

Lust/Disgust : Online Pornography and Affect

Title	Lust/Disgust
Subtitle	Online Pornography and Affect
Lead-in / Abstract	For the past ten years, media researchers have focused on online erotica and cybersex, the possibilities of sexual self-expression, experimentation and play online ("e-rotics" and "cyborgasms"), while relatively little attention has been paid on the massive and highly profitable field of online pornography. Online porn,

varying from live shows to webcams, videos, photo and text galleries, is increasingly part of everyday Internet use, finding its way to inboxes as html spam, and forming the most popular search words on the WWW.

There is little doubt that pornography is both affective and effective, but there is less agreement over its meanings and implication. Porn relies on "gut reactions" in terms of arousal as well as disgust, and these reactions are inseparable from the workings of gender, class and race. This presentation, basing on analysis of 366 html porn spam messages, argues for the need to consider porn both in terms of representation and affect in order to achieve a fuller understanding of the meanings of, and reactions towards pornography.

Participants and speakers

Paasonen, Susanna (FI)

Short biography of participants

Susanna Paasonen is an Academy of Finland Postdoctoral researcher at the Centre for Women's Studies, University of Turku, and docent of media culture at University of Tampere. She has authored and edited several books on Internet research, popular culture and women's studies, including *Women and Everyday Uses of the Internet: Agency & Identity*, 2002 (co-edited with Mia Consalvo), and the forthcoming *Figures of Fantasy: Women, Internet and Cyberdiscourse* (Peter Lang). Her current research focuses on issues of location in studies of the Internet.

Full text

Since the mid-1990s, Internet researchers have been interested in sex entertainment for women, possibilities for self-expression in web cam sites, or the subversive potential of role and identity play in erotic chats and other online exchanges. Cybersex applications, no matter how conceptual and sketchy, have been used to illustrate the novel possibilities for erotic computer-mediated explorations -- also within media arts, as in Stahl Stenslie's and Kirk Wolford's *Cyber S/M*, exhibited at Isea'94.

Studies of online pornography, not plentiful in amount, have focused on freedom of speech and censorship, child pornography, traffic in women, but also the possibilities provided by the Internet to redefine the gendered codes of porn and erotica.¹ Mainstream porn web sites and their ties to offline porn industry, again, have been left with relatively little scholarly attention.

Given that online pornography is the first profitable form of online content, that the porn industry distributes its products (from images to videos and live shows) increasingly online, and that the most popular key words for search engine searches have consistently to do with nudity and sex, the lack of scholarly studies on commercial online pornography is quite striking. To a degree, this can be understood through the branding of scholars doing research on pornography -- being labelled a porn scholar is not the most appealing of career profiles in a competitive academic market. More centrally, I believe that the lack of scholarly attention has to do with the tendency to emphasise novelty in studies of the Internet or "cyberculture" at large -- as is evident in the insistent tendency to consider the Internet as a "cyberspace" that is decidedly separate, and free from, the more corporeal lived realities, their norms and practices.

This selective focus on freedom and individual choice is well in line with the logic of capitalism². **Zillah Eisenstein** has called identified it as cyberfantasy that emphasises freedom, choice and self-expression while disregarding the conditions, rules and limitations involved in online communication, and issues of power in general. In her reading, such neo-liberal rhetoric feeds into the logic and practice of global capitalism, linking electronic media and the Internet in particular with promises of increased individual freedom, choice, and exciting futures³. Pornography may not fit in too well in such an optimistic scenario.

My current study on affect and representational conventions of online pornography aims to shift focus onto questions of normativity and power within and around Internet pornography. This study is part of a postdoctoral research project of both the Internet as a popular, commercial medium, and the interdisciplinary methods and questions that need to be posed in studies of the Internet. My approach to online porn concerns an interest to think about the power of representations through the notion of affect -- the power of images, texts and audiovisual materials to move us in very corporeal ways -- as well as the ways in which desires and preferences tie into systems of representation.

Slippery points of reference?

In terms of intellectual endeavour, pornography stubbornly escapes being pinned down, analysed and known: It is hardly breaking news that pornography does not address one's theoretical mind to the degree that it does one's libido. Pornography functions in the logic of attraction, spectacle and affect that do not fully translate into semantic models of explanation.

