

## De-knowing and re-knowing misogyny through pornography<sup>1</sup>

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In a recent series of interviews, Auckland psychology researcher Alex Antevska asked young men what they found appealing about pornography.<sup>2</sup> Their answers did not unlock any mysteries of the inner erotic workings of the psyche. Indeed, mostly the young men seemed surprised that it was a question anyone felt the need to ask. Wasn't it pretty obvious? However, in the process of expanding on what and how they watched it, these men's responses give us a fascinating glimpse into the cultural context of pornography in New Zealand today.

The men spoke with familiarity about a genre of porn catering to a male heterosexual market in which men are dominant and women are submissive. They were well acquainted with acts that might seem dehumanizing and humiliating towards women. 'Ass to mouth' – where a man takes his penis directly from a woman's anus to her or another woman's mouth – was nothing to blink at. The 'money shot' – that seminal act marking the face or body of a woman – was taken for granted as the natural finale to pornsex. As one man said, 'how else would you finish?' Violence (always against women) was described as if it was background scenery – yes, it was there, but not something they paid much attention to. The picture fits with much of what has been written about pornography and its consumption overseas, where this kind of (material) imagery seems increasingly to be consumed *and* normalized as a mundane part of many men's everyday lives.

So how is the brazenly misogynist, and sometimes racist, flavour of quite a bit of popular porn accommodated in a supposedly gender egalitarian society? That it *is* accommodated – not only by those who choose to consume it, but also by those who refuse to call it into question in the name of individual freedom and privacy – perhaps says something about the implicit hierarchy of values in our society. And about what it is possible simultaneously to see and not see.

Tackling a very different contemporary issue – climate change – British cultural theorist Judith Williamson discusses the contradictory ways in which images function.<sup>3</sup> She writes specifically about how dominant visual images representing climate change (snow, ice, and polar bears) perpetuate a melancholic form of denial – an emotional attachment to the past, and what is disappearing, at the cost of recognizing what is happening in the present and what is forecast for the future. 'Facing a future we find almost unimaginable', she suggests 'we develop ways of what I call de-knowing, living without letting ourselves really look at what we know is there.' De-knowing is, in this case, about 'knowing something but not ultimately seeing it'. It is about the cultural denial of realities that arouse difficult emotions.

Williamson's analysis can be extended to incorporate both direct visual images as well as the hazy semiotic net of signification captured by a word. *Pornography*. Whether we consume the actual images of pornography or not the word itself shapes or populates our imaginary images of what it is and what it means. Not too many decades ago the word was associated with sleaze. It was rubbed with shame, and taken up by 'pro-sex' activists as a marginal and under-privileged

cultural place that ought to be supported and defended as part of a wider push back against conservative moralistic and legal restrictions on sexuality. In her diagrammatic depiction of a ‘charmed circle’ of sex published in 1984, influential feminist theorist Gayle Rubin included pornography in the outer ring – positioned alongside casual, non-procreative and unmarried sex, homosexuality, masturbation, sadomasochistic, cross-generational and other categories of ‘bad, abnormal and unnatural’ sexuality marginalized in the hierarchy of sexuality in US culture at the time.<sup>4</sup> Rubin was a key figure in the so-called sex wars in the United States in the early 1980s. In the context of vitriolic debate about pornography and sexuality – resembling ‘gang warfare’ according to Rubin – she claimed that ‘anti-porn literature scapegoats an unpopular sexual minority’. Her drive towards a pluralistic sexual ethics was premised, at least implicitly, on calling into question the coercive power of normativity to stigmatize and dispossess those whose sexualities or sexual preferences were on the fringes or beyond the pale of respectability.

Nearly thirty years on, pornography no longer occupies this marginal cultural space.<sup>5</sup> At least not in any straightforward sense. It is no longer the preserve of sexual minorities – to the contrary, the consumption of pornography is now mainstream, particularly for men, and especially young men. In the New Zealand popular cultural imagination watching porn is now more likely to be associated with sexual normalcy, naturalness, and health (at least for males) than it is with sleaze. More likely to be legitimated with reference to individual rights and freedoms, than it is to be condemned.

In the process, misogyny (and racism) within pornography have become – or remained – unremarkable. Why would anyone stop to notice it when critical public attention to porn has been dormant in New Zealand since the early 1990s? In the meantime the normalization of pornography has converged with the great neoliberal elevation of the individual’s right to *consume*, and defend their freedom to do so – setting the scene for a tolerant attitude of ‘each to their own’. Against a backdrop of regressive sexual politics (intensifying retrosexism hand in hand with postfeminist denial of sexism) opportunities for serious commentary let alone critique are limited. Gender-based hate speech, which is currently escalating on social media, punishes and likely pre-emptively gags many of those who wish speak the language of feminism in an effort towards gender equality.

