

Realism in Feminist Pornography

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INTRODUCTION

The past forty years have seen intensely passionate and divisive debates among feminists surrounding the topics of pornography, sexuality and censorship. Many of the arguments have stayed the same over time, especially from the anti-pornography side where the writings of contemporary feminist scholars such as Gail Dines resonate flawlessly with the rhetoric of the original anti-pornography feminists of the 1970s. However, newer voices have emerged on the other side of the debate that are not merely anti-censorship or even pro-sex, but pro-*pornography* feminists who are acting in, directing and producing what they call “feminist pornography”. These pornographers have a similar objective to that of their feminist predecessors: to eliminate the pervasive degrading and misogynist influence that mainstream pornography has on women in our society. However, their approach is completely orthogonal, fighting for change from within the industry and trying to rectify the misrepresentations of women in pornography instead of eliminating them. Perhaps the most interesting and pervasive feature of today’s feminist porn movement is the emphasis placed on the authenticity of the action and the genuineness of the pleasure depicted. Madison Young, one of the most successful and prolific feminist activists within the porn industry, promises to customers entering her *Feminist Porn Network*, “Inside you will find women and men having real orgasms and something that is a rarity in porn – connection.”¹ Although realism in pornography is arguably something that women may enjoy², it is not a sufficient condition upon which to judge the feminist value of any given instance of pornography. This paper will attempt to

¹ Young, “Feminist Porn Network”

² According to Petra Joy and Erika Lust, female audiences crave realistic characters and plotlines as well as believable and relatable narratives of arousal. May.

situate the prominence of realism in the rhetoric of feminist pornographers within the larger feminist value system behind their activism. I will first outline the major feminist criticisms of the porn industry and the different approaches that have been taken to combat its potential to harm women. Then, based on those criticisms I will propose a set of criteria necessary for any pornography to be consistent with broad feminist goals. Finally, I will explain the connection between those criteria and the ‘realism’ promoted by feminist pornographers—that realism is a conveniently distilled catch-all for the longer list of feminist requirements of porn, a list on which each element is necessary, but together are not sufficient, for creating realistic pornography featuring authentic pleasure.

THE FEMINIST DEBATE ON PORNOGRAPHY

Pornography was at the center of feminist debate in the 1970s and 80s, with advocacy groups and activist publications springing up across the United States from every possible feminist angle. One of the prevailing arguments, in accordance with Catherine MacKinnon’s dominance theory, was that pornography itself *is* subordination of women. Not only does pornography *depict* scenes where women are degraded, objectified and violated, but pornography actively subordinates women by infiltrating our thoughts and fantasies, thereby “creating and maintaining the civil inequality of the sexes”.³ When women in pornography are reduced to their sex organs and are shown enjoying the degradation and violence inflicted on them at the hands of men, it simultaneously shapes male desire and our collective understanding of female sexuality, promoting and glorifying male sexual aggression through the misconception that women are passive and silent, and are turned on by being degraded.

³ Duggan et al., quoting the MacKinnon/Dworkin Antipornography Ordinance in *Theorizing Feminisms* p. 323

In 1983, Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin proposed an Antipornography Ordinance that would target pornography legally as a civil issue, arguing that the influence of pornography goes as far as to “harm women’s opportunities for equality of rights in employment, education, property rights, public accommodations and public services”⁴, necessitating more regulation and censorship. According to anti-pornography feminism, in addition to reinforcing the gender hierarchy, pornography’s monopoly over our sexual scripts also normalizes rape and assault by silencing women⁵. In her 1980 essay *Women and Consent*, Carole Pateman explains the low rape conviction rate and other trends⁶ by the fact that “apparent refusal of consent can *never*, in a woman, be taken at face value.”⁷ Where a man’s spoken “no” is sufficient to be universally understood as refusal, a woman’s “no” is less often heard, understood, or believed, as “the public [is] convinced that the ‘naturally’ sexually aggressive male must disregard a woman’s refusal as merely a token gesture that hides her true desires,”⁸ a recurring theme in mainstream pornography. While this reading of pornography’s societal impact holds many valuable lessons for feminists—namely awareness of the industry’s large sphere of influence and of the nuances and intricacies of consent issues—its theoretical implications and resulting pro-censorship stance have been widely criticized from alternative feminist perspectives warning of the dangers of censorship, male and heterosexual stereotyping, and sex-negativity.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Sometimes this silencing takes the form of women literally not speaking, but more often it is through *illocutionary disablement*, where women’s words and intent are correctly articulated but don’t hold an authoritative enough position to be perceived as meaningful by others. Langton, p. 48