When thinking of reactions towards porn -- be they ones of arousal and excitement, guilt and shame, or disgust and anger -- it is quite impossible to bypass questions of affect. For pornography *is about affect*, gut reactions and sensory responses. Feminist scholars have paid attention to how class-specific notions of "good" and "bad" taste link to aversion towards pornography that fails to match middle-class norms of "proper" representation⁴. **Laura Kipnis** argues that the disgust exhibited by many feminists towards porn springs from a history of bourgeois desire to "remove the distasteful from the sight of society", which again links to a denial of the body, its orifices and desires⁵. While questions of taste and class are undoubtedly central here, I insist that feminist aversions have centrally to do with the *power relations* at the basis of pornographic representational conventions -- the lexicon of those who give and those who take, those who surrender and those who "take what is theirs". Which, of course, is not to say that the object of pornography would not be entangled with more affects than one.

In order to map this lexicon of mainstream heterosexual pornography, I carried out a detailed content analysis of 366 HTML porn spam messages sent to my personal university account between October 2002 and February 2004. My analysis included the characters, body parts and bodily forms represented in the images, the terminology used (of women, men, acts, genitalia), the ways in which the messages address their users and invite them "into the action".

While it is not viable to describe my analysis of spam here in any detail, the material clearly foregrounds male agency, pleasure and point of view -- both literally as point-of-view cameras, narrators and layout, and more generally as division into subjects and objects, bodies to be displayed and have things done to. Something is evident already in the terminology: women are described with a wider range of adjectives and nouns than men, the most popular ones including *girl, slut, babe and lesbian*, while the selection of popular adjectives feature *hot, teen, sexy and young*. Women are described with nouns in 410 accounts, in comparison to which there are only 49 similar references to of men. Also their scale is narrower: men are named *guys, men, studs, buddies and even brothers*. As a rule, men are not defined with adjectives except when describing their penises (*huge, big, thick, monstrous*) that tend to penetrate (*rip, tear, pound, split*) female genitalia (*tiny, tight, little*).

Pornographic terminology relies on a circulation of terms, settings and stock characters, and the basic vocabulary for describing heterosexual acts or desire illustrates the principles of heterosexual morphology, where female and male bodies -- the so-called "opposite sexes" -- are seen to complement each other all the way to their inter-connecting genitalia⁶. Genders are seen as mutually opposing, yet inter-connected by heterosexual desire. Faithful to this logic, pornography focuses on body parts marked as primary signifiers of gender difference: genitalia, breasts, buttocks, long hair and red painted lips⁷.

When analysing a sample consisting of 366 examples, generic conventions, repeating terms and scenes become evident. This focus on repetition makes explicit the *scripts, stock materials, phrases and scenes* used in framing a scene as "a turn-on", and it also makes issues of address and power impossible to miss.

Repetition and scripts

Daily encounters with pornography on my computer disturb me as stylized displays of heterosex -- of ones who give and ones who are taken, ones who penetrate and ones whose faces are ejaculated upon -- that I *recognise* as a turn-on, but have failed to *experience* as such in my heterosexual relationships.

Pornography is disturbing, since it makes evident the degree to which our sense of things sexual is shaped by things seen and heard, in pornography as well as in the more respectable erotica, or romance for that matter. It makes visible how things felt as most personal (desire, excitement, fantasy) are also products of culture and society: we *learn* to recognise scenes and terminology as titillating, although these scenes might be far apart from that which we actually want to experience and experiment with.

This function of pornography as a reservoir of available moments, moves and lines can be thought of through the notion of *scripting*. Feminist studies of romance have pointed out the degree to which expressions of romantic feeling concern culturally available scripts of settings and situations, articulations of love, tenderness or passion, such as those drawn from media representations and negotiated in practices of courtship. One "writes oneself into love" by incorporating personal moments, events, emotions and experiences into such scripts -- like with romantic walks in the moonlight or passionate romantic-sexual encounters that cross the boundaries of "representation" and "lived experience".⁸

Similarly, the notion of *pornographic scripting* helps to map the blurred boundaries of the personal and the social/cultural: be it couples who "talk dirty" during their intimate moments, or people taking part in erotic chats who want to mediate sensations, expressions of arousal or climax. There is not necessarily a huge degree of variation involved in expressions of desire, or things recognised as a turn-on, but this is not to say that pornography as if "programmes" or simply conditions people to respond in a certain way, or to desire certain things.

