

# Off/Scene Representation: On the Construction of Sexuality in Pornographic Cinema

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**Abstract**—Various manifestations of pornography have been emphatically addressed by feminist studies and critique. In that context, the pornographic movie genre and erotic cinema are often considered part of a phallogocentric universe of meaning. Some dissonant views exist, however, relative to the conception of pornography as a clear reproducer of women's sexual oppression. Bearing in mind the aforementioned debates, this work analyzes the representational dimension of pornographic films from a socio-cultural standpoint, focusing on the rhetoric of pornography and on its effects on the construction of the contemporary socio-sexual universe.

**Index Terms**—Cinema, Feminism, Pornography, Representation

## I. INTRODUCTION

Pornography, understood as a category encompassing a range of sexually-explicit materials, dates back to the 19th century, when it became the target of a regulatory discourse which stumbles time and again with the ambiguities of the power surrounding sex. In movie history, demands for censorship came on the heels of the first manifestations of erotica<sup>1</sup>. The scandal was related, first and foremost, to the way in which the screen's size magnified the intimacy of the sexual encounter, turning it into a public object.

Explicit representations of sexuality have been the target of historic moral crusades, concerned about the alleged corrupting effect of pornography on the institution of marriage, deemed the only acceptable context for sex, with procreation as its exclusive purpose. In contrast to those traditional and conservative stances, liberal movements challenge government supervision and censorship, arguing that private consumption of pornography cannot be harmful.

As regards feminist views, the debate on pornography generally moves along different lines: the critique is not aimed at sexual explicitness, but at sexism. In this context, pornographic movies are taken as a cornerstone of the phallogocentric universe of meaning, reproducing women's sexual oppression, and also as part of a highly-profitable industry, managed according to the rules of capitalism, which turns people and their sexuality into products to be consumed. In that line, pornography is not structured outside of the broader domain of social practices (Nead, 1992.)

The heyday of pornography in print and mostly audiovisual media is part of the process E. Wilson (1992) labeled as "culturalization of society," characterized by the growth of media technologies. These are the days in which the second-wave militant feminism "has shifted from struggles to change the world to struggles to change representation" (Wilson: 16).

Since the late eighties, the debate on pornography is one of the most visible feminist activities (mostly in the United States, Australia, and Europe). Arguments focus not only on challenging the persistence of the representation of women as men's objects of desire and loci of sexuality, but also on exploring women's responses to various pornographic movies.

Within feminist theory and critique, discussions on pornography are numerous and pugnacious. Throughout his paper, we aim not to reflect that complexity, but to provide a reflection on the rhetoric of pornography in cinema, focusing on its effects on the construction of the contemporary socio-sexual universe. In other words, if all pornography is a representation (Kuhn, 1982), the consequences to be drawn from this troublesome field depend, among other factors, on the conception of the very idea of cinematographic representation.

From a socio-cultural standpoint, crossed with gender studies, this article analyzes the phenomenon of pornographic movies, whose contact points with the issue of pervasive sexism in communication media must be taken into account. First, we present a brief discussion of the abolitionist feminist group WAP (Women Against Pornography) and the feminists organized in FACT (Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce), so as to focus on underlying conceptions of the idea of representation. Second, resorting to an historical review of pornography as a cinematographic industry, some key aspects are pointed out as regards the mechanisms of visual representation they display. Third, some outstanding points of pornography as a discourse genre are discussed, with the goal of attempting a critique of the pornographic trend of the culture industry. The paper closes with the general conclusions of the investigation.

## II. PORNOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATION AND FEMINIST DEBATE

In this section, we refer to the main points of the dispute between the group headed by C. MacKinnon and A. Dworkin, which considered pornography an extension of the political and sexual oppression of women, as well as a branch of prostitution, on the one hand, and the "pro-sex" and "anti-censorship" movement on the other, whose main point of contention with WAP was related with the

<sup>1</sup> The following are some examples of groundbreaking erotic films: *The Kiss* (1895), *La puce* (1896), *The Kiss in the Tunnel* (1899), *As Seen Through a Telescope* (1900), *Bains des dames de la Court* (1897), *Flirt en le chemin de fer* (1900-1903), *L'amour a tous les étages* (1900-1903), *Peeping Tom* (1901), *Baignade interdite* (1897).

eagerness with which the American right, led by R. Reagan, embraced the feminist legislative proposal to abolish pornography.

In the late seventies, a faction of the feminist movement set out to fight pornography with an approach aimed at denouncing the objectification of women. This was marked by the creation of the abolitionist feminist movement, rallied under the motto “*Pornography Is Violence Against Women*”. In 1983, Dworkin and MacKinnon drafted a bill with a proposal to create an innovative legal mechanism to fight against pornography, understood as a violation of women’s civil rights. Though said effort brought much public attention to the debate on pornography within the feminist movement, the differences ultimately divided the movement and caused a sizeable share of feminist to agree politically with the right<sup>2</sup>.