⁶ such as the fact that rape is rarely prosecuted or seen as a serious crime in the absence of visible signs of violent resistance on the part of the woman, a standard for non-consent much higher than a verbalized “no”, Pateman, p. 161

⁷ Pateman, p. 155

⁸ Pateman, p. 158

One of the most basic objections to anti-pornography is the fact that sexism and gender discrimination are much older than the porn industry—which merely reflects those attitudes—so any effort to eradicate pornography would be misplaced, targeting a symptom not the cause of the problem.⁹ Beyond just being ineffective, battling pornography through increased censorship puts the control over sexually explicit media into the hands of the courts and legislature, largely male-dominated spaces. Carolyn Bronstein, in her historical account of the feminist pornography debate, describes how anti-censorship feminists, “opposed any effort that might give the state additional power to regulate sexual expression, fearing that such power would likely be used to censor feminist, gay and lesbian materials.”¹⁰ Solidarity with other marginalized groups—especially sex- and gender-related ones like the LGBT community—is an important component of the women’s movement. People who fall outside of the mainstream are the most susceptible to the effects of censorship, especially with obscenity in America being legally defined by average, community standards. Lisa Duggan explains the feminist’s responsibility to defend freedom of speech for such groups, saying that, “for sexual minorities, sexual acts can be self-identifying and affirming statements in a hostile world. Images of those acts should be protected for that reason, for they do have political content.”¹¹ Pornography can serve as a place to normalize certain acts, identities or body types, and seeing reflections of oneself in media, even in pornography, can be powerful and encouraging to otherwise alienated and marginalized consumers.

The more radical opposition to anti-pornography could best be described as the pro-sex, or sex-positive approach. Sex-positive feminists believe that celebrating

⁹ In her review, *Nature’s Revenge*, Ellen Willis states, “Pornography that offers concrete images of how to act out hatred of women may invite imitation and re-enforce an atmosphere of complacency toward sexual violence, but the hatred and complacency that produce violence are built into the culture. In short, pornography is a symptom, not a root cause.”

¹⁰ Bronstein, p. 280

¹¹ Duggan et al., in *Theorizing Feminisms*, p. 320

sexuality and encouraging female sexual autonomy are important steps on the path towards women's liberation. This attitude is supported from both a reactionary and an independently positive perspective. First, Ellen Willis explains the need for acknowledgement and acceptance of female desire by highlighting the problematic logical implications of dominance theory:

A world view that defines male sexuality and pornography as rape leaves no room for mutual heterosexual desire, let alone love... If relations with men offer nothing but violence and exploitation, most women's apparent desire for such relations must mean that either men are so diabolically powerful as to have crushed even passive resistance or women have been so brutalized that we have lost the will to resist. Where in this scenario is the possibility of struggle?¹²

An attitude that puts down women for expressing their sexuality is reminiscent of the traditional, conservative anti-sex position that has caused so many problems for women¹³. The consent issues that Carole Pateman described and the overall absence of a female gaze from pornography and other media can, at least somewhat, be attributed to how women are portrayed as the pure, passive sex, lacking in genuine physical desire. Bronstein describes this attitude (according to sex-positive feminists) as the "repressive sexual ideas that served right-wing interests, namely that men possessed uncontrollable sexual drives, that women were more oriented to emotional nurturing than physical release, and that sex itself was a dangerous, violent force from which vulnerable women required protection."¹⁴ This places women in a predicament where they are encouraged to have sex with male partners for the man's pleasure but are often criticized for being promiscuous for doing so, with no opportunity to express their own desires or needs. Additionally, anti-pornography and anti-sex rhetoric reinforces negative stereotypes about men and their

¹² Willis

¹³ Duggan asserts that the tone of the MacKinnon/Dworkin Ordinance is evocative of traditional anti-sex rhetoric, targeting all sexually explicit material under the name of pornography just as all past obscenity laws have done, in *Theorizing Feminisms*, p. 318

¹⁴ Bronstein, p. 280

“uncontrollable sexual drives”, simultaneously painting all men as abusers and shifting blame for rape and assault onto “nature” and away from perpetrators. If, instead, we operated under the assumption that all people, male and female, were entitled to their own sexual identities and autonomy, and if we were surrounded by positive models of female sexual agency, perhaps a woman’s non-consent *would* be taken at face-value, because it would clearly be in stark contrast to the learned norm for female sexuality.

