royalle (b. 1950) is today's most renowned producer of porn—or “erotic films,” as she prefers—from “a woman's point of view.” Born and raised in New York City, where she became an active member of the feminist movement during her time at City University, Royalle moved to San Francisco in her early twenties, as the feminist movement turned increasingly against men and towards each other, embracing lesbianism while denouncing men (Levy 2005).⁸ There, she entered the world of porn as an actress. Ten years later she returned to New York, ambivalent about the porn industry though she maintained that possibilities exist for women in porn and that better porn could be made. With that intent, Royalle co-founded Femme Productions in 1984. Since then she has produced eighteen films.

Now in her late fifties, Royalle has become an icon in her field. She is training a new generation of sex-positive women for a career in female-friendly porn (e.g. Jamye Waxman, co-writer and producer of *Under the Covers*, 2007), and recently founded a new sub-division of her company, Femme Chocolat, featuring a more ethnically diverse cast in films directed by young women of color (e.g. Venus Hottentot, director of *AfroDite Superstar*, 2007).

Royalle's films stand out in terms of quality filmmaking, use of realism, and depth of

Mulvey (1975) in favor of a reactive gaze where the filmmaker and the viewer “come remarkably close to addressing one another directly—the viewer by shouting out his approval or disapproval” (Clover 1992, 202). Contrary to the phallic gaze, which assaults, the reactive gaze posits a vulnerable receptive flesh that is itself assaulted by the film; “we take it in the eye,” as Clover writes (*ibid.*, 202).

⁷ Williams suggest we look to Sobchack, Clover, and historian of visual culture Jonathan Crary for inspiration as we proceed “thinking about the visual and visceral pleasures of moving-image pornography” (Williams 1999, 292). Crary has termed the “carnal density” of modern vision to illustrate how the body, which had a neutral or invisible status in the classical Cartesian camera obscura model of vision, began to acquire a new thickness and density in the more de-centered nineteenth-century ways of seeing (Crary 1992, 149).

⁸ Royalle recounts that since she had a boyfriend, she felt like she was “sleeping with the enemy. There was a real move to rejecting heterosexual relationship and embracing lesbianism, or embracing separatism” (Levy 2005, 68). There is a historical basis for Royalle's experiences (see Segal 1994).

plot and character development. The characters convincingly display the complex nuances of sexual longing and fulfillment that the original music scores compliment beautifully. In the feature-length film *Eyes of Desire* (1998),⁹ for instance, we follow the protagonist, Lisa, as she explores new dimensions of her sexuality. Her character, a photographer torn between the offer of a new career and a relationship that is not fulfilling her, is believable. We can sympathize with her feeling of listlessness and longing for something to happen. She seeks refuge in the apartment of her friend Amy. Amy invites Lisa to explore life through a telescope, which she herself has been using to look over at the apartment of her boyfriend Tim in a sexual game of theirs. Lisa is torn between her awakening desire and shy reluctance to watch. The music reveals this with a synthesized progression of a simple yet tantalizing melody, broken by moments of dissonance. The viewers can sense what Lisa feels. We hear the silence in the living room when the music pauses to build the suspense and can almost feel the telescope that presses towards her eye as the camera closes in on it. Crosscuts between close-ups of Lisa, gazing, and shots of what she sees through the telescope, build anticipation, as the music swells to new exhilarating dimensions. The tension reaches a climax when Lisa notices that she is herself being watched by a mysterious neighbor; surprised, she finds pleasure in this.¹⁰

As Linda Williams points out, the “cultivation and exploration of specifically female desire is especially evident in all the Femme films” (Williams 1989, 255). Furthermore, Williams writes, “the real importance of Femme is its serious attempt to visualize women’s desire in a genre that has consistently continued to see sex ... from the viewpoint of the phallus” (ibid., 247). I agree that Royalle’s films are exceptional in their capacity to develop female desire and capture it from a woman’s point of view. However, I am intrigued not only by Royalle’s capacity to avoid the phallic gaze, but to capture a gaze that is mutual and democratically exchanged between two individuals. There are no women or men posing for the director’s camera in these films; instead, they gaze at each other, absorbed and entranced. The gaze here becomes a vehicle of admiration, adoration, affection and passion, not degrading objectification. In Lisa’s case, the telescope becomes a vehicle to overcome her inhibition, and to access repressed and unexplored aspects of her sexuality. This way Royalle legitimizes both the activity of looking at sex, and the pleasure in being the object of

⁹ Shot on Beta Cam video. Royalle has also produced one 35 mm film (*Revelations*, 1992) and now shoots on digital video.