The advocates of this group understand pornography as the paramount manifestation of sexism and as a promoting force behind gender-based violence. They claim that pornography, as an organized crime industry and example of sexual exploitation, denigrates women through objectification.

As regards the debate on the link between representation and reality, MacKinnon points out: “From the standpoint of the person used to make the materials, the image of the person is still that person. And the sexual use of the person in the materials by the consumer is a real, actual, sexual act for the user.” (2010: 86).

Unlike the radical feminism of K. Millet, S. Firestone or A. Koedt<sup>3</sup>, WAP’s exclusive focus on exploitation-related aspects of sexuality puts forward a key question: “Is censorship an effective way of helping minority groups achieve emancipation?” (Osborne, 1993: 249). The distinction between the objectification inherent in all representation processes and sexist objectification becomes a problem of the utmost significance.

The idea is not to deny that pornography does objectify and expresses itself on relations of power. However, according to S. Berns (1989), those who denounce pornography for sexually subordinating women end up indirectly stressing the eye of the beholder. If we go back to the main criticisms made by the anti-censorship movement to abolitionist feminists, it is worth noting that graphic subordination of women is not exclusive to pornographic material. On the other hand, the authors of the bill in favor of censorship often overlook the universe of women who consume pornography (Loach, 1992), and only manage to implicitly suggest that those who use or enjoy pornography are being cheated, oppressed and victimized by male sexuality.

### III. OVERVIEW OF THE HISTORY OF EROTIC CINEMA

This section presents a brief historical review of the emergence of pornography as a cinematographic industry, in order to show the establishment of certain stereotypical formulae that determine the dominant representational parameters in pornography to this day, and to point out certain subtle, but significant, departures.

The year 1886 marked the first instance of female nudity in cinema: *Le Bain*, a film in which Louise Willy performs a strip tease in the bathroom. Based on its success, the producer premiered a series of movies of naked women dancing, taking baths, or exercising, thus giving birth to “*stag movies*,” targeting men who used to visit brothels, private parties or stag parties.

In the thirties, as films found their place among the mass media, conservative powers hurried to regulate which productions were acceptable for the big screen. *Ecstasy* (1933) is remembered as one of the first movies which caused a scandal for showing full frontal female nudity. The movie was seized by the US Customs Service and burned for being “obscene.”

Towards 1950, women were considered to have little or even no libido. Sexually-adventurous women were stigmatized as prostitutes or nymphomaniacs, whereas men were assumed to be naturally libidinous.

The late-sixties feminist revolution stressed women’s right to sexual self-determination, as shown in *Barbarella* (1968), directed by Roger Vadim, and *Nola Darling* (1986), directed by Spike Lee.

As we can see, though the emergence of pornographic films (which were nothing more than minutes-long sequences) was simultaneous to the birth of cinema, it was not until the early seventies that the industry found firm footing, giving rise to the golden age of pornographic movies. *Deep throat* (1972), directed by Gerard Damiano, became a milestone as the first great success of the genre in regular US theaters. Another famous example is *In the realm of the senses* (1976), directed by Nagisa Oshima, which includes an encyclopedic index of sorts of sexual behaviors.

The period between the sixties and the seventies was, according to D. Maingueneau (2007), “a transition regime,” characterized by the emergence of pornographic productions which reached a massive audience, thanks to the proliferation of specialized theaters.

In the late seventies, some strict government measures were established to control the phenomenon<sup>4</sup>. Maingueneau points out that said transformation is part of the transition towards a new regime which is buttressed in the eighties: from *pornography* to *porn*. Said passage marks the emergence of a massive industry whose products can be consumed privately, at home: television, video rental stores, internet.

<sup>2</sup> Also aligned with ultra-conservative sectors was the so-called “pro-life” (anti-abortion) movement.

<sup>3</sup> While radical feminism is very critical of the “sexual revolution,” the movement understands the repression of desire is a key obstacle to the emancipation of women.

<sup>4</sup> Between 1975 and 1978, almost half of all films produced are pornographic. However, this was followed by a reaction period, based on the implementation of restrictions that imposed, for instance, the “X” rating.

Towards the nineties, porn actors and actresses found themselves launched to stardom in megaproductions which made their work popular, turning them into recognizable *imago*s. Simultaneously, those years saw the development of a genre that explored the depiction of sex, but without turning it into an end in itself (for instance, films directed by Winterbottom, Breillat, Von Trier, Solondz, Bertolucci, No , Ch reau, which challenged the “soft” style of Hollywood sexuality).

