

# PORNOGRAPHY IN THE PUBLIC EYE: ETHICS AND THE ART OF ENGAGEMENT

PROJECT BRIEFING DOCUMENT

MARCH 2013



'Pornography in the Public Eye' is a programme of research that aims to make space for critical discussion around the misogyny, sexism and racism within mainstream pornography, and to provoke creative responses to the genre and its place within contemporary culture. The research is funded by a grant from the Marsden Fund, administered by the Royal Society of New Zealand, and is based in the School of Psychology and the Centre for Art Studies at The University of Auckland. The purpose of this briefing document is: (1) to offer a basic introduction to relevant contemporary pornography research and highlight what we consider to be the main sources of debate within the field, and (2) to flesh out our perspective on key issues, describe the main projects we are undertaking, and explain why we believe a fresh, critical intervention is timely.

## POPULAR HETEROSEXUAL PORNOGRAPHY

### Defining Popular Heteroporn – Refining our Particular Focus

The term 'pornography' refers to any sexually explicit media that is intended to arouse (Malamuth, 2001). This is a wide and diverse genre. Our focus is much more specific. We are interested in 'popular heteroporn' – the 'everyday' (Boyle, 2010a) mainstream pornography produced for a, predominantly male, heterosexual audience. This includes commercial, professionally produced pornography as well as amateur and user-generated material; these categories are becoming increasingly blurred and there appears to be little to reliably distinguish them in terms of content and style (Paasonen, 2010a; van Doorn, 2010).

We are interested in this particular slice of pornography because our underlying concern is with the ethics and the gender and cultural politics of the kind of material that is most widely consumed. We are interested in what it says about men, women, and sexuality. And what the implications of this might be for gender relations. In singling out this particular, albeit popular, subset of pornography we recognize that other kinds of pornography exist which do not pose the same sorts of ethical challenges. Such material is beyond the scope of our project.

### Who Views Popular Heteroporn?

There is a great deal of variety in the age and gender of pornography users, as there is in the material and medium preferred, and the time and money spent on consumption (McKee, Albury & Lumby, 2008). Pornography is increasingly available via the internet where it can be viewed with ease and anonymity. As a result the prevalence and frequency of pornography consumption appear to be increasing. But because no one is certain who is looking at what on the internet and why, it is very difficult to obtain data that ascertain the prevalence and frequency of pornography use within a population. We do know that production of commercial pornography is on the rise. For example, between 1996 and 2005 there was a 60% increase in the annual production of new video titles in the U.S. (Bridges, Wosnitzer, Scharrer, Sun & Liberman, 2010). The proliferation of pornography on the internet has increased its accessibility for those seeking it out; it is also increasingly possible to stumble across it unintentionally. In a survey of Australian adolescents, Flood (2007) found that 84 per cent of boys and 60 per cent of girls reported being 'exposed accidentally' (p. 45) to internet pornography.

Traditionally considered a male domain, anecdotal evidence suggests that women are increasingly part of the audience for pornography – particularly ‘domesticated’ pornography marketed to women and couples (Juffer, 1998). Nevertheless, the vast majority of popular heteroporn continues to be produced by, intended for and consumed by men (Flood 2009). Qualitative research suggests that both men and women see pornography use as normative among men and rare among women (e.g., Hardy, 2005; Flood, 2007). One Australian survey, for instance, found that 84% of teenagers believed it was normal for male peers to watch X-rated videos, whereas only 4% considered this behaviour normal for female peers (Flood, 2007). Studies have reliably supported this impression: men report consuming pornography at considerably higher rates than women (e.g., Haggstrom-Nordin et al., 2005). A recent New Zealand study (with a convenience sample of over 800 respondents, average age 28) found that 30% of men, but less than 4% of women, reported regularly watching or reading pornography. Nearly 60% of women, but only 15% of men, said that they did not consume pornography (Braun & Terry, 2012). In an interview-based study with women who view or have viewed pornography, Ciclitira (2004) found that many reported feeling conflicted, uneasy or guilty about enjoying porn, whereas Hardy’s (2005) interview-based research with men found the opposite: male use of pornography was accepted and expected. Furthermore, Hardy found that pornography was described as part of male socialisation and peer bonding, a function which it does not perform in general among women (see also Hald, 2008; Attwood, 2005). This research is suggestive, but we add a caveat: the extent to which it reflects current attitudes and behaviours is uncertain, given the rapid pace of technological developments and accompanying shifts that are likely in sexual norms and practices.

