Editorial

Feona Attwood, Clarissa Smith & John Mercer

To cite this article: Feona Attwood, Clarissa Smith & John Mercer (2019) Editorial, Porn Studies, 6:1, 1-3, DOI: 10.1080/23268743.2019.1572303

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2019.1572303

Published online: 24 Apr 2019.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 208

View related articles

View Crossmark data
Editorial

In this special issue of Porn Studies, Ricky Varghese has pulled together a great selection of articles which explore the complex and layered relationships between pornography and psychoanalysis across films, internet videos, pornographic literature, and pulp fiction.

Theories of sexuality have preoccupied psychoanalytic scholars but there has perhaps been a dearth of rigorous application to pornography – the exploration of how categories such as desire and pleasure are so entangled in pornographic production, consumption, and practices is the focus of the articles presented here, beginning with Varghese’s account of why psychoanalysis might have value for contemporary research into sexually explicit representation.

Pornography is usually understood as a visual medium; indeed, this understanding is sedimented in the various ways that pornography is publicly discussed – from the subtitle of Linda Williams’ foundational text Hardcore to the calls for censorship of pornographic imagery, pornography’s ‘frenzy of the visible’ all too constantly renders the sounds of pornography redundant. Eugenie Brinkema’s article ‘Form for the Blind’ takes a different approach, exploring the unwieldy, difficult to categorize, and ignored category of audio porn. Taking examples from Pornhub’s growing archive of professional vocal transcriptions of conventional visual pornographic texts, Brinkema works through the difficulties of describing description alongside its relations to forms of interpretation and the ways that description overwrites the action onscreen. Cinematically specific visual language is only one aspect of the ‘unmoved viewer’ who retells the action producing two registers of performed desire. Brinkema finds that ‘Description thus indexes the interpretability of pornography as such, making clear in its unfolding performance that pornographic labour is inextricable from its formal activity.’

For Chris Vanderwees, new media technologies not only interpellate desiring subjects as Peeping Toms – watching, stalking, looking at each other – but he also contends that contemporary viewers must also live with the anxiety of being ‘peeped’ at themselves – cultures of surveillance extend even into our most private spaces, collecting data on our screen-time, use of social media and online pornography. In ‘Paranoid Pleasure: Surveillance, Online Pornography, and Scopophilia’, Vanderwees uses Sartre’s conception of the man looking through the keyhole to explore the complexities of scopophilic pleasures and desire, and their relationships with anxieties around voyeurism, shame, narcissism, and the self. His article strives to understand the possible connections between ‘fantasies of looking and being looked at through the keyholes of technology’ that characterize consumption of contemporary online pornographies.

Voyeurism is also the subject of Fan Wu’s ‘A Porn Voyeur’s Discourse’. Inspired by Roland Barthes’ A Lover’s Discourse and his idiosyncratic, particularly literary, understanding of psychoanalysis, Wu offers a lyrical exposition of the different pleasures offered by amateur and studio gay pornography. Moving away from depersonalized enumerations of the cultural significances (too often negative) of pornographic texts, Wu offers a more personal exploration of his reactions to the texts in a set of moves which seem to echo Barthes’ assertion that signs ‘are only important to me if they seduce or irritate me. Signs in themselves are never enough for me, I must have the desire to read them.’ Barthes famously rejected pornography (in his Camera Lucida), separating ‘the “heavy” desire of pornography from the “light” (good) desire of eroticism’, but Wu diverges from Barthes on this. Exploring edging, authenticity effect, and the

© 2019 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
pleasures of personal porn archives, Wu argues for a renewed appraisal of porn’s pedagogies for our desire(s).