¹⁰ James K. Beggan and Scott T. Allison provide an excellent analysis of how scopophilia is legitimized in Royalle’s films (Beggan & Allison 2003).

someone's gaze.

Royalle's films demonstrate a concern with that which prevents women and men from pursuing their sexual desires, be it fear, a sense of shame, or a policing of desires that are not 'politically correct.' In her handbook on sex, *How to Tell a Naked Man What to Do*, Royalle recounts her own policing of "politically incorrect" fantasies as a young woman (e.g. of being forced by an anonymous man to have sex); how she—a college feminist—locked them away in shame and fear of being discovered by her feminist "sisters;" how this repression prevented her from sexual pleasure; how counseling sessions helped her accept her fantasies; and, finally, how directing films taught her how she could find a place for these fantasies in her own life (Royalle 2005, 21). What she learned from directing was that she could entertain her fantasy as a fictive scenario, either toying with the idea, or actually staging it, enacting it through consensual role-play. In other words, Royalle's way of dealing with the hegemonic heterosexual erotic discourse, with its "symbolic subordination of women" (Hardy 2000, 89), was to engage it reflectively and ironically, a critical appropriation.

Royalle uses her films to communicate her lessons, portraying characters who, like Royalle, overcome their own shame and fears, and who find ways of tapping into the deeper reach of their sexual desire through role-play. In this way they become positive role models. The positive reception of Royalle's films suggests viewers identify with her characters. They enact both 'politically correct' and 'incorrect' positions while making it clear to the viewer that they are themselves clear that they are *playing*, not *being* the parts they play. They all appear well-educated and informed by the principles of gender equality, and the negotiation of the sex is consensual.

In *Eyes of Desire*, again, Lisa is invited to watch (through the telescope) a staged role-play. Amy tells Lisa to take a look at around eight in the evening: Amy is wearing a red latex dress, waiting by the couch with drinks prepared. Tim arrives from work, briefcase in hand. Amy poses, turns, and bends over for Tim, wriggling her butt. Then she strips for him. It is all playfully performed; the atmosphere is good-humored and the sex that follows is warm and loving.

Through the telescope Lisa also comes across the role-play of another couple in a neighboring apartment. This one is less typical: getting ready for a party, the wife comes upon her husband dressed up in a gown similar to hers. The repartee that ensues (she complains about him not wearing a tuxedo as the invitation called for and for stretching her underwear, to which he replies that it seems she must like it since she's getting wet) results in giggles and excited sex. As they cuddle after sex, he teasingly asks if he can borrow that frilly pink frock

she brought home earlier that day, to which she snaps, then laughs, smilingly assuring him that he can borrow whatever he wants from her.

Role-play (and role-reversal) here becomes a subversive means of expressing desire and a way of expanding the playfield (and the erotic discourse) for women and men to establish and express their gender and sexuality.

Under the Covers also features role-play; it begins with a young couple making their own home-sex-video and concludes with a feathered and masked role-play in the backroom of a sex party. Both activities have become more common in recent years in the United States. The technology is readily available to couples who want to make their own sex videos, and sex-themed parties are hosted by CAKE (among other groups) on both coasts. Female friendly sex-toy shops—also featured in the film—are thriving. At the same time, the federal government has contributed to an exponential increase in abstinence-only programs in schools across the United States.¹¹ Blurring religion with science, and treating gender stereotypes as facts (U.S. House – Special Investigation Division 2004), these programs—accompanied by virginity pledge programs and abstinence-until-married trinkets—propagate pubertal hang-ups about sex. *Under the Covers* highlights this complex paradox under the pretext of following a young journalist reporting on sex in New York City. We meet her in the film’s second scene where she is interviewing a sex therapist for whom, we learn, the young couple in the first scene was making the sex video. Virgins when they married, the couple solicits the advice of the therapist to overcome their lack of comfort in the bedroom, in particular when it comes to oral sex. The therapist advises them to view some sexually explicit films, and to perhaps make one of their own as an exercise to make them more comfortable and playful. The couple is in the comfort of their own bedroom when shooting their video, but there is still a sense of shyness and inhibition about the situation; the young woman giggles at her husband’s suggestion that she touch herself, but eventually she gets more into it, as does he. The scenario is believable, even if the two act a bit corny. The atmosphere is tentative, but loving.