### **What is the Nature of Popular Heteroporn?**

What, then, is the nature of popularly viewed heterosexual pornography? Because an immense volume of pay-to-view and free material is now available for anonymous consumption through the internet, compiling a representative sample of popularly accessed material is a challenge. Several recent content analyses have approached this problem by pulling samples of top-renting videos (Bridges et al., 2010; McKee et al., 2008; Tibbals, 2010), analysing unsolicited pornographic email spam (Paasonen, 2007), using content descriptions from trade publications (Tyler, 2010) and coding material from popular videos using the free online pornography search engine *YouPorn* (van Doorn, 2010).

Despite variation in findings, the broad agreement between content analyses as to the frequency of acts and images suggests there is a shared ‘pornoscript’ across popular pornography, be it free or pay-to-view (van Doorn, 2010). Oral, anal and vaginal sex are common, as are acts such as slapping, hitting, hair-pulling, double penetration, ass to mouth (ATM)<sup>1</sup>, and deep ‘fellatio’ to the point of gagging (Bridges et al., 2010; McKee et al., 2008). Women are overwhelmingly on the receiving end of these acts,<sup>2</sup> which are generally performed by men, or occasionally by another woman. Bridges and colleagues found abusive or insulting commentary in half the scenes they coded. To furnish an

<sup>1</sup> ATM is the act of taking a penis from a person’s anus to her or another’s mouth without washing it.

<sup>2</sup> Note that although oral sex involving a man’s penis is generally found to be between 2 and 4 times as common as cunnilingus, this does not necessarily mean that a man is best thought of as the receptive partner. The way this act is commonly shown in heteroporn is arguably not ‘fellatio’ if this is assumed to mean that the person whose mouth involved is the active partner. The act is shown less as one in which a woman is sucking or licking (verbs used with the OED definition of fellatio) a man’s penis, and more as one in which the man is thrusting his penis into a woman’s mouth and throat.

example of this kind of speech, a woman about to be orally penetrated after anal penetration in the film *Forced Entry*, is told “Are you going to taste your ass, you filthy cunt?” (Maddison, 2009, p. 50). Despite this overt hostility, there were no instances of simulated rape in the content surveyed, suggesting that ‘rape fantasy’ pornography is no longer a staple of the mainstream (Bridges et al., 2010).

While much pornography features sex acts which may be risky or uncomfortable, the vast majority of popular heteroporn does not feature overt coercion. Instead, the (almost invariably female) recipients of these acts appear either impervious or aroused by their rough treatment (Bridges et al., 2010; McKee et al., 2008). Although McKee and colleagues consider this material consensual and therefore unproblematic, others (including us) are troubled by this gendered apportionment of pleasure, pain, and power in popular heteroporn, ostensibly consensual or otherwise. Pornography that features women accepting or enjoying abuse, sexual domination and objectification unrealistically depicts sexual aggression as enjoyable to women. In doing so it arguably endorses and fuels consumer appetite for ‘mock’ misogyny by suggesting that whatever is being done to a woman, she enjoys it and wants it (Whisnant, 2010; see also Antevska & Gavey, in prep).

Tyler’s (2010) content analysis of a U.S. trade publication, *Adult Video News*, suggests that the misogynistic bent of much heteroporn is not incidental; in fact, it seems fundamental to its appeal. Tyler reports industry insiders discussing the marketability of women being dominated or sexually humiliated. This testimony has also been vividly captured on camera in a recent U.S. documentary on the commercial pornography industry, *The Price of Pleasure* (Picker & Sun, 2008). Both sources demonstrate that the more violent, and physically damaging and degrading for the women performers, the more arousing and commercially successful a video is projected to be (for related points see Dines, 2010; Paasonen, 2010b; Whisnant, 2010). This fits with the defensive contempt and hostility towards women evident in some men’s account of the attractions of pornography (see for instance Jensen, 2010; Kimmel, 2008; also Antevska & Gavey, in prep). Some internet sites also employ these themes to entice punters, promising:

*‘We take gorgeous young bitches and do what every man would REALLY like to do. We make them gag till their makeup starts running, and then they get all other holes sore – vaginal, anal, double penetration, anything brutal involving a cock and an orifice’*  
(quoted in Dines, 2010, xix).

