Porn Studies

ISSN: 2326-8743 (Print) 2326-8751 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rprn20

Conceptualizing, researching and writing about pornography

Feona Attwood, Giovanna Maina & Clarissa Smith

To cite this article: Feona Attwood, Giovanna Maina & Clarissa Smith (2018) Conceptualizing, researching and writing about pornography, Porn Studies, 5:1, 1-5, DOI: 10.1080/23268743.2018.1444008

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2018.1444008

PORN STUDIES, 2018
VOL. 5, NO. 1, 1–5
https://doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2018.1444008

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

EDITORIAL

Conceptualizing, researching and writing about pornography

Despite an ongoing incitement to speak about sex (Foucault 1990), the way we are encouraged to talk and write about sexual issues is strongly policed and ways of conceptualizing and researching them have been constrained and often contentious. While a scholarly approach to sex has historically been one way of legitimating speech about sex – a way, perhaps, of cleaning up something that is perceived as 'dirty' – sex remains a problematic area of study. This is particularly true of pornography, towards which, as Linda Williams has famously noted, 'it is difficult to strike a proper attitude' (1991, xi). As part of our continuing concern with developing a critical porn studies (see Smith and Attwood 2014), in this special issue we explore the problems of 'striking a proper attitude' and the ways in which different conventions of writing and speaking may limit porn studies, as well as their potential to be productive of new ways of thinking.

Elsewhere we have noted two overriding conventions in the organization of public discussions of pornography (Smith and Attwood 2013). Firstly, the persistence of an anti/pro structure in much public discourse has made it difficult to articulate complex responses to pornography, enforcing a structure which encourages argument and opposition – not to mention hostility – and provides no means of moving forwards in any significant way. Porn is often positioned in terms of a battle between the extremes of pro and anti standpoints which 'ordinary' people must then judge (Smith and Attwood 2013). Secondly, anti-porn rhetoric – which provides the most widespread set of conventions for much discussion of porn – associates porn with 'feelings of hurt, anger, frustration, fear and nausea', producing a discourse of '*negative affect* … as the acceptable reaction to pornography' (Paasonen 2007, 47; original emphasis).

Anti-porn rhetoric tends towards the thrilling and the titillating, relying on grandiose language and 'scary futurology' (Smith 2010) – pornography is a 'tsunami', an 'epidemic', the 'end of the world' – and the term itself can be used to 'express many kinds of intense revulsion' (Rubin 1993, 37). This kind of rhetoric draws on the arts of 'arousal and manipulation' (Segal 1998, 56), deriving its power from the association of desire with disruptive and dangerous external forces (Deignan 1997) and the broader emotional culture of sex; 'an affectively dense mix' of dread, excitement, shame and fear, which can be drawn upon to produce an emotional arc of 'outrage, anger, and disgust' (Irvine 2009, 243).

In contrast to this rhetoric, academic work has adopted a supposedly 'scientific' model as the 'proper' means of speaking about sex (Kendrick 1987), a model that has, however, 'multiplied, intensified, and even created its own intrinsic pleasures' (Foucault 1990, 71), while disguising its own preoccupations and its blind spots. It has resulted in a tendency to emphasize 'objectivity' as a way of creating a distance from the object of study (McKee 2009). The detailed examination of the texts, images and fantasies of sex may feel dangerously close to self-revelation; explicit speech – even in the cause of education – continues to be a difficult and sometimes embarrassing experience because of differences and delicacies about what can be said and how. The claim to objectivity can be particularly important for academics who study porn. While it is often argued that pornography is increasingly acceptable, both as a leisure pursuit and as an object of study, problems remain about the terms we use and the kinds of sentiments that are permissible in discussion.