Psychoanalysis is, of course, an interpretative science and particularly of the complexities of desire(s). David K. Seitz employs the interpretative lens of melancholia in ‘Looking for Pei Lim’s Penis: Melancholia, Mimicry, Pedagogy’. Freud’s account of melancholia and its constitutive role of loss in subject formation is the foundation for Seitz’s exploration of the racialization of queer sexuality and its mediation in pornography, particularly through the staging of ‘repudiated desire’. Seitz focuses on the artistic, activist, and porn careers of Lim Pei-Hsien, an important, if rarely acknowledged, figure in Canadian LGBTQ, AIDS, and anti-racist circles. Focusing on Lim’s work read through a psychoanalytic lens enables Seitz to argue that Lim is a profoundly and perhaps instructively melancholic figure with significant resonance for apprehending the interconnections of race, queerness, and pornography.


The Lacanian concept of ‘jouissance’, or the enjoyment that goes beyond the pleasure principle, makes its appearance in many of the articles in this special issue. For Gareth Longstaff the interpretation of jouissance makes possible the exploration and repositioning of a queer and psychoanalytic politics of bareback and chemsex as porn. In ”Bodies that Splutter” – Theorizing Jouissance in Bareback and Chemsex Porn’, Longstaff examines the output of UK director Liam Cole and US website RawFuckClub.com alongside a transposition of Judith Butler’s concept of performative bodies that matter and Tim Dean’s unconscious bodies that mutter in order to frame gay male desires for bareback and chemsex as instances of phallic jouissance.

Lacanian ethics are the subject of Alison Horbury’s ‘A Psychoanalytic Ethics of the Pornographic Aesthetic’. As Horbury explains, Lacan positions a psychoanalytic ethics in opposition to traditional ethics, enabling ‘the cleaning up of desire’, through ‘modesty’, and ‘temperateness’. Utilizing this psychoanalytic ethics, Horbury attempts its application to a pornographic aesthetic. Once again Roland Barthes is useful to our author – the theoretical concept of the punctum enabling her examination of the pornographic ‘artefact of the libido’ and its aesthetic, which she argues, despite Barthes’ protestations to the contrary, ‘may “prick” our symbolic identifications and political ideals to generate a more honest engagement with the (libidinal) truth of our desire’.

While pornography has traditionally been derided as fake and speaking to our basest desires, one form of pornographic production has more recently been claimed to embody honesty, truth, and authenticity. Feminist porn has become the story du jour, although its substance and impact have divided opinion. Madison Young has argued that ‘Feminist porn takes a cultural form that has historically been seen as the purview of men. It reworks sexual images and conventions to explore new and more diverse kinds of desires’ (in Martincic 2017); while anti-porn activists deride feminist porn as an oxymoron. In ‘The Social/Political Potential of Illusions: Enthusiasm and Feminist Porn’, Maggie Ann Labinski argues that the Freudian strategy of leading with ‘enthusiasm’ might offer a way through the impasse of ‘ambivalence’.
towards more developed understandings of the impact of feminist porn within the social/political sphere.

The exploration of significances and impacts forms the basis of the final article in this special issue authored by Peter Rehberg, an academic and archivist at the ICI Berlin and Schwules Museum. Rehberg takes the realcore of Porn 2.0 and its new post-pornographic cultures to explore the limitations of psychoanalytic accounts of subjectivity and desire, to consider the possibility that psychoanalysis might be obsolete, or that we now live in a post-psychoanalytic pornographic universe. Rehberg’s article ‘More than Vanilla Sex: Reading Gay Post-Pornography’ develops its thesis through the juxtaposition of Eve Sedgwick’s theories of affect with Freudian theories of the drives. Rehberg’s contribution moves beyond the purely theoretical through exploration of the culture of affective sexualities as presented in the Dutch gay fanzine Butt.

In each of these articles our authors explore the multiple ways in which desire manifests in relation to pornographic authorship and viewership/consumption, drawing out the experiences and meanings of pleasure and moving beyond the negative connotations of perversion and pathology which have dogged pornographic consumption. Taken together, these articles reinvigorate some of the well-worn psychoanalytic categories of jouissance, loss, lack, mourning, melancholia, attachment, trauma, and the fetish, to argue for the importance of taking a fresh look at thinking psychoanalytically about pornography.

Reference


Feona Attwood
Clarissa Smith
John Mercer
✉ editorspstudios@gmail.com