Despite their differences in approach, anti-pornography, anti-censorship and pro-sex feminists all share two fundamental beliefs about the porn industry that motivate their activism: that both men and women get a great deal of their information about sex and sexuality from pornography, and that the representations of women, consent and gender dynamics in mainstream pornography are dangerous and damaging from a feminist perspective. Gail Dines, perhaps the most vocal contemporary anti-porn feminist, characterizes the porn industry’s pervasive impact by saying “pornography has become almost invisible by virtue of its very ubiquity. It seeps into our lives, identities, and relationships. We are so steeped in the pornographic mindset that it is difficult to imagine what a world without porn would look like.”¹⁵ In light of that reality, many feminists on the opposite side of the debate have decided to combat the negative portrayals of women in porn by contributing their own more deliberate and positive images to the mix. As Jen Loy, editor of *Fabula* magazine, puts it:

Pornography is here to stay, it not going anywhere, and while a lot of pornography does portray women in less than ideal roles and fantasies that don’t necessarily make me comfortable, feminism has to move into that industry and has to take porn back. It has to create a kind of porn that we want as women, that feminists want.¹⁶

¹⁵ Dines, *Pornland*, p. 163

¹⁶ *Hot and Bothered*, Jen Loy 7:15

Today's feminist pornographers share their core values with the sex-positive feminists of three decades ago, and many of their goals are even compatible with that period's anti-pornography proponents: combating rape culture, legitimizing women's speech, and wresting away the masculine monopoly over media. Maggie Mayhem, a feminist porn performer, producer and activist, explains her reason for entering the porn industry:

“I believe that we have diminished women's autonomy in sexuality. We have said that there is one gaze—the patriarchal gaze—and I am here, if nothing else, to disrupt that gaze and to say that my own sexuality and desire is legitimate.”¹⁷

Moving forward in this paper, I will assume that this approach of working within the porn industry to create alternative imagery and narratives could be successful in furthering the feminist ideals described above. Consequently, I will identify the specific attributes necessary for such pornography to be effective and in keeping with a broadly defined feminist agenda.

WHAT MAKES SOME PORN 'FEMINIST'?

There are a number of women's issues to address when evaluating whether any given production can qualify as “feminist”. It is necessary to consider the socio-economic challenges that disproportionately affect women, such as the draw of the sex industry for women with few other options, and the health concerns and potentials for exploitation, coercion and abuse that are inherent to that industry. Another set of considerations deal with the negative body image messages and unrealistic beauty standards that constantly bombard women and young girls in our society. Keeping intersectionality in mind, we must strive to be inclusive and supportive of people of different races and abilities, as well as alternative and marginalized sexual communities. The message must combat the harmful gender

¹⁷ “Pornography Panel”, Maggie Mayhem, 12:19

stereotypes that peg men as overly sexual aggressors and women as passive tools for male pleasure. Such pornography would also need to empower women and give them ample space to speak and be heard in order to reverse their silencing that is so ingrained in our culture. In an attempt to distill all of these goals into distinct and comprehensive categories, I propose the following four requirements of feminist pornography: (1) It must include positive depictions of consent and communication, (2) it must have an equal focus on all participants' desires and pleasure, (3) it must feature diversity in body types, orientations and identities, and (4) it must be ethically produced.

Consent and Communication

The porn being made by today's most influential feminist pornographers adheres to the guidelines above; this becomes apparent upon inspection and through hearing what the directors have said about their work in interviews and lectures. Madison Young focuses on communication between her performers, before, during, and after a shoot. She makes a point of including this communication in the final product so that viewers see the performers negotiating and consenting to the action and keeping the lines of communication open throughout the process. In describing her process and the artistic decisions she makes, Young explains, "I like to show that communication can be sexy... I ask people to ask for lube when they need it, I think its important to show that and I give space and ask performers about barriers that they might want to use,"¹⁸ making sure that viewers see those parts of the conversation, ones that are often edited out in mainstream pornography. She continues, saying:

I try to get as much communication on screen as possible, so if something is uncomfortable or if something feels good I want to hear about it. I don't need it

¹⁸ Young, "Reclaiming Pornography", 1:11:07

to be said like, “cut! Oh can we change positions” or something like that. Instead I prefer that I be able to document *that* as well. We’re not mind readers who just know when something feels good or when it doesn’t or we want to change into a new position.¹⁹

Showing that type of interaction provides viewers with a script to have similar conversations with their own partners—about protection and comfort—and helps to dispel the dangerous illusion that mass media and mainstream pornography have created of sex being easy, smooth and flawless without any communication or feedback, and of it being okay and even normal to engage in sexual activity with someone without discussing or asking about it first.