The work of Irvine (1990, 2002, 2008, 2014, 2015) is indispensable in locating these difficulties as part of the broader place of sex research in the academy. She notes that while most forms of work that are stigmatized are typically low prestige, some forms of work – like academic research – that are generally considered higher status, may render the academics themselves 'dirty workers' if their work is focused on stigmatized topics or marginalized social groups. Sex researchers face stigma and suspicion (Attwood 2009; Hammond and Kingston 2014) and academics have had 'their reputations destroyed, lost their jobs, and faced legal sanctions for teaching or researching porn' (Jenkins 2004, 2). Irvine notes that this kind of dirty work is best understood in terms of structural inequality, marked by the absence of comprehensive graduate training, disproportionate challenges by Institutional Review Boards and barriers to funding, publication and promotion. This may sometimes take the explicit form of modifying language; a number of her respondents – sociologists working in sex research – reported that funders had asked them to modify a research proposal, for example by eliminating 'dirty words' (even, for example, the words 'sexual' and 'sexual orientation') (Irvine 2014, 649).

Meanwhile porn research is still regarded with 'suspicion and disdain', if not 'open hostility', and there is 'explicit rejection as a valid field of study' from some academics (Gabriel 2017, 308). Even within the field, many challenges remain. The use of explicit imagery is a problem for academic publishing; Tom Waugh recollects the production of his classic article 'Men's Pornography: Gay vs. Straight' in 1985 and the importance of including 'pictures of hard cock' (2017, 133). Imagery continues to be a source of tension for publishing, even while access to explicit material is dramatically easier almost everywhere else. At the same time, other issues of approach and of the relation between the academy, the practices of individual academics and the wider culture have become the focus of interest. Across a range of disciplines many scholars now employ a greater openness; about funding sources and potential conflicts of interest, the importance of a researcher's race, class, gender, sexual orientation and religion, the need to acknowledge the researcher's own standpoint, and the potential for exploring research topics from an 'insider perspective' or through methods such as autoethnography (see Thomas and Williams [2016] for a discussion).

In particular, the need to develop reflexivity – the process of reflecting on our relationship to what is being researched – has come to be seen as an essential part of a developed research ethics. Questioning our own conceptual baggage, preconceptions and assumptions is part of a broader project of questioning the idea that knowledge is objective and value-free and acknowledging that research is a process of making meaning, not discovering it. Values, attitudes, feelings and experiences need to be explored and acknowledged as part of the way that frameworks of interpretation and paradigms of research are constructed, with consequences for what is made visible and invisible in the work and what questions are possible to pursue.

This approach has increasingly informed research on media and their audiences, and has become particularly notable in the development of work which sees culture as increasingly 'participatory' (see Jenkins 2006) or which acknowledges that researchers may also have diverse relationships with what they study; for example, those who work as 'aca/fans' (Jenkins 2006). But this is more difficult when those texts and audiences are part of sexual cultures. While there have been calls for sex researchers to 'come out of the closet', not just in relation to sexual orientation and identity 'but with regard to sexual desire itself' (Thomas and Williams 2016, 94), this remains a risky strategy. Blinne suggests auto(ethnography) as useful for sex research, but even for readers this:

> requires that you take a risk … to jump into the process with your body, heart, and mind so that we can create spaces to tell our sexual stories – stories that need to be told … regardless of how masturbatory they are, may be, or might become. (2012, 953)

It is this fear – that writing about porn might function as pornography – that haunts much concern about porn studies. As Marks recounts:

> In 2006 at my first academic conference presentation, I presented the very first essay I wrote on pornography. It concerned US slavery rhetoric in interracial pornography and a professor asked if I had considered the way my presentation replicated the pornographic material I was critiquing. I had not. Furthermore, I did not understand what she meant. I was not an exclusive porn scholar at that time, and naively assumed that porn studies would be treated like any other field. During my time working in trauma studies, I had never been asked about unwittingly replicating the content of the rape and incest testimonials I had been analyzing. (2014, 120)

This 'replication' – at worst traumatizing and at the very least cheapening academic discourse – plays out around our uses of visual and linguistic register. Alan McKee has described how a leading social science journal accepted a paper he had submitted, but requested revisions based on the reviewers' observation that some of the language used was 'unnecessarily vulgar and unscholarly' (2009, 629). The choice of the name *Porn Studies* for this journal has also attracted criticism on the grounds that the use of 'porn' rather than 'pornography' might indicate too intimate a relationship with its subject. Linda Williams has argued that while the use of 'pornography' 'signals the higher ground of a more scholarly, distanced and critical approach', the move towards 'porn' 'is the act of placing oneself "on the side of" an industry whose main purpose is to make money by enacting sexual fantasies' (2014, 34).