The extent to which these analyses of popular commercial content are generalizable to popular amateur or ‘cottage industry’ pornography has proved a point of contention among researchers. While some argue that the latter are qualitatively different to commercial productions, a growing body of research demonstrates the fluidity of the boundary between apparently ‘amateur’, DIY or user-generated pornography and commercial pornography (Paasonen, 2010; van Doorn, 2010). In a content analysis of 100 ‘amateur’<sup>3</sup> videos accessed via *YouPorn*, van Doorn (2010) found little to set user-generated or amateur productions apart from their professional counterparts. Although he observed a greater variety of body shapes within amateur material, the sex acts adhered to the standard ‘pornoscript’ of mainstream commercial productions. Given that viewers may be more

<sup>3</sup> In this context, amateur refers to pornography with a homemade aesthetic: amateur productions are typically disjointed, low resolution videos which emphasise the ‘realness’ of the material, setting it apart from smoothly filmed and edited studio productions. The ‘amateur’ aesthetic tells us little about who the performers are, however: an amateur style has been co-opted by the porn industry, which produces ‘amateur’ pornography as well as overtly commercial material using paid professionals (van Doorn, 2010).

likely to interpret amateur pornography as representative of 'real' sex, van Doorn (2010) suggested that its promotion of an essentialist, sometimes sexist portrayal of gender could be especially pernicious.

To conclude, we must acknowledge that although content analyses are useful in providing a snapshot of popular pornographic content, we cannot know how neatly this analysed material maps onto the pornographies people choose to use. Nevertheless, the recurring theme of men's sexually aggressive acts and intent against women is undoubtedly a feature of at least some popular heteroporn. The casual callousness with which these scenes are described by industry promoters, and some consumers, offers further evidence that a regressive gender politics has become an accepted part of what popular commercial pornography now *is*.

## PORNOGRAPHY DEBATES: PAST TO PRESENT

### Pornography and the Sex Wars

Since the 'sex wars' of the 1970s, feminist scholars and activists have been bitterly divided over what pornography is and what it means for women. Anti-pornography feminists of the late 1970s and 1980s condemned it as a site and source of men's violence against women (MacKinnon, 1989; see also Ciclitira, 2004). Many sought censorship of pornography, seeing it as part of a cultural engine disseminating misogynistic constructions of women and sex (see MacKinnon, 1989; Russell, 1993).

In contrast, other feminists staunchly opposed censorship. Some pointed to pornography's potential to counterbalance dominant, heteronormative and male-centred sexuality and to create a cultural space asserting women's and sexual minorities' entitlement to sexual pleasure (Vance, 1984). Many also regarded supporting pornography as a political necessity to defend sexual diversity from state regulation (for example, Segal, 1992; Williams, 1992).

### Contemporary Debate

Decades later, a superficially similar divide persists. Some scholars of sexuality continue to argue for pornography's potential to shake up limiting stereotypical norms for heterosexual sex and propose new, liberating sexual possibilities (e.g., Albury, 2009; Attwood, 2010; McNair, 2009). Much of 'the new porn studies' centres around exploring 'alternative', transgressive pornographies (e.g., Attwood, 2010). Wider sexualisation and 'pornification' (the mainstreaming of pornographic aesthetics and modes of being) within western societies is accommodated if not celebrated within this body of work for its potential to 'democratise desire' (McNair, 2002). That is, the idea that people will have greater access to a more diverse and pluralistic set of sexual possibilities. Criticism of pornography is typically dismissed by such scholars as part of a 'backlash' against the sexualisation of culture (Attwood, 2011, p. 16; McNair, 2009, p. 66). Researchers working in this vein do not deny the existence of misogynistic popular heteroporn. But they argue that focussing on the pernicious aspects of pornography unfairly stigmatizes the whole genre, and unrealistically credits too much influence to the media's capacity to influence behaviour (e.g., McKee, Albury & Lumby, 2008).