Pleasure and Desire

In *Hot and Bothered*, her 2003 documentary on female pornographers, Nina Hartley asserts, “Feminist pornography is subversive because it shows women desiring [sex] unabashedly.”²⁰ Dismayed at the lack of focus on female pleasure and agency in mainstream pornography, Hartley and her contemporaries decided to make porn with the expressed purpose of showing women’s sex drive and desire as a force on par with that of their male counterparts, giving all viewers permission to explore, to desire, and to fully express their sexuality.²¹ Also in *Hot and Bothered*, Greta Christina explains, “Women are porn consumers, and that in itself...is very much a radical feminist idea: the idea that women can be sexual aggressors, sexual consumers,

¹⁹ Young, “Reclaiming Pornography”, 1:09:53

²⁰ *Hot and Bothered*, Nina Hartley, 10:58

²¹ At the beginning of *Bend Over Boyfriend*, a pegging instructional video infused with porn and aimed at couples, Robert Morgan tells viewers, “One of the things that we want to teach you about anal play is that, as adults, we have the *right* to play,” *Bend Over Boyfriend*, 2:00. Jackie Strano (producer) comments on the movie saying, “this video is so wonderful and affirming and giving permission to people, that’s been the success of *Bend Over Boyfriend*,” *Hot and Bothered*, 20:52. Tristan Taormino goes one step further in describing her book-turned-movie *The Ultimate Guide to Anal Sex for Women*, another late 1990s fusion of instruction manual and porn, saying, “I feel like its *Our Bodies Ourselves* but just specifically for your ass. Its like whipping out the speculum, getting in touch with your ass, finding out about anatomy, finding out about pleasure, in that do-it-yourself, feminist, consciousness-raising kind of way,” *Hot and Bothered*, 12:50.

seeking out a consciousness of our own sexual desires and insisting that those desires be filled.”²² Mainstream pornography has always depicted men as active instigators and women as passive, receptive and accommodating. Feminist pornography challenges this dichotomy on two levels: providing a product that allows women to pursue their sexuality, and featuring female pleasure and desire as content.

Diversity

Feminist pornographers cast performers of all different shapes, sizes, races, orientations, and gender presentations in a conscious effort to depict a variety of aesthetics not often found in mainstream pornography.²³ Greta Christina explains how different body types are positively received by female viewers:

I think that a lot of women are barraged by imagery of what they’re supposed to look like—this impossible body image that they’re supposed to achieve—and feminist porn doesn’t say “you have to look like a teenage boy with huge plastic breasts in order to be attractive”. It says “you can look like an ordinary person and get laid and have a good time in bed”. That’s a lot of what women find appealing.²⁴

In an interview at *TheRumpus.net*, Madison Young explained the other benefit of diversifying pornography, in accordance with the call for representation of sexual minority groups in pornography articulated by Lisa Duggan and others above:

My interest lies in expanding the conversation about the complex identities of people in LGBTQ, kink, sex worker, and sex-positive communities... The work I do is about creating space for people to feel confident and safe in exploring their full and complete identity without judgment. If we are able to expand this to a mainstream level, it breaks a wall of isolation that individuals might feel when

²² *Hot and Bothered*, Greta Christina, 9:29

²³ or worse, only existing within niche fetish categories, such as *BBW* (Big Beautiful Women, featuring overweight women) and *Ebony* (featuring black actors), that exotify the physical characteristics that separate them from the norm, essentially ensuring that no overweight or black woman appear in “regular” porn.

²⁴ *Hot and Bothered*, Greta Christina, 9:56

they are discovering parts of their identity that might set them apart from the people they see around them.²⁵

Feminist pornography creates at least a virtual community for isolated sexual minorities and generates positive, sexy images of people of all types that disrupt the homogeneity of the mainstream porn industry's aesthetic.

Ethical Production

Evaluating the ethics of creation of any pornographic production is difficult because we don't have access to every detail of the working conditions and experiences of the performers. However, relying on first-hand accounts and documentation of the process, we can see that producer Madison Young approaches the creation of her product from a holistic and performer-focused perspective. In describing the procedure, a completely transparent process shown in her newest docu-porn, *Women Reclaiming Sex on Film*, Young explains that she meets with perspective performers ahead of time to discuss why they want to be in front of the camera and to make sure they truly know what they're committing to, talk about barriers and health concerns along with experience and preferences.²⁶ She says:

For me what is crucial is talking and listening and creating a safe space for my performers, and having a dialogue with them for a long time about what their fantasy is, not the porn consumer's fantasy, and how I can make that a reality on film and facilitate the safest possible space for them to connect with someone that they actually care about or have a crush on or that they want to work with.²⁷

Prioritizing the performer's fantasies, relationships, safety, and well being helps foster a more comfortable and less risky work environment for women working in the sex industry.