Williams argues that there is a risk in aligning our own work of scholarship too closely with the work of the pornography industry. Yet if we accept Irvine's (2015) assessment that we are 'the other sex workers', we may be able to open up a better examination of the relations between our own labour and that of people in the sex industries. In their discussion of porn labour, Lee and Sullivan (2016) have argued that, however precarious, examining pornography from the safety of an academic job is a much more comfortable experience than those of many other sex workers, and that we need to do much more to include the insights and experiences of other kinds of labourers in our own work. We should also argue for more dialogue with other kinds of writers and with other kinds of voices and speech. In this special issue we include pieces by Jarrett Neal, Adam Jones, Joanna Walsh and Becca Glaser, who mix factual and creative writing and academic and more personal viewpoints in their reflections on porn. As Katherine Angel and Clarissa Smith note in their reflections on these, while personal voices continue to be regarded with suspicion in academia, they offer interesting ways of understanding the processes of becoming sexual and the significance of the languages we choose to express these.

The other articles in this issue take up the subject of expression in a variety of ways. Martin Barker considers reports about porn in UK newspapers during the period 2000–2010. In the tabloid press he finds two main kinds of story – prurient fascination with pornography and 'kiddie porn' as a marker of evil. The broadsheets also include stories which use porn as a metaphor (for example, 'food porn' and 'emotional porn') – stories which emphasize the superiority and inventiveness of the writer – underpinned by an image of pornography as:

> a symptom of weakness, self-indulgence, of loss of contact with your real self/the world/other people, of wasted time and uncontrolled attention, of lack of finesse/critical judgement, and of excessive attention to feelings, emotions, sensations, bodies that 'we all' might be tempted by occasionally. (Barker, this issue)

For the broadsheets it is 'extreme pornography' that is the marker of evil, something that cannot be written about light-heartedly and with 'a magnetic hold' which 'seems to drag everything and everyone towards it'. Discussing their current research project, 'Pornography's Effects on Audiences: Explaining Contradictory Research Data', Alan McKee and Roger Ingham reflect

on 'writing about porn across disciplines' from their perspectives as humanities and psychology researchers, considering the differences in their vocabularies, the blind spots and misrepresentations that occur between disciplines, and their experiences so far of learning to speak each other's languages.

Janice Irvine recounts her work 'studying the people who study sex' and how 'the accusation that they are pornographers has long plagued sex researchers'. As she has argued elsewhere, she shows how stigma ultimately works to constrain the production of sexual knowledge. Laura Helen Marks discusses laughter as a common reaction of colleagues and acquaintances to porn studies, marking the way the field is disparaged. While this can be annoying, she notes that humour can be deployed as a means of 'clearing the way for a more nuanced, honest, and thoughtful conversation'. The issue of language is taken up further by Susanna Paasonen, who argues that the combination of affective voice and critical rigour, established in feminist cultural studies as a means of thinking through the body, is one we can usefully deploy in studies of pornography.

Our forum section takes the issue of speaking about porn in a different direction, by investigating porn as pedagogy and its place in a variety of educational spaces, an issue that is currently pressing as countries such as the United Kingdom consider how to incorporate discussions of porn into sex and relationships education. Patrick Catuz describes the challenges of teaching a form of porn studies that incorporates practical work, but noting also how useful this can be in helping students to address production ethics and problematic representations. Kate Dawson, Chloe Cooper and Jenny Moore recount the difficult process of gaining permission from Tate Modern to screen the work of porn director Shine Louise Houston as part of their 'Bedfellows' project, and its rewarding and positive outcome.

