Introduction to the issue

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Introduction to the issue

Our last issue of 2015 includes articles that range across public sex performance in Amsterdam, sexting, microporn, the mandating of condom use in some North American pornography, and the use of pornography in the research of J. Michael Bailey and Meredith L. Chivers.

In our first article Valerie Webber examines Measure B legislation, introduced in 2012 to mandate condom use in pornography made in Los Angeles County, USA. While supporters presented the legislation as motivated by concerns for public health and labour rights, it can be more accurately understood as revealing the clash of neoliberal and neoconservative values around sex work and pornography. Neoliberalism promotes self-regulation while neoconservatism aims to enforce particular kinds of moral behaviours. As Webber notes, ‘Measure B struggles to balance neoliberal autonomy with neoconservative morality through appeals to pornography’s pedagogic potential/responsibility’ – by insisting that porn performers set a good example by showing condom use in performance, and by aiming to ‘promote itself as a labour rights and occupational health measure’ that protects porn performers through the use of condoms on set. In addition, it does so without consulting with those who work in pornography, fails to address their actual working conditions, assumes a protectionist stance which is racist, sexist and homophobic, and creates ‘impossible worlds for performers to inhabit’.

Nicole Erin Morse examines how porn is used in the research of psychologists such as J. Michael Bailey and Meredith L. Chivers. Bailey and Chivers aim to produce ‘scientific’ knowledge about sexual orientation, gender, and sex by examining the relation between research participants’ genital and subjective responses to pornographic ‘stimuli’; the stimuli coded in such a way as to determine their ‘real’ sexual orientation. Morse shows how, by assuming that ‘pornography is a stable object with predictable functions’ and by focusing only on the apparent gender and sex of the performers, the sexual acts that are performed, and the sexual orientations that are depicted, these studies simply reproduce the categories they are designed to investigate. Although widely reported, this kind of research is completely unable to address the real complexity of both pornography and human sexual response.

Discussions of pornography frequently focus on visual content, but in her article, Erin Sanders-McDonagh considers the importance of space and place and the implications these have for sexual consumption. Her research, carried out in Amsterdam at a live sex show, demonstrates that some kinds of public sex performance are positioned as legitimate sexual entertainment for tourist men, women, and couples - and that substantial numbers of a wide range of female tourists visit these. As other researchers have found, context is key in determining access to pornography; here it is the kind of tourist environment that Amsterdam represents which makes it possible for women to inhabit a ‘pornographic’ space. The article also raises the future possibilities of examining the politics of looking across a range of sexualized spaces such as strip clubs, the places where pornography is consumed, and sex tourism more broadly.

In ‘Sexting and the politics of the image’ Tim Gregory argues that, like other panics around sex and the media, the legal and social actions taken against sexting...
- and sometimes against young people who engage in this practice - almost always focus on girls. Yet research suggests that what we call sexting is a widespread and everyday practice amongst young people, and that boys and young men take as many images of themselves as girls and young women do. While some instances of sexting are made hyper-visible, we do not know what the vast majority of the images that young people make and circulate look like, or what their significance might be. Gregory suggests that these images may have enormous value for young people, given that they continue to produce them in spite of public shaming and the threat of criminal proceedings. That young people do not refer to distinct categories of ‘selfies’ and ‘sexting’, as adults have done, may mean that the boundaries between sexual and other kinds of images are not as definite for their producers as public responses suggest; and that perhaps we might understand them as related less to sexual expression and more to the practices of play, self-design and autonomous representation.

In our final article, Helen Hester, Bethan Jones and Sarah Taylor-Harman examine microporn in the form of moving-image GIFs – the compressed image files in which fleeting moments of sexual imagery are looped on repeat. Arguing that micro-porn can be understood as a key part of the participatory practices of porn fans, the authors examine GIFs circulated by ‘Deenagers’ - the female fans of porn performer James Deen. They note how this short form porn cannot be understood in terms of narrative pleasures or educational use - qualities often used to explain the attractions of porn, particularly for women. Instead, for this group of fans at least, microporn appears to speak to the pleasures of the ephemeral and moments of sexual excitement.

Finally, we note with great sadness the deaths, in September, of the feminist porn pioneers, Candida Royalle, founder of Femme Productions, and On Our Back’s Honey Lee Cottrell. Appreciations of their work and its significance will follow in our next issue.

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