Rather, the question concerns the legibility of intimate moments and acts: their representation is tied to cultural norms and institutions concerning gender and sexuality *in order to be legible to others as well as to oneself*. For example erotic chats, with their onomatopoeic expressions of seduction, pleasure, arousal and orgasm are hardly "free" expressions of an authentic, inner desire. Desire becomes narrated in relation to various scripts that again shape articulations of individual desires.

I find it important to insist on the politics of representation and the productivity of pornographic texts -- to make visible their limits, norms and scripts in an attempt to think differently about representations of sexuality that, in the context of pornography, are explicitly about power. Pornography is not synonymous with sexuality or sex, even if it easily read as such: porn produces representations of certain kinds of settings, acts and relations as a "turn on" and iconic to things sexual. Once its scripts and stock materials are recognized, however, it becomes easier to figure different kinds of ways of depicting sexual acts and "titillating" scenes without -- or so I hope -- the need to reproduce and reinforce male heterosexual control over female bodies or desires, or white hegemony and "Latin fantasies", not to mention the spectacle of "Black bros white hoes" (to use one of the sites advertised in my sample).

Porn and power

Pornographic images and texts do have some power to move me, and these encounters with pornography are disturbing and unsettling in the sense that they open up difficult questions concerning what we desire, what we think we desire and what other things may still move us in most bodily ways. In other words, attractions of pornography are also something quite out of one's intentional control.

The body and embodied practices have been seen as one of the rare arenas available for self-expression and self-definition in a postmodern culture controlled by the markets and mass production, but this hardly makes embodied practices an arena somehow outside things social, economic or political. While it is appealing to think of things private and affective as separate from the realm of media, business and representation, this is nothing but a bias in perspective, or even a form of denial that bases on individualistic belief on autonomous subject. Sexual self-expression, in its deviant and less deviant forms, and the desires articulated through them are crafted from the cultural fabrics and scripts available to us. Pornography provides templates for desire and its articulations, and the degree to which it does so is not necessary open to individual decision or control.

As pointed out by **Annette Kuhn**, porn has the affective capacity to "produce gut reactions -- of distaste, horror, sexual arousal, fear", which makes it particularly difficult to approach analytically⁹. Gut reactions bring pornography to the realm of the personal, the sensory and the embodied: we *feel* pornography in our bodies, but this is not to say that discussions on pornography, affect and interpretation should remain on the level of individual experience.

Personal experience and enjoyment of porn is often used to discredit feminist critiques of pornography from the 1970s, as well as critiques of pornography in general. This is especially the case with overviews on the meanings of pornography targeted at a wider readership: they tend to figure anti-pornography feminists as others that fails to address the multiplicities of desire and enjoyment involved with

porn. Women enjoying pornography are posed as evidence of the shortcomings of anti-pornography feminists, as are the experiences of men using pornography who claim not to enjoy scenes of female humiliation or non-consensual sex¹⁰. The argument is simple, even simplistic: if people insist that their preference for women in bondage or sex with dogs has little to do with gendered relations of power, then this must also be the case¹¹. Such an understanding of individual autonomy, desire and power is evidently shallow and de-contextualised. It presumes voluntary subjects capable of separating themselves from relations of power, as well as separating fantasy from lived reality. Unlike such a scenario would have it, personal enjoyment does not excuse -- or make disappear -- issues to do with power and politics would somehow disappear.

Individual fascinations, desires and fantasies are never isolated from representations of sexuality: rather than mere manifestations of some inner impulse they are *relations* between people, texts and artefacts. In this perspective, the question concerns the inter-connections between desire and power: the scenarios and imageries we find stimulating, and their connections to representations of sexuality, gender, race, age, class and nationality.

Brief conclusion

Porn is increasingly part and parcel of everyday media environment. In terms of affect, this has numerous consequences. As something encountered daily, pornography becomes something "not at all special", banal and everyday. And as pornographic imageries "penetrate" the fabric of everyday life, it becomes necessary to investigate what this means in terms of sexuality, media and power. This, again, necessitate analysis of actual pornographic texts, their scripts and norms, are we to gain fuller understanding of how they feed into representations of gender and sexuality in various arenas of media culture.

The notion of affect enables a discussion on the power of pornography that does not remain on the level of individual experience or fantasy, nor assume that pornography only evokes sexual arousal or curiosity. Rather, the focus shifts on different emotional investments, what we might find desirable and what else has the power to move us. Insistence on pornography as representation, again, raises the question of what implications these fascinations and dissatisfactions may have: the kinds of scenarios that we "buy into" when consuming porn. This, again, links to the political investments of insisting on the centrality of the material conditions of porn production and consumption (porn industry, performers and the kinds of acts they perform) that refuses to separate pornographic texts from their origins, and also makes consumers accountable for the scenes they consume.

- 1. For these studies, see respectively Charles Ess, "Philosophical Approaches to Pornography, Free Speech, and CMC. Cyberspace as Plato's Republic: or, why this special issue?" *Computer-Mediated Communication Magazine* Vol. 3, No 1/1996 at <http://www.december.com/cmcmag/1996/jan/ed.html>; Chuck Kleinhans, Virtual Child Porn: The Law and the Semiotic of the Image. In Pamela Church Gibson (ed.), *More Dirty Looks: Gender, Pornography and Power*, 2nd edition. London: BFI 2004, 71-84; Donna Hughes, The Internet and Global Prostitution Industry. In Susan Hawthorne and Renate Klein (eds.) *CyberFeminism: Connectivity, Critique & Creativity*. Melbourne: Spinifex 1999, 185-121; Marjorie Kibby, Women and Sex Entertainment on the Internet: Discourses of Gender and Power. *Mots Pluriels* N:o 19/ 2001 at, <http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/MotsPluriels/MP1901mk.html>; Marjorie Kibby and Brigid Costello, *Between the Image and the Act: Interactive Sex Entertainment on the Internet. Sexualities: Studies in Culture and Society* Vol. 4 Issue 3 2001: 353-369; Kate O'Riordan, *Windows on the Web: The Female Body and the Web Camera*. In Mia Salvato and Susanna Paasonen (eds.), *Women and Everyday Uses of the Internet: Agency & Identity*. New York: Peter Lang 2002, 44-61; Amy Villarejo, *Defycategory.com, or the Place of Categories in Intermedia*. In *More Dirty Looks*, 85-91.
- 2. Cf. Donna Haraway, *How Like a Leaf: An Interview with Thyza Nichols Goodeve*. New York: Routledge 2000, 53-54.
- 3. Zillah Eisenstein, *Global Obscenities: Patriarchy, Capitalism, and the Lure of Cyberfantasy*, New York: New York University Press 1998.
- 4. Annette Kuhn, *The Power of the Image: Essays on Representation and Sexuality*. London: Routledge 1985/1994, 20-21.

- 5. Laura Kipnis, *Ecstasy Unlimited: On Sex, Capital, Gender, and Aesthetics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1993, 226.
- 6. Diane Richardson, *Heterosexuality and Social Theory*. In Diane Richardson (ed.), *Theorising Heterosexuality: Telling it Straight*. Buckingham: Open University Press 1996, 6-7.
- 7. See Kuhn 1994, 34-37.
- 8. Cf. Jean Duncombe and Dennis Marsden, "Can Men Love?": "Reading", "Staging" and "Resisting" the Romance. In Lynne Pearce & Jackie Stacey (eds.), *Romance Revisited*. London: Lawrence & Wishart 1995, 238-250; Jackie Stacey and Lynne Pearce, *The Heart of the Matter: Feminists Revisit Romance*. In *Romance Revisited*, 13-15; Lynne Pearce and Gina Wisker, *Rescripting Romance: An Introduction*. In Lynne Pearce and Gina Wisker (eds.), *Fatal Attractions: Rescripting Romance in Contemporary Literature and Film*. London: Pluto Press 1998, 1-19.
- 9. Kuhn 1994, 21.
- 10. Laurence O'Toole, *Pornocopia: Porn, Sex, Technology and Desire*. London: Serpent's Tail 1998.
- 11. David Loftus, *Watching Sex: How Men Really Respond to Pornography*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press 2000.