Taking a different approach and a different setting, Meg-John Barker and Justin Hancock consider the many problems involved in showing porn in the classroom. They argue that not only is this likely to make the experience of sex and relationships education coercive – a clear disadvantage given its remit to model consensual sexual behaviour – but that screening any kind of media is unnecessary if the purpose of this kind of education is to help students to reflect on their own media encounters and on relationships, self-care, behaviours, communication and managing risks. Kath Albury picks up on this theme, drawing on her research with professionals who work with young people and who typically have little training in any kind of media studies. She argues that it is vital for these groups to develop an understanding not only of the content, but also of the practices involved in young people's mediated sexual cultures.

References

Attwood, Feona. 2009. 'Dirty work Researching women and sexual representation.' In *Secrets and Silences in the Research Process: Feminist Reflections*, edited by Roisin Flood and Rosalind Gill, 177–187. London: Routledge.

Blinne, Kristen C. 2012. 'Auto (Erotic) Ethnography.' *Sexualities* 15 (8): 953–977.

Deignan, Alice. 1997. 'Metaphors of desire.' In *Language and Desire: Encoding Sex, Romance and Intimacy*, edited by Keith Harvey, and Celia Shalom, 21–42. London and New York: Routledge.

Foucault Michel. 1990. *An Introduction, Vol. 1, The History of Sexuality*. New York: Vintage Books.

Gabriel, Karen. 2017. 'The Subject of Porn Research: Inquiring Bodies and Lines of Resistance.' In *Bodies in Resistance: Gender and Sexual Politics in the Age of Neoliberalism*, edited by Wendy Harcourt, 307–323. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hammond, Natalie, and Sarah Kingston. 2014. 'Experiencing Stigma as Sex Work Researchers in Professional and Personal Lives.' *Sexualities* 17 (3): 329–347.

Irvine, Janice M. 1990. *Disorders of Desire: Sexuality and Gender in Modern American Sexology*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Irvine, Janice M. 2002. *Talk About Sex: The Battles Over Sex Education in the United States*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Irvine, Janice M. 2009. 'Transient Feelings: Sex Panics and the Politics of Emotions.' In *Moral Panics, Sex Panics: Fear and the Fight Over Sexual Rights*, edited by Gilbert Herdt, 234–276. New York and London: New York University Press.
Irvine, Janice M. 2014. 'Is Sexuality Research "Dirty Work?" Institutionalized Stigma in the Production of Sexual Knowledge.' *Sexualities* 17 (5-6): 632–656.
Irvine, Janice M. 2015. 'The Other Sex Work: Stigma in Sexuality Research.' *Social Currents* 2 (2): 116–125.
Jenkins, Henry. 2004. 'So You Want to Teach Pornography?' In *More Dirty Looks: Gender, Pornography and Power*, edited by Pamela Church Gibson, 1–7. London: BFI Publishing.
Jenkins, Henry. 2006. *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*. New York: New York University Press.
Kendrick, Walter. 1987. *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Lee, Jiz, and Rebecca Sullivan. 2016. 'Porn and Labour: The Labour of Porn Studies.' *Porn Studies* 3 (2): 104–106.
Marks, Laura Helen. 2014. 'How did you get Into This? Notes from A Female Porn Scholar.' *Colaboração Internacional* 2 (2): 120–130.
McKee, Alan. 2009. 'Social Scientists Don't say "Titwank".' *Sexualities* 12 (5): 629–646.
Paasonen, Susanna. 2007. 'Strange Bedfellows: Pornography, Affect and Feminist Reading.' *Feminist Theory* 8 (1): 43–57.
Rubin, Gayle. 1993. 'Misguided, dangerous, and wrong: An analysis of antipornography politics.' In *