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Pornography and gender
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The relationship between pornography and gender can be understood in a number of related ways. One concerns what pornography depicts, in terms of not only the gender of the people whose bodies and activities are described or displayed, but also the gendered association of the scenes and contexts depicted. Gender also comes to the fore in pornography in terms of who produces and who consumes it; but both production and consumption are also layered, in that, for example, intended audiences are not necessarily the same as actual audiences, and agents can hijack products designed to be consumed by someone else. Perhaps the most dramatic role that gender has played in pornography is in the political polarization between its opponents and its defenders, between those who wish to control or eliminate it and those who aim to consume or promote it. This last relationship between pornography and gender is closely related, although in a problematic way, to the contrast between gender categories that are harmed by pornography and those who perpetrate this harm.

Pornography and gender in historical perspective

While the depiction of sexuality goes back to deepest antiquity and obscenity has existed as a notion since the emergence of a public–private distinction, pornography as a bounded entity is a product of modernity. It is difficult to extricate representations of sexuality prior to the emergence of modernity from the context in which they were produced, be it religious, cosmological, artistic, or political. Only in the modern age did sexuality come to be represented as sexuality and not as a sign vehicle for other dynamics. The European seventeenth century, particularly in France and Britain, is pivotal: print had developed considerably as both medium and technology, allowing for the broad dissemination of texts and graphic representations.

Gender is implicated in early modern pornography in a complicated way. There, the dominant form is the representation of women's sexuality produced by men for the reading and viewing pleasure of high-ranking men. There are salient exceptions, such as the writings of Marquis de Sade, which are more concerned with the limits of sexual pleasure than with the gender of those involved. A common practice that brought gender to the foreground was the use of female narrators in pornographic novels, particularly prostitutes. Some historians have argued that, while it was an unequivocally male affair, early modern pornography was the only context at the time that raised the possibility that women could exert agency over their sexuality (Hunt 1996).

With the Enlightenment, pornography became associated with political criticism. In absolute monarchies like France in the decades leading to the Revolution, novels, pamphlets, and engravings depicted the alleged libertine excesses of the aristocracy and the clergy. These documents were repressed by the state not because they were obscene but because they were politically subversive. Gender played an important role because pornographic documents often associated high-ranking women (e.g., Queen Marie-Antoinette) with immorality. But it was not so much gender but rank that was targeted.

In the nineteenth century, several technological developments contributed to a proliferation of pornographic representations, namely the invention of photography (1839, in the form of the daguerreotype) and film (1895). Besides enabling new representational forms, the new technologies also increased the circulation and availability of pornographic images. The period also witnessed the emergence of a science of sexuality, which was implicated with an essentialization of sexuality, including its pornographic representation, as an object of regulation and repression, as well as a definer of individual identities. Where pornography and
gender intersected in particularly interesting ways is in the colonial context. Turn-of-the-century French postcards of Algerian women, alternatively veiled, nude, or seminude, captured both the male colonizer's Orientalist fantasies and his anxieties about the imperialist enterprise (Alloula 1986). By depicting and consuming these images, the photographer and purchaser came to symbolically possess the colony. Dutch medical texts that described and proscribed in prurient detail the gender roles and sexualities of both colonizer and colonized in the Dutch East Indies constituted a “scientific pornography” that sought to control the empire along lines of gender, race, and social class (Stoler 1995).

**Pornography and gender in the context of the feminist “sex wars”**

As Foucault (1980) argues, sexuality, particularly in its “perverse” manifestations, is the product rather than the antecedent of the forces that attempt to regulate it, such as medicine, the law, and the police. This is true of pornography, certain forms of which evolved from the very materials produced for the surveillance of illicit sex (Waugh 1996). While gender has always figured as a prominent component of the regulation of sex (Walkowitz 1982), it became particularly embroiled with pornography in the 1970s and the 1980s in the context of what has been called the feminist “sex wars.” In many Euro-American countries, the sexual revolution of the 1960s had witnessed a relaxation of obscenity laws, which coincided with advances in technology and the gradual liberalization of market economies, which contributed to an explosion of pornography. Ironically, this efflorescence coincided with the emergence of Women’s Liberation, another consequence of economic liberalization, which provided new opportunities for women to enter the labor market, and not just temporarily so as in wartime, and to demand equal treatment. Some second-wave feminists argued that pornography was an instrument of gendered oppression that demanded aggressive state intervention, just like the protection of civil rights.

The most common argument for this position is that pornography is implicated in sexual violence: “Pornography [is] one of the forces contributing to a cultural climate in which men felt free to rape” (Brownmiller 2000:297). The power of pornography resides in the fact that it constructs gender relations as power relations and sexual desire as the desire to dominate or be dominated. Nowhere is the association between pornography and rape so insistently maintained than in Andrea Dworkin’s (1981) *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, a landmark manifesto for antipornography feminism. Along with legal scholar Catharine MacKinnon (1995), Dworkin became one of the most vocal advocates of the legal prohibition of pornography, arguing that all pornography eroticizes gender violence, whether explicitly or implicitly. Most memorably, the two activists drafted in 1983 an Antipornography Civil Rights Ordinance, which inspired a series of local government ordinances throughout the United States, and enabled women to take legal action if they could prove that they were harmed by pornography. This legislation broke new ground in the regulation of pornography by shifting its basis from morality to civil rights. It did not prevent U.S. antipornography feminists from forging somewhat surprising political alliances with conservative movements such as the Christian Right, which advocated the suppression of pornography on the more predictable basis of morality, but was also ideologically opposed to feminism. These alliances, as well as the support that antipornography feminists received from some men (e.g., Kimmel 1991; Jensen 2007), illustrate that gender is only one of many dimensions in the debates.

The same point is demonstrated by the opposition to antipornography feminism from a heterogeneous group who would eventually be referred to as “sex-positive” feminists. They argued that the focus of the debate should be shifted to the sociocultural dynamics that produce gender and sexuality as sites of inequality (Rubin 1984). Some demonstrated that many forms of pornography are primarily about neither sex nor gender, but about social class. For example, Laura Kipnis (1998) showed that, in the infamous magazine *Hustler*, scatology is as prominent as sex, frequently utilized to ridicule politicians and celebrities. The grotesque and the irreverent conspire to create political theater reminiscent of a Rabelaisian carnival, in which the underdog (e.g., working-class men) transgresses the inequalities that victimize them (cf. Penley 1997). In some cultural contexts,
men see in pornography the marker of a desirable modern but masculinity-inflected cosmopolitanism (Liechty 2001), while in others the majority opinion is that it is the uninvited token of an encroaching and immoral globalization (Bellows 2011).

Viewed in this light, pornography has little to do with gender oppression, and if it expresses violence, it is not against women but against the structural conditions that authorize certain voices to be heard and silence others. The argument is a historical full circle that returns to the eighteenth-century depiction of sex among the elites as political satire. The logical consequence is that the legal suppression of pornography is tantamount to the maintenance of social inequality between strata of society. While most feminists will agree that some pornography perpetrates violence on some women (and potentially members of other groups), the violence depicted by most pornography pales in comparison to the material and symbolic violence embedded in structural inequality (an argument that is also commonly advanced in defense of sex work).

Sex-positive feminists also remind us that pornography, even if violent, is fiction involving actors, not real-life victims. Kipnis (2006:158) critiques Dworkin’s and MacKinnon’s position as an unreconstructed replication, although catapulted from the psychological to the social, of the classic Freudian conflation of the feminine with masochism, the latter being evident in the painstakingly detailed description of violence against women that characterizes some antipornography feminist writing.

A variety of other arguments have been advanced to militate, either implicitly or explicitly, against antipornography feminism. For example, a counterexample to the alleged link between pornography and gender violence is the widespread consumption of pornographic comics (ero manga) in Japan, some portraying graphic sexual violence, in a society with a low rate of sexual assault (Kinsella 2000). Another argument is predicated on the well-known fact that pornography is notoriously difficult to define, and that forms of cultural production related to pornography have an emancipatory effect on the consumer. The romance novel (“bodice ripper”), for example, can be construed as degrading of women since more often than not it depicts them as being at the mercy of men, but its exclusively female readership consumes the genre in search of agency, even when their lives are devoid of it (Radway 1984). Finally, pornography presents an unavoidable problem of identification, in that who and what the consumer identifies with can cross gender lines, sexual orientations, race, body types, and many other parameters of social difference, as well as position (watcher/watched, pleasure-giver/receiver).

Identification is also relevant to the types of gendered bodies represented, as well as the body parts that are visibly possible or not visible. While the representation of bodies has changed in the course of pornography’s history, it remains singularly conservative, as it overwhelmingly features body types that are predictable ideals in the particular historical context. For example, since the 1980s, male actors overwhelmingly feature hyperdeveloped muscularities, while advances in surgical procedures have rendered enlarged breasts and “designer vulvas” (Braun 2009) increasingly common. Mainstream heterosexual sexual acts continue to centralize women’s genitals, under the assumption that this is what interests the male heterosexual viewer, and shy away from depicting male genitals except for the “money shot,” a reflection of straight men’s fear of homosexual desire. Desire, identification, body image, and gender intersect in the consumption of pornography in complex ways.

**Pornography in the age of the Internet**

By the time the Internet revolutionized the way in which information circulates around the world, feminist wars over pornography had abated, with antipornography activists moving on to other causes, notably sex trafficking (Rubin 2011:35). The Internet has had an enormous transformational effect on how pornography is produced, circulated, and consumed, as well as on its gendering. For example, one effect it has had is to dislodge the hegemony of North America, as centers of production have shifted to cheaper locations like South America and Eastern Europe, with global distribution being enabled by cyber technology. Developments that occurred at the same time as the emergence of new media technologies, notably the invention of Viagra and the rise of HIV,
had profound effects on pornography, but how gender is implicated in these effects remains to be investigated.

The ease with which pornography can be produced and circulated through the Internet, combined with the consumer compartmentalization that characterizes late capitalism, gave rise to an efflorescence of “specialized” genres that are often gender specific. “Fat porn,” for example, depicts obese women for the consumption of straight men (Kulick 2005). Alt (“alternative”) porn, produced by amateurs whose bodies and practices often fail to conform to mainstream ideals of gendered beauty, challenges the power of money in controlling the production of pornography and potentially opens the way for new forms of agency that transcend traditional gender inequalities (Paasonen 2010). Yet these genres are largely addressed to niche markets, with mainstream pornography on the Internet remaining singularly conservative in its depictions, camera angles, and agents, particularly when compared with the increased visibility, in many societies, of “gender bending” and transgender representations.

The most anxiety-provoking genre of cyber-aided pornography is that which depicts underage subjects, variously termed “child pornography” or “kiddie porn” (even though subjects depicted can be as old as 18), often associated with human trafficking, child molestation, and organized crime. The gendering of such pornography is more complex than that of other genres, with men overwhelmingly being its producers and consumers but its objects being variously female or male (although a few women artists have had to answer to charges of producing pornography for depicting naked children in their work). There is no doubt that underage pornography is a worldwide phenomenon that has been exacerbated by cyber technologies and that targets vulnerable subjects, although public representations rarely address the structural conditions that underlie it and the extent to which it has become, in the last decades, a “sex panic” that overwhelmingly criminalizes certain categories (e.g., ethnic minorities, gay men) and constructs “the child” as the object of enormous anxiety in need of protective regimes that may ultimately be more harmful than useful (Levine 2002; Lancaster 2011).

The one aspect of cyberpornography that is uncompromisingly gendered is the emergence of “porn addiction” as a newly medicalized condition associated with men, particularly young men (Voros 2009). Alongside gambling addictions, with which it is frequently associated, porn addiction is often represented as being the product of the Internet age, particularly the increased availability of pornography it has produced and the possibility of its consumption in private settings. Some experts venture that porn is addictive because it causes neurological changes that lead to compulsive behavior. Others argue that the search for biological factors erroneously transforms a symptom into a condition, and that “excessive” consumption of Internet pornography should be understood as depressive behavior and thus treated as such, with particular attention paid to its gender and age specificity. This debate has had the effect of reviving old themes about the alleged effects of pornography on gender relations.

While a full evaluation of these dynamics probably requires a historical distance that is lacking at the present time, fruitful avenues for this exploration foregrounds the changing role of affect as a commodity in economically precarious times, highlighting the relationship among gender, affect, and commodification as a pivot for the changing relationship between structure and agency.

SEE ALSO: Gender; Pornography, History of; Pornography and Violence

REFERENCES


**FURTHER READINGS**