Evidently, the sex therapist’s advice works for the young couple. She proceeds in the interview by promoting the safe use of sex toys. Echoing masturbation guru Betty Dodson, she explains to the slightly uptight journalist the functions of various sex toys at the local female-friendly sex-toy shop, “Babeland.”

¹¹ Under the Bush administration there has been a continued expansion of investment in abstinence-only programs. In fiscal year 2001, federal abstinence-only funding was approx. \$80 million. Since then annual funding has more than doubled to \$176 million in 2007. The Bush administration requested \$204 million for fiscal year 2008, proposing it reaches \$270 million by 2009 (NARAL 2007).

Sexual repression is defeated by pleasure in *Under the Covers*. The virginity vow activist who works undercover at the sex-toy shop succumbs to the temptations of masturbation and skips her “Virginity until the Vow” meeting. The journalist lets go of her hang-ups, and—protected by a masked identity—delights in a threesome at a sex-party. The therapist, finally, takes care of her own needs, first with toys (in particular a very large blue dildo), then with a well-hung man whose ad she finds online at “thickandjuicy.com.”

The message of *Under the Covers* is that as long as the sex is consensual, there is nothing wrong in pursuing one’s erotic fantasies. Women and men are not reduced to their taboos or preferred parts in sexual role-play. There is hope for the sexually repressed; inhibitions can be overcome. Oral sex, masturbation, sex toys, porn films, and arranged role-play (including S&M, which the film also features) can be stimulating components of a healthy sex life. Finally, for those who need further assistance, a sex therapist can help. And there is always the online market to help people with likeminded preferences connect.

Royalle’s choice of featuring a sex therapist is not coincidental. She takes pride in her membership of the *American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors and Therapists* and that her films have been used in sex therapy. Co-writer and producer Jamye Waxman shares Royalle’s dedication to pedagogy; with a M.A. in Sex Education, she teaches courses on oral sex, sex toys and partner sex, and writes the advice column “Sex Ed” for *Playgirl Magazine*. Considering the pages the *CAKE* founders dedicate in their book to masturbation advice, how to overcome shyness to fully enjoy oral sex, and the benefits of sex toys, role-play, group sex, watching sex and videotaping one’s own sexual interactions with a partner (Gallagher and Kramer 2005), it would seem that Royalle and Waxman are in sync with young American women.

If *Under the Covers* scores in pedagogy and attention to realism, it loses, however, in quality as film and potential to move the viewer. Whereas Royalle’s films typically demonstrate a careful eye for sensual composition through framing, lighting, and color, this film reveals less attention to these aspects to avoid the sterile appearance of digital video. And whereas Royalle’s films typically convey convincing desire and pleasure of believable characters in their natural settings, the characters here tend to be rather stiff, and their costumes and settings are less realistic. Finally, whereas most of Royalle’s films have exceptional original music scores, there is nothing exceptional about the soundtrack to this film; on the contrary, it has the typical monotonous beat of much porn. Perhaps the pedagogical motivation became more important for the director and producer team of this production than aesthetics. Or perhaps they got carried away engaging in sexual-political

activism with its jabs against prudishness and the conservative right. Or perhaps they wanted to do more than their budget allowed for. In either case, it remains an important film, addressing critical issues while capturing the diverse range of current attitudes to sex in the United States. As discourse, it has potential to give voice to many young American women and men.

Shagging in Europe: A different kind of porn

Royalle's Scandinavian distributor, CUPIDIO, a Norwegian-based sex and lifestyle magazine with an online shop, declined to purchase *Under the Covers*. CUPIDIO's owner and chief editor, Terje Gammelsrud, found its humor somewhat flat and the sex scenes rather bland (Gammelsrud 2007). Instead, he has expanded CUPIDIO's selection of porn with new DVDs by Anna Span (b. 1972), a British producer of porn. Span is the first independent female porn producer with a production company of her own (*Easy on the Eye*) to enter the porn scene after Royalle, almost twenty years later.