Today, the dominant trend moves towards the search for alternative political formats, based on the use of performative practices as spaces for experimentation, which affords the possibility of removing guilt from pleasure, of de-naturalizing sexual differences, and of unmasking the simulacrum of femininity. Against that background, post-porn emerges a subgenre that attempts to challenge the dominant production system in pornography, in a context of mutation, from a war- and manufacture-based capitalism towards a consumption and information model, focused on sex and pleasure. This regime of body control and production of subjectivity is defined by B. Preciado (2010) as a “pharmaco-pornographic capitalism,” whose consumer economy and culture of leisure and entertainment provide a new sensory and emotional network.

#### IV. PORN RHETORIC

This section presents a reflection on pornographic cinema, understood as an effective production technology for the visual-sexual.

In order to understand the —historically-developed— nature of film representations of women’s bodies and sexuality, we must go beyond an explanation of the legal and economic conditions of the pornographic system. We need to consider the textual mechanisms and the relations forged with consumers as well.

Today, pornography is linked to new consumption practices related to the possibility of reproducing images mechanically. The articulated structure of gaze aims to produce effects on the body. As its goal is to create sexual arousal, even if it is not achieved in all cases, the rhetoric of pornography emphasizes a relation with the consumer as a sexed subject.

Berns proposes focusing the attention on questions such as: Why are women symbols of an omnipresent and uncontrollable sexuality? Why and how has been sexual violence legitimized by cultural institutions? Why are women, in a very real sense, victims of said traditions, and why do they (including several feminists) interpret themselves as victims, instead of as willing subjects? (Bern, 1989).

If pornography is not a crime to be punished but a means of expression, which cinematographic resources come into the foreground? To answer that, we must consider how gaze is structured and which needs, beliefs and attitudes manifest in the exhibition process through visual representation techniques.

Due to its referential and analog nature, cinema includes the ideal of the conquest of sex inherently. Heterosexual pornography, which identifies sex with the appearance of

sexual organs, became the hegemonical representation of sexuality in the products of the movie industry.

Within the realm of feminist movie theory, it has been extensively argued that the active system of gaze implies the adoption of a male position. However, as A. McClintock points out, “identification in porn can be multiple and shifting, bisexual and transsexual, alternately or simultaneously” (1992: 125).

L. Williams (1992) posits the hypothesis that explicit sexual representations have moved from an off/scene place (ob/scene) to a new on/scene prominence. Said shift implies changes for sexual policies. It is precisely in the emergence of different pornographies, and not in censorship, where feminists can find both a resistance to the domination of pornographic imagination ruled by the male heterosexual standard, and an opposition to dominant representations of pleasure. Moreover, Williams stresses that the link between pornography and pleasure make it one of the few movie genres where female protagonists are not punished for seeking sexual gratification. Indeed, pornography often is a collection of everything conservative morality seeks to control: sex for pleasure’s sake, outside the regulatory borders of marriage, outside procreation.

#### V. PORNOGRAPHIC TRENDS OF THE CULTURE INDUSTRY

“Works of art are ascetic and shameless; the culture industry is pornographic and prudish”  
*Max Horkheimer & Theodor W. Adorno*

The rhetoric of pornography establishes a regime which attempts to provide a truthful representation of sex. In this section, we mention some debates that took place as regards the critique of the pornographic trend in the culture industry.

Three fundamental exhibition techniques are defined around the principle of maximum visibility which predominantly characterizes the pornographic system: a) fragmentation of bodies; b) voyeuristic visualization of orgasms; and c) a phallogocentric image. Following those lines, it can be posited that both the points raised by anti-pornography feminists and the position of anti-censorship feminists, however opposed, share the idea that pornography represents the “truth” of sex (Dorlin, 2009). Complementarily, sometimes it is requested of porn to show the truth: “Something we never ask of films, which are essentially an illusion technique” (Despentes, 2009: 78).

According to Y. Landeau (in de Lauretis, 1984), film is a privileged means for pornographic expression due to the fact that the textual strategies used to craft a movie, from script to editing (the fragmentation of scenes due to camera movements, the angle’s depth in the construction of the representational space, light and color effects), are equivalent to the techniques deployed by the pornographic system (the fragmentation of the pre-fabricated female body, the interplay of skin and make-up, the combination of nudity and clothing). In the same lines, V. Despentes notes that “all modern media serve the market of sex first and foremost” (2009: 51).

From a critical position focused on enunciation strategies of cinematographic language, E. Grüner (2005) claims that visual elements, and thereby all cinema developed under the institutional mode of representation (IMR), are essentially pornographic, as they leave nothing *off scene*. Though said description can be valid to some extent for hegemonical cinema, we think it tends to overlook the dialectic condition of cinematography (expressed in the duality between modern cinema and mainstream cinema<sup>5</sup>).