On the other side are scholars and activists who denounce mainstream pornography as a regressive, sometimes misogynistic force that feeds unjust gender ideologies (e.g., Bridges, 2010; Dines, 2010;

Flood, 2009 Jensen, 2010). From this perspective, the pornification of culture is less a liberating force than a repressive one: popular heteroporn is thought to teach little to women, except as Butler suggests, 'how to "fake it" and "take it"' (2004, p.191). Instead, it reinforces a narrow and subordinate sexual role for women and models both exploitative sex and the sexist treatment of women. Furthermore, these scholars point to the cumulative social psychology research which suggests that, although the relationship is complex, there is a connection between men's pornography use and attitudes that support violence against women (Hald, Malamuth & Yuen, 2010). Popular pornography implies that women exist for male pleasure; this belief has been linked to sexual entitlement in men, which in turn is correlated with rape and sexual violence (Bouffard, 2010). Rather than scapegoating individual consumers, this scholarship directs most of its criticism towards industry producers, demonstrating how punters are groomed and exploited by the pornography industry. Viewers are both complicit and victimised, 'consumer and consumed' (Whisnant, 2010, p. 115).

Some current writers deliberately attempt to avoid positioning themselves on one or the other 'side' of the debate. Susanna Paasonen's work, for instance, manages an insistence on the sexism, classism and racism within heteroporn without adopting purely literal readings of these dynamics. Paasonen's demonstration of the precariousness of pornography – a genre she conceives of as teetering on the edge of self and social parody – could be a useful starting point for those interested in spoiling the erotic allure of the sexist sex within pornography.

It is worth pointing out that key scholars, on all sides of the debate, agree that sexuality is at least in part socially constructed. The norms of sexual behaviour and desire have changed dramatically over time, and they vary across cultures. Pornography's portrayal of masculine sexual dominance and invulnerability cannot therefore simply be explained by any raw biological drive. Its particulars are of interest, instead, for what they tell us about the sexual and cultural politics of our times.

### **Our Position**

Pornography is inherently neither liberating nor repressive; it requires a context and a viewer to bring meaning to it. In theory, it is just as able to question the limiting ways in which gender and power stereotypically work within heterosexual sex as it is to reinforce them. As feminist scholars, however, we are not primarily concerned with pornography *in potentia*. Neither are we interested in considering the genre as an abstract whole. Instead, we are interested in how context alters the tangible social and political consequences of particular arguments over time. Pornography debates during the 'sex wars' arose in a social context where popular media representations of an active, independent female sexuality were few and far between. Early feminist support for pornography hinged on the belief that through showing women as sexually active and experiencing sexual pleasure, it could challenge limiting conventional ideas of women as sexually passive and uninterested in sex (e.g., Segal, 1992). Since the sex wars, however, we have not seen the progressive 'proliferation of different pornographies' that some feminist scholars anticipated (e.g., Williams, 1992, p.262). Rather, the popular heteroporn of the past decade appears to herald a shutting down of the 'sexual imaginary' – at least in relation to more diverse and egalitarian possibilities for women.

Accordingly, we argue that utopian aspirations for popular heteroporn to sexually empower women are out of line with reality. Representing female sexuality is not inherently feminist, and it does not necessarily shatter the traditional restrictions around women's sexuality. Insisting on representational space for the celebration of sexual diversity does not *require* turning a blind eye to the sexism (and racism) that permeates the genre. Without overlooking the potential of some material to radically challenge restrictive gender conventions,<sup>4</sup> the most commonly seen and sought after pornography continues to be commercial, mainstream and produced for a heterosexual male audience (Boyle, 2010a; van Doorn, 2010). There is little that is revolutionary in this 'everyday pornography' insofar as it presents and prioritises the supposed desires of heterosexual men (Boyle, 2010b), in ways that appear to bolster masculine dominance. While pornographic depictions of women as active, sexual beings may have challenged repressive ideals of femininity that were hegemonic within the wider culture thirty or forty years ago, these representations now play into a hegemonic ideal of super-sexualised femininity (Gill, 2008), that is arguably equally limiting. It is the lack, rather than the presence, of women's sexual desire that is now problematised and pathologised in contemporary western culture.<sup>5</sup>

We contend that through the repetition and eroticisation of male sexual control and female submission, popular heteroporn normalises sexual scripts and authorises patterns of interaction that are dangerously close to coercion and rape. Elements of popular heteroporn do, we argue, contribute to the cultural scaffolding of (hetero)sexual coercion and gender based violence (Gavey, 2005; Gavey & Calder-Dawe, in subm).