Span believes that "to sexually objectify, that is to fleetingly view a person's sexual attractiveness separately from their personality/person, is a natural human experience, NOT just a male one, as traditionally depicted" (Span 2005, her emphasis). Thus Span legitimizes the act of viewing porn. She highlights the pleasures of looking at sex in her porn by either inserting herself as the cameraperson, e.g. on *Anna's Mates* (2002) and *Pound a Punnet* (2003), or by shooting others looking at someone else. In the 1980s, however, Span was staunchly opposed to looking at porn, considering it a male subjugation of women to service their needs. Then she came to the realization that she was jealous by how the society she lived in said that a man's desires were worth investing money in to cater for but not a woman's; she felt that "what was missing was the equivalent (but very different in content/style) for women" (ibid.). While completing her degree in Film and Video at St. Martin's School of Art in London, she decided to do something about this. Taking advantage of digital video cameras and the easy access to online distribution, she released her first DVD in 2002, incidentally the same year CAKE opened a branch in London. She has since released a total of eleven DVDs, each including five twenty-minute episodes.

Span is CUPIDIO's bestselling female porn producer (Gammelsrud 2007). The popularity of Span's porn speaks to the level of comfort with which sex is approached in today's Scandinavia, at least compared to the United States. The benefits of a much more thorough human sexuality education and the accomplishments of the women's movement are apparent, as young Scandinavian women are encouraged to take ownership over their

sexuality. A recent comprehensive study on teenage sexuality in Norway suggests we are witnessing a new generation of more sexually active and self-confident females (Pedersen & Samuelsen 2003). A modern female audience in Scandinavia will probably identify with the confident women that populate Span's porn, more so than the characters in Royale's porn. Moreover, Span brings sex down from its romantic pedestal and shows how sex can be simply about having a good time. Often the sex is between friends, of the same sex or opposite, or between people who know each other casually. Whatever the case may be, the attraction between people is incentive enough and sufficient basis for both the women and men to have sex. This may resonate well with young Scandinavians, e.g. in Norway where the norm of being in love as the sole basis for a sexual relationship has been challenged in recent years (ibid.).¹²

Span's porn reflects other cultural and generational differences between herself and Royale. Whereas Royale's porn is typically concerned with conveying a serious message of pedagogical value, portraying women, and men, overcoming personal and social inhibitions to connect with the depths of their sexual desire, Span's porn shows people who are already completely comfortable with their sexuality, frolicking in some jolly good sex mainly for the fine fun of it. Hence, the use of humor is different. Whereas Royale primarily uses humor as political commentary (e.g. in *Under the Covers* and *Stud Hunters*, 2002), Span uses humor to build sexual tension through the characters' repartees, drawing the viewer closer to the characters as we giggle with them, not at them.¹³ Moreover, the characters' ability to role-play under the most hilarious circumstances, whether realistic or fantastic, is a way of pointing out

¹² With the release of *Rosa Prosa* (Pink Prose) in Norway on March 8, 2006, Åse Brandvold and Maria Børje brought further attention to this, discussing their experiences having sexual relationships with friends, so-called "pulevenner" (friends with benefits or fuck buddies); how pure lust, rather than romantic love can be the basis for sex; how friends can find comfort in one another through sexual intimacy, but also how one risks getting hurt if one develops more emotions than the other; how one learns to separate being horny from being in love; and how a sense of security can be more important than love as a basis for sexual intimacy (in Roggen & Tornes (Eds) 2006, 115-30).

¹³ Neither Royale nor Span include humor to provide the viewer with the opportunity to detach and raise above the main sexual plot, as opposed to the humor used in much other porn, as discussed by Magnus Ullén who concludes that: "Vi skrattar inte *med* den pornografiska diskursen, vi skrattar *åt* den" (We don't laugh *with* the pornographic discourse, we laugh *at* it) (Ullén 2005, 33). According to Ullén, the point of this kind of humor—which is not really funny, only incredibly ridiculous—is for the viewer to feel better about him- or herself watching porn, i.e. to justify the viewing: the viewer continues to watch not because the content is interesting, but because it is so incredibly bad that the viewer can't believe his or her own eyes.

their awareness of the role they are playing.

“Sperm Sample” (*A & O Department*, 2004) is a good example of how wit and banter are used to build sexual chemistry, and how role-play is employed in a woman’s reflective and ironic appropriation of the heterosexual erotic discourse. True to Span’s style, the episode also showcases a woman in control: a female lab technician is distracted by a male custodian mopping the floor. He is cute, and she is amused by their amicable bantering. With the pretext of finding out whether or not he has “elephantitis of the penis,” she points out an “unusual growth” in his pants. He knowingly plays along when she asks to see if it fits in her mouth, her vagina, her anus. After she has climaxed, she asks for a sperm sample, which she collects in a glass after he has finished himself off. She concludes, tongue-in-cheek, that “it’ll have to do” and sends him away without a diagnosis.

Unlike Royalle, Span is less interested to invest in the filmic quality of her porn; she does not try to cover up for the fact that it is shot on digital video; there is no music soundtrack; and there are no elaborate plots. However, the picture quality is typically good, demonstrating attention to the use of lighting and colors, as well as the attractiveness and authenticity of the characters and their settings. While Royalle places the emphasis on soft lighting and the exclusion of the more graphic meat and money shots,¹⁴ Span includes all of the typical genre conventions of porn, including the lingering close-ups of genitals, cunnilingus and fellatio, penetration in various positions orally, vaginally, anally, sometimes both, and money shots. What sets Span’s porn apart from most porn is the democratic use of the camera, shooting from both genders’ perspectives, and the close-ups avoid the gynecological feel of meat shots in most porn, highlighting instead the natural beauty of genitals in their various shapes and colors, folds and fluids. As discourse, it can speak to a new generation of confident young women in at least many parts of Europe and probably some young women in the United States,¹⁵ engaging in a variety of forms of intimacy with modern men devoted to accommodate women’s pleasures first.¹⁶

¹⁴ Meat shots refer to explicit close-up shots of genitals and penetration; money shot to the male external ejaculation.

¹⁵ Through the Internet, Span might possibly be reaching viewers worldwide through online DVD sale and paid online viewing.

¹⁶ Through interviews with young urban men and women in Norway, Willy Pedersen found that men, like the women, are critical to “tradisjonelle macho væremåter, knyttet til seksuelt press og pågåenhet” (traditional macho ways of being, connected to sexual pressure and aggressiveness) (Pedersen 2005, 93). To avoid association with this kind of stereotypical masculinity, young men seek alternative identities, in particular by

New porn on the horizon

The last few years have seen a flurry of activity among a new generation of aspiring independent female porn-makers in Europe and the United States. Erika Lust (b. 1977), a young Swedish woman who now lives and works in Barcelona, deserves particular attention.¹⁷ With a B.A. in Political Science and Feminism, and a M.A. in Audiovisual Management, Erika launched her own production company (Lust Films) in 2004 and released her first porn short, “The Good Girl,” the same year. In 2007, she released her first full-length DVD, *Five Hot Stories for Her*, which includes “The Good Girl” as one of five episodes.

Aesthetically, Lust creates an entirely revamped look with cinematic quality not often found in porn. The use of lighting and color gives the digital video the appearance of professionally produced film. Compared to the more formulaic bare-bones presentation of Span’s porn, Lust presents a very fluid arrangement. The cutting and camera movement are concise and deliberate, matched with an indie-style, pop-rock soundtrack that can swell up in crescendo. In addition, Lust teases us with beautiful pictures. Each shot is composed with careful attention to framing and angles, lighting and color, shapes and forms. The tempo between shots, e.g. of a bare shoulder, wine spilled over a woman’s belly, a tongue licking it, etc., builds tension and heat; she lingers just long enough on one before cutting to the next. Lust’s porn has the look and feel of a music video slash indie-film with explicit sex that can move the viewer visually and viscerally.

As discourse, Lust’s porn reflects the range of real twenty- and thirty-something women and men today across Europe and the westernized world, be they bold and alternative, modern and hip, single and on their own, or married with children; whichever the case, reflecting a fairly sophisticated middle-class generation that has grown up with MTV and, later, “Sex and the City.” The characters are believable in their scenarios, and their sexual desires and pleasures are convincingly portrayed. In a time and culture of increased gender equality and diminishing homophobia (Giddens 1992), the characters demonstrate new freedoms and levels of confidence, but also the continuing constraints and inhibitions among women as well as men (Pedersen 2005).¹⁸ Here Lust points to the tentative vulnerability as

being more oriented towards women’s sexual pleasure than their own (ibid.).

¹⁷ Others include Petra Joy (Strawberry Seductress since 2003), Estelle Joseph (Stella Films since 2004), and Tristan Taormino (Smart Ass Productions since 2006).

¹⁸ E.g. when it comes to same sex intimacy, men appear more constricted than women, who in many ways experiment more freely with various forms of intimacy, same sex included (Pedersen 2005, see in particular

well as the empowering excitement of women and men in a time of changing gender arrangement. Thus Lust provides young women and men across the world with a voice as they too maneuver in a “gap between the ideal and the practice of gender” (Hardy 2000, 91). The capacity of porn to illuminate this gap between what is and what can be, as women and men reconfigure their ways of establishing and expressing their gender and sexuality, is one of the most intriguing aspects of re-visioned porn.