²⁵ Martin

²⁶ Young, "Reclaiming Pornography", 15:03

²⁷ Young, "Reclaiming Pornography", 12:27

ADVERTIZING 'REALISM' IN PORNOGRAPHY

Even though much of today's alternative, activist pornography meets all four of the above proposed guidelines to qualify as "feminist", those features do not get promoted or advertised nearly as much as the guarantees of real orgasms, genuine pleasure, and authentic action. Madison Young's website promises, "inside you will find women and men having real orgasms and something that is a rarity in porn – connection,"²⁸ a promise that can be found all over the websites and DVD covers of most of today's feminist pornographers. What is the connection between realistic pornography and feminist pornography? Why is realism a goal that so many feminists have striven for in their pornography, especially when the trend is not necessarily mirrored in the mainstream porn industry?

First, an obvious reason why female porn producers trumpet the realism of their porn over, perhaps, the ethics of its production is that the realism is sexier. A consumer, even a conscientious one with feminist motivations, would probably rather be thinking about real orgasms when browsing for porn than be reminded of high rape rates when reassured of the good models of communication depicted in her pornography. Contemporary feminist porn is also incredibly gynocentric in tone, and the emphasis on connection, real female pleasure, and distinctly feminine sex may appeal more to a female audience. Although there certainly is male viewership, much of the porn is produced and directed by women and for women, often with all-female casts. The connection that women see on the screen between performers, along with the additional potential for connection between the viewer and performer when the performer is acting as herself and experiencing genuine emotions on film, are powerful selling points to a female-focused consumer base.

To understand the appeal of this realism, I have split the possible motivations for consuming pornography into four categories: fantasy fulfillment, physical attraction,

²⁸ Young, "Feminist Porn Network"

guilty pleasure, and vicarious pleasure. A viewer could enjoy a certain video because the situation or specific acts depicted in that video fit a fantasy they have, allowing them to imagine themselves in the middle of the action. However, the same video could be enjoyed by another viewer who had no interest in those specific actions or circumstances, but was purely physically attracted to one of the performers and used the video to imagine having sex with that person independently of the plotline. The third type of porn enjoyment comes from the thrill of indulging in a guilty pleasure, whether just by virtue of watching other people have sex, an interaction that “should” be private, or more often through sites that claim to show footage from secret cameras or submitted by angry ex-boyfriends. Mainstream pornography caters overwhelmingly to those first three motivators, as evidenced by the strict categorization of most porn by race, body type, plotline, and source. However, the fourth motivator, experiencing pleasure vicariously through the perceived pleasure of the performers, depends on the believability of the scene. Feminist pornographers seem to be marketing their material largely to consumers who are motivated by this vicarious pleasure, and the best way to ensure believable pleasure on film is to strive for genuine pleasure. Madison Young often compares mainstream porn companies to fast food restaurants, where they have engineered the most efficient possible formula for a product that will just barely do the trick, so as to be able to produce it over and over again at the lowest possible cost and effort. Pleasure is often what gets lost in the process, as she explains:

Pleasure is something that has greatly been removed from a lot of pornography that is being generated, and I would say that this all comes down to intent and why we are making porn. It is not time-efficient to include laughter and pleasure in a lot of the porn that is being generated out of the San Fernando Valley and LA”²⁹

²⁹ Young, “Reclaiming Pornography”, 1:44:14

It may be the case that porn made to cater exclusively to fantasy fulfillment, physical attraction, and guilty pleasures is incompatible with feminism—or at least exploitive of the performers—because the bodies of the performers are used to create content that is dictated solely by the desires of consumers, but that proposition would be difficult if not impossible to prove or generalize. Luckily, the reverse statement—that porn created to allow viewers to experience pleasure vicariously through the pleasure of the performers is always in keeping with feminist principles—seems to be true, and can therefore be used as a rough approximation, or rule of thumb, when evaluating the compatibility of pornography with feminism.

CONCLUSION

Looking back to our four requirements of feminist porn, I believe that genuine pleasure could not happen for porn performers if any of a focus on consent and communication, desire and pleasure of all parties, diversity or ethical production were absent, meaning that if the performers in any given film are depicted experiencing realistic, authentic pleasure, then that film must meet our requirements for being feminist. Ethical production is a given, because the performers need to be comfortable with each other and with their work to be enjoying themselves. Communication and a focus on the desires of everyone involved are essential for the performers to be getting exactly what they want and avoiding what they don't. Diversity in body types and identities is important for realism, in order to reflect the actual diversity of the real world. While an extra chemistry must be added to spark authentic pleasure, meaning that these four conditions are not sufficient to produce the realism advertised by feminist pornographers, they are certainly necessary for such realistic, genuine pleasure, which by extension allows us to feel secure in the feminist content of today's alternative pornography movement.

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