## OUR RESEARCH PROGRAMME

### Overview

Given the contradiction between the misogynistic flavour of much popular heteroporn and widely espoused ideals of gender equality, there is a surprising lack of critical discussion of the genre. Our scholarly interest in the area was sparked by an uneasy sense, within the New Zealand context at least, that mainstream pornography is a no-go zone for critical public debate. Instead, discussion of mainstream pornography is mostly characterised by an attitude of liberal tolerance, which in turn rests on the minimisation, ignorance or denial of the sexism which saturates much of the genre (Gavey & Calder-Dawe, in progress).

This silence is troubling; as we have seen, popular heteroporn commonly features a gendered dynamic of men in control and women in submission, including significant levels of sexist hostility and sexual aggression towards women. Given what appears to be the exaggeration of these patterns within pornography, as well as pornography's increasing proliferation and influence on mainstream popular culture, a more sustained critical airing of the gender politics of contemporary pornography is overdue.

Our research programme aims to bring the issue of pornography back into the public eye. We hope to provoke new ways of seeing the issue, so that the ethical challenges posed by contemporary

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, *Bend over Boyfriend*, a lesbian-made but heterosexually-oriented pornographic film which features a woman anally penetrating her male sex partner with a dildo (see Butler, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> See Moynihan & Mintzes (2010) on the 'female Viagra'.

heteroporn can be open to be debate. In complementary ways, each project outlined below promotes forms of critical engagement that, we hope, will foster more diverse, creative, and rebellious responses to the sexism and aggression within everyday pornography.

## Projects

Our research involves both theoretical and empirical academic research as well as action research initiatives designed to work alongside others in the community. Specific projects include:

### 1. A study with Key Informants

'*Conversations towards Consensus*' is comprised of a series of interviews with New Zealand key informants whose professional expertise relates to pornography in some way, and who present a range of perspectives. We are interested in mapping the possibilities for critical discussion of mainstream pornography within New Zealand. We hope to explore the extent to which informants' talk is structured around 'pro' versus 'anti' pornography binaries and, if so, how; and to understand how the cultural dominance of this polarization shapes the way arguments about pornography can be justified and articulated.

### 2. Art and Engagement

We are curating an art exhibition '*A Different View: artists address pornography*', which aims to bring together art that calls into question the gendered gaze of mainstream popular pornography. In the curation process we are consulting a Reference Group of artists, activists, and scholars. The exhibition will run at the Gus Fisher Gallery in Auckland from mid-August, 2013. Through the exhibition itself and associated initiatives (an exhibition website, a public events series, and possibly social media), we aim to generate community engagement and help revitalise local public debate on the politics and ethics of mainstream pornography.

We are also working with a network of activists, artists and scholars to coordinate fringe activities in public spaces with the same intention.

### 3. Critical Dialogue and Social Action

Octavia Calder-Dawe's doctoral project explores the various spaces open to New Zealand youth to think critically about gender, bodies and sexuality. As part of her investigation of the interplay between contemporary media messages about gender, sexuality and bodies and young people's experiences, Octavia draws on Freire's (1970) concept of 'conscientization' to facilitate 'problem-posing' workshop discussions with Auckland secondary school students. The workshops will explore how collective reflection and action can support critical thinking about elements of popular culture. Beyond (and including) the cultivation of 'critical media literacy' (e.g., Flood, 2009) this research aims to promote possibilities for collective community engagement and activism.

### 4. Website

In support of the research projects described above, we are creating a website as a site for communication with the public in general, as well as other academics, activists, artists, students, and the media. It will be a way of providing updates about the project and related activities, as well as providing a repository of wider relevant resources.



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*Acknowledgements*

This project is supported by the Marsden Fund Council from Government funding, administered by the Royal Society of New Zealand, and is supported by The University of Auckland.

We are grateful to Helen Madden for feedback on this document.

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