Conclusion

The negative functions of porn have received much attention in feminist discussion, Levy included. The possible positive functions have received less attention. Recently, CAKE has become an outlet for women who insist they find pleasure and empowerment in watching porn.¹⁹ Certainly we cannot dismiss these women; eschewing them for being conditioned by a male dominated society is tantamount to saying they can’t speak for themselves. On the contrary, the audience for CAKE or porn appealing to women is, as Feona Attwood notes, mostly classy, well-heeled, middle-class professionals, Sex and the City look-alikes, not the “‘white trash’ figure of the ‘slut’” (Attwood 2006, 85).

Levy sees the commercialization of the porn-chic as a perversion of sexual liberation. However, the classy chic commercialization of sex in today’s consumer culture is also creating access for an audience that has traditionally been excluded from the consumption of sexually explicit material (Juffer 1998, Attwood 2006). As Span says in a feature by *The Observer* on the new women’s sexual revolution with its sex shops, parties, and porn, “It’s bigger than just sex. It’s about saying to a woman that she as a person is worthy of investment” (Moore 2003, 27). Petra Boynton, on the other hand, a sex psychologist at University College London, responds with similar concerns as does Levy in the United States, questioning how much is gained by what appears primarily as a commercial trend:

“We see all these new sex stores and openness as sexual freedom, but our whole culture for women is very prescriptive. Name one overtly sexual female role model who isn’t constantly pilloried ... For too many women ... sex is still surrounded by

chap. 8). Lust captures this but also suggests men may become more comfortable exploring same sex intimacy (see in particular the episode “jodetecarlos.com”).

¹⁹ In Norway, chief editor of the magazine *Woman*, Heidi Sinding-Larsen, has given voice to young women who find pleasure and inspiration in watching porn (e.g. in Roggen & Tornes (Eds) 2006, 97-103).

feelings of confusion, inadequacy and embarrassment” (ibid., 27).

Her recommendation for improvement is better sex education; “It should be about negotiation, and how scary it is, how to say yes, how to say no, how it feels, whether it hurts” (ibid., 27).

While I agree with Boynton on the importance of sex education, I also agree with Span on the significance of recognizing women as worthy consumers of sexually explicit material. Protecting women from the commercialization of sex because you can sell “anything” to women because “women are so vulnerable to feeling inadequate” (as one woman puts it), is patronizing (ibid., 25). Commercialization is easily dismissed as the enemy, but in a commercialized age, denying access is tantamount to denying a voice. If the swanky design of sex shops legitimizes the purchase of porn to women who otherwise would not set their feet in a sex shop, then these shops provide some women with at least the opportunity to assert their interest in having their sexuality catered for. It is a way of making the private public that has significant social and political ramifications. Seeing how overtly sexual women are still pilloried, and how women’s sexuality and their erotic needs have been isolated to the privacy of the home, excluded from public access to sexually explicit visual material by cultural norms, reinforced by the uninviting look of porn shops that haven’t “done much to attract women customers,” this is an important victory, even if it takes us only so far (Juffer 1998, 58).

The female producers of porn discussed in this article suggest that re-visioned porn as a re-signified discourse could take us quite far. In the meantime, what was once perceived as degrading is now appropriated and used as a tool for one’s own pleasure and empowerment, and for personal identification and signification. And the day may come when more men, like the women before them, will be interested in revising porn, catering to a modern gender equal-minded audience,²⁰ to the detriment, one may speculate, of the kind of porn that perpetuates traditional gender roles. This may allow men (and women) to feel *good* about watching porn,²¹ and give voice to young men and women alike who seek to break out of

²⁰ Tony Comstock (Comstock Films since 2003) demonstrates such an interest.

²¹ Hardy found in his research that “when men reject pornography – because of their inability to reconcile its symbolic subordination of women with their emotional commitment to an egalitarian relationship with a female partner – the whole field of their erotic experiences tends to be foresworn, or retained only as a guilty secret” (Hardy 2000, 89). It seems that a re-visioned porn that provides a picture of women and men that agrees with their commitment to an egalitarian relationship with their female partners would provide these men with a

confining gender categories.

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welcome alternative unavailable to them less than ten years ago; the reception of Comstock's films indicate as much.

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