The changing place of pornography requires a nimble critical response, in order to recognize and respond to the shifting weights of power, privilege and exclusion where heteronormativity and pornography collide. What images and ideas about gender, race, and sex are winning out in the marketplace of porn? There is a newly fashionable branch of academia: *porn studies*. Ironically, many of the high profile scholars in the area speak as if the critical progressive challenge was still one of championing a marginalized and underprivileged minority practice. It is as if the word itself has been unable to shed the associations that attached to it around the time of the ‘sex wars’ – so that it still evokes for them progressive transgression, pure pleasure and freedom and, above all, *sex*.

In Williamson’s terms, it can seem as if there is ‘an imaginative denial of the real nature’ of much everyday porn – sexist and racist warts and all. A de-knowing of misogyny, and instead seeing it as something else (such as consensual BDSM in the case of the scholars). The same was true of

the young men interviewed by Antevska. They too saw male domination and violence but, with a few exceptions, they talked about it as if it was Teflon coated. Few of them paused long enough to know it for what it was.

Of course, an analogy between the denial of misogyny in porn and the denial of climate change is weak in places. Unlike climate change, it is so not obvious what *'the knowledge'* about pornography is, nor *'the progressive'* position. Both are highly contested. The issue might be less one of not seeing what we actually know, but refusing to 'know' what we actually see.

As 'porn studies' scholars repeatedly point out, pornography is not a 'singular entity'<sup>6</sup> – neither solely a field of progressive possibility and pleasure nor only a field of degradation and exploitation. It is one word, but it describes a multitude of possibilities. It could be premature to let go of the aspirations for pornography that feminist scholars such as Lynne Segal and Linda Williams articulated in the early 1990s, which they saw as a medium that could decentre heteronormativity and promote a 'new pornographic ethic of sexual diversity' (Williams).<sup>7</sup> However, holding on too tightly to an unabated advocacy for the potential of pornography in general is surely only possible from the position of a nostalgic spirit of protectionism. A nostalgia that binds attachments to an object that no longer exists as it is imagined.

The turf on which we might jostle around these issues is very different in twenty-first century New Zealand than it was in Rubin's (and Reagan's) eighties USA. Marginalized, transgressive practices deserve generosity from cultural critics, whose role in such instances may include 'speaking truth to power'. But the role of the critic in relation to normative practices and categories of experience should be quite different, and not so loyal.

By the same token, hyperbolic denouncement of pornography *in toto* is strategically out of step with any desire to speak to people who are inclined to like or otherwise defend pornography. A more realistic goal might be to encourage people to see it in all its textural form – to see and know that as well as the threads of sexual titillation and other kinds of satisfaction, pleasure and exploration that might be on offer, there are also threads of raw misogyny and stifling normativity in the representation of gendered sexual roles. Failure to notice, as troubling, the repetition of patterns of male dominance and female submission in mainstream porn (targeted to straight men) colludes with a wider culture that remains marked with sexism and misogyny. Refusal to see misogyny and racism in the systematic bad treatment of whole categories of people is a form of cultural denial. It is time to stop de-knowing misogyny (and sexism and racism) and time to 're-know' it when we see it.

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### *Notes*

- <sup>1</sup> Draft essay for *A Different View: Artists address pornography* Catalogue 2013  
[www.sexualpoliticsnow.org.nz](http://www.sexualpoliticsnow.org.nz)
- <sup>2</sup> Antevska, A. & Gavey, N. (2013). Detachment and the masculine consumption of sexist pornography. Manuscript to be submitted for publication. (This research focussed on pornography addressed to men who have sex with women.)
- <sup>3</sup> Williamson, Judith. (2011). Unfreezing the truth: Knowledge and denial in climate change imagery. *Now future dialogues with tomorrow series*. Wellington: Now Future.  
<http://www.dialogues.org.nz/2010/index.php?/06/judith-williamson/> [Downloaded 3 August 2013]
- <sup>4</sup> Rubin, G. (1984). Thinking sex: Notes for a radical theory of the politics of sexuality. In C. Vance (Ed.), *Pleasure and danger: Exploring female sexuality* (pp. 267-319). Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- <sup>5</sup> Thanks to Octavia Calder-Dawe for pointing out the historical specificity of Rubin's analysis.
- <sup>6</sup> Paasonen, S. (2006). Email from Nancy Nutsucker. Representation and gendered address in online pornography. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 9(4), 403-420.
- <sup>7</sup> Segal, L. (1992b). Sweet sorrows, painful pleasures: Pornography and the perils of heterosexual desire. In L. Segal & M. McIntosh (Eds.), *Sex exposed: Sexuality and the pornography debate* (pp. 65-91). London: Virago.
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