“There is no place for pornography, unless it is denied a space,” writes B. Sarlo (2005: 14), for whom pornography as a risqué genre or subversive monomania has lost its adventurous nature: it has become as unavoidable and abundant as advertising in a media assimilation regime that dulls all violence. The paradox in this case is that pornography stops being pornographic when it foregoes its nature as a discourse aimed at scandal and destined to be prohibited.

Thus, it would seem one of the features of the contemporary era is a trend to overexpose sexuality. Through different manifestations available in several channels, it is possible to see the repetition of sexist patterns based on the objectification of women. Therefore, the dominant issue of sexism is not limited to pornographic material, but is a part of everyday environments.

While T. de Lauretis acknowledges that the most prevalent branches of pornographic cinema are designed to address men and that obscenity is not exclusive to pornographic movies —practically all narrative illusionist cinema, as L. Mulvey (1975) noted, treats female bodies as erotic objects projected by the male vision— it can be seen that positing and equivalence between cinema and pornography prevents feminist social participation and historical change.

## VI. SEXUAL IMAGES IN SPITE OF IT ALL

The proximity or the distance between an object and the representation of that object have been the subject of extensive aesthetical and philosophical discussions, going back with its myriad subtleties to the two great trends first posited in the Socratic dialogue between Cratylus and Hermogenes (i.e., the dispute between representationalists or transcendentalists and anti-representationalists or conventionalists). Such is the background of reflections on the inter-relationships between cinema and the world, which seek to analyze how current circumstances leave their trail in film.

Fiction works with at least a minimum of distance from reality, which the hypertrophy of hyper-realistic representations of the society of the spectacle tends to undermine. Pornography attempts to cancel the space mediated by language and symbols, erasing the distance between viewer and image, which is what ultimately enables a subjective positioning (Marzano, 2012).

The main feature of the culture industry, as defined by the *Kritische Theorie*, is the production of representations. For that reason, cinema stands as the paramount ideological object, on account of being “the perfect place for the merchandise fetish and the primary process to converge” (Grüner: 41). According to critical theories on the idea of representation (Rancière, 2001), cinema is interpreted as the scenery for a struggle against images.

However, the screen does not work as a mirror nor creates a closed scene. The political strength of cinema lies in the invention of a space capable of producing a change in sensitivity, positing an order based on heterogeneous visibilities, forgotten, dissonant relative to the stereotypical world of mass leisure and propaganda.

According to A. Badiou (2004), cinema is an art of the sexual body, an art of nudity, which opens intimate images up into massive images. Cinema is, since its inception, a form of art completely devoid of purity, due to its dependence on money, which unifies and normalizes the heterogeneous. Unlike other forms of arts, cinema is born of the impure, of disorder, and attempts to extract some fragments of purity. For cinema, sexual images are fundamental. “Should a great filmmaker be modest? Should he suppress bodies? Omit sex? Obviously, this is not the true road. The true road calls for accepting pornographic imagery, but transforming it from within” (Badiou: 68)<sup>6</sup>.

## VII. CONCLUSION

As we have discussed, far from causing indifference or being the province of a closed group of specialists, pornography, more than any other audiovisual genre, is a subject of debate for feminists, conservatives, judges, artists, the academia, liberals, and moralists.

Among the perplexities animating the debate on pornography, we can mention the question of which are the criteria used to define the borders between the inner realm (associated to what is secret and private) and the outer realm (associated to what is public), and the ways of portraying intimacy in sexual practices, desires and pleasures, knowing they do not lie outside the knowledge-power discourse that insist on regulating them.

The expansive and widespread nature of pornographic imagination places sexuality on the brink of excess, as an experience of the limits and as a narrative of the extreme. Resisting obscenity, which tries to fit desire into reality in a conformist fashion by means of seeing everything and telling everything, is the central value of cinema, its disturbing power.

In that sense, pornography sheds some light on a certain paradox of contemporary culture: through overexposure and the illusion of transparency in representations, it reveals that which tries to escape from the boundaries of visibility. Thus, the tension between what is prohibited and what is accepted is one of the key lines in this issue, in a context

<sup>5</sup> Grüner, in fact, mentions the possibility of an intervention of style, capable of breaking the naturalist illusion of cinema: “the world is no longer a naked body, but a body *marked* by the author’s irreproducible gaze” (Grüner: 239). If total nudity leads to a death of desire, the style is capable of recovering the mark in the body.

<sup>6</sup> Badiou points out three ways of achieving said transformation: a) turning the sexual image into an image of love; b) turning sexual representations into a stylized, almost abstract image, of an ideal beauty; c) radicalizing what is pornographic to make it even more pornographic, thus creating a second-degree pornography.

which, as we have seen, shows a widespread trend towards revealing the secret before the pornographic eye.

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### IX.

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