

Pornography Under the Lens

by *Béatrice Damian-Gaillard*

Alongside the usual reductive condemnations, studies on pornography have increased in the academic world. Florian Vörös examines the field's key texts, which reveal the diversity of productions and uses of pornography and analyse the emotional experiences pornography awakens as well as the hierarchies it shapes and recreates.

Reviewed: Florian Vörös (ed.), *Cultures pornographiques. Anthologie des porn studies*, Paris, Éditions Amsterdam, 2015, 320 pp.

Although frequently mentioned in public debate, pornography has only recently attracted the attention of the scientific community. And while it continues to draw contempt from society, researchers are now trying to define and specify its boundaries, products, actors and consumption patterns. In this context, the book edited by Florian Vörös, *Cultures pornographiques*, reflects France's growing field of research in porn studies, which originated in the United States in the 1990s-2000s.¹ These studies assume the heterogeneity of pornographic productions and representations. In doing so, they oppose discourse that uses a reductive singular approach, equating pornography with violent images and indiscriminately deploring the potential risks involved for the sexuality of groups considered socially vulnerable. Rejecting the misleading notion of a single form of pornography, they reflect on "pornographic cultures", highlighting the plurality of pornographic expressions, the wide range of uses and the social, symbolic and even ideological approximations to which those cultures are subject. Studies in this field are reluctant to make any over-generalisations; they commit to vigilance by observing how individuals seize on these sexual representations and incorporate them into their own sexuality.

¹ Linda Williams, *Hard Core. Power, Pleasure and the Frenzy of the Visible*, University of California Press, 1989; Linda Williams (ed.), *Porn Studies*, Duke University Press, 2004.

This collection of founding texts links a number of elements of a theoretical and epistemological framing in this area of research, according to three resolutely political perspectives: sensation, gaze, appropriation. Porn studies seek to understand, through people's individual relationships with pornographic images, the social principles that provoke desire. These are no doubt constructed in people's personal histories, but they are also part of a social, political and moral hierarchisation between representations, sexual acts and social groups. It is therefore equally vital to focus on those who define what pornography is and determine the practices and representations that stem from it. This definition has been the subject of disagreements between social actors belonging to collectives and institutions, resulting in policies regulating products and their circulation.

Being affected

In the first part of the book, "*Politique de la sensation*" ("Politics of Sensation"), Susanna Paasonen's text entitled *Strange Bedfellows. Pornography, Affect and Feminist Interpretation* focuses on the heuristic relevance of reflexivity when analysing people's relationship with pornography. This approach proposes to redefine our interpretative processes by advocating integrating affect into the interpretation of sexual representations. It invites the researcher to question his or her experience, not so much for the purposes of self-analysis but rather in an understanding that the learned body is also affected by social processes. Physical sensations such as pleasure, displeasure, attraction and disgust are part of any reading of pornographic texts.

This is not an easy exercise because, as the author explains,

"the legacy of the separation between body and mind in Western society certainly cannot be denied. Nevertheless, the "affective turn" recently diagnosed in feminist thought is a significant step towards a more embodied approach to interpretation."

This position not only calls into question the traditionally external position adopted by the researcher, which was intended to ensure scientific objectivity, but also invites the researcher to interpret the complexity of the affects aroused by pornographic images and to take seriously his or her subjective viewpoints when exploring the "gap between our political positions with regard to gender and sexuality and our vulnerability to pornography and its generic and stylised staging of control". (p. 77).

Seeing

Kobena Mercer's article entitled "Reading Racial Fetishism. The Photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe" is incorporated into the second part of the book, "Politique du regard" ("Politics of Seeing"). The author revisits two readings he proposed for the photographer's series on nude black males. The first was published in 1986 in Great Britain, and the second in 1989 in the United States. The retrospective re-readings enable him to question the developments that have taken place in his relationship with these images. The researcher's gaze is a key element here, revealing the social relations that underpin not only the interpretative work but also the expression of desire. By comparing his different readings, Kobena Mercer shows that the successive displacements of his gaze are linked to his position as a black, gay subject and to the struggles and controversies the book provoked in American society at a particular time. The process consists in constantly resituating the researcher's subjective viewpoint when discussing "his relationship with the difference that characterises the complexity and incompleteness of any social identity" (p. 112).

He therefore makes an initial interpretation of the photographer's work through the lens of the fantasies that white people construct around black men's sexuality. He focuses on the way in which the artist plays with stereotypes and how the reified bodies become objects of desire. This reading "which is accompanied by a racial fetishism" gives rise to a reflection on "the unconscious politics of white masculinity" (p. 127). The researcher then changes his interpretation, which is no longer anchored solely in social race relations but in the context of urban gay culture. As a result, these images "disturb and decentre the dominant "white" racial identities as well as the standard (hetero)sexual identities" (p. 142). This study therefore questions the plasticity of interpretations according to the social anchoring of the individual observing and the imaginary relationship he or she establishes with the text.

The study by Clarissa Smith, Martin Baker and Feona Attwood on "reasons for viewing pornography", published in the third part of this collection, provides further enlightenment on this subject. Based on a consumer survey, the results show the complexity and diversity of consumers, uses and sexual representations offered in an increasingly segmented market. The authors maintain that pornographers, in an effort to widen their audiences, have increased the variety on offer and, in particular, have "[...] facilitated women's participation in the production and consumption of sexual fantasies" (p. 258).

The survey not only collected information on users' social background and stated sexual orientation but made a special effort to define people's consumption habits (frequency, types of products and technology used – DVDs, downloads, file sharing platforms, webcams, etc.), what they seek from pornography and what they do with it. According to the authors,

"[our] statistics show a series of differences between men's relationships with pornography and women's. For example, the average man sees pornography as a simple *means of expressing* their arousal, whereas women usually see it as a *means of becoming aroused*. Women also seem to use porn to reconnect with their body and in

their relations with partners. Men, on the other hand, seem more inclined to resort to pornography to fend off boredom or when they have nothing better to do. (p. 260)

Pornography as a tool

The chapter by Lisa Sigel, “Filth in the Wrong People’s Hands”, introduces the third part of the book, “*Politiques de l’appropriation*” (Politics of Appropriation), and continues this reflection on another level, taking a long-term perspective, and in the context of struggles between social groups. Using the example of photographs of naked girls in France and England in the late 19th and early 20th century, the researcher shows how the status of pornography changed. It was socially and politically tolerated when these photographs were viewed exclusively by white, aristocratic or bourgeois men, but they became suspect and dangerous when they concerned the working classes, women, people of colour or children. According to the author, “this new form of large-scale, low-cost sexual representation changed verbal obscenity into visual obscenity” (p. 213). The shift from the private to the public sphere, and from the elite to the masses, triggered widespread moral panic and measures of control and repression by the authorities and private organisations, which argued that the most vulnerable groups needed to be protected.

At the same time, however, there was also a fight to prevent the political appropriation of these forms of expression and their distribution in the public sphere. Indeed, as they became more accessible, these photographs of nude women diversified and were turned into postcards, after which they widely disseminated political criticism of society. While some played on social relations of gender, class and race, under the lens of a colonial fantasy, others drew on sexual representations in order to mock the aristocracy or working classes. As Lisa Sigel highlights,

“social position determined the significance of the subject being observed. Its explicitly sexual nature in itself was not enough to define a subject as indecent, obscene or pornographic. These definitions were the product of a confrontation between a plurality of actors and perspectives, and the challenge was maintaining asymmetrical social relations between the groups observing and those being observed” (p. 219)

The texts that are brought together in this book thus strive to define a theoretical and epistemological framework for the study of pornography that would be capable of conceiving the heterogeneity of its definitions, subjects, uses and audiences. Porn studies are an area of research that gives great importance to reflexivity as a heuristic tool for constructing knowledge: the reflexivity of the researcher’s gaze and the reflexivity of a social group with regard to itself. It incorporates affects and sensations into the intellectual task. In addition, this approach simultaneously takes into account the processes of social assignment and stigmatisation, tactics and interpretative shifts. It should be applied to other areas considered nobler, or less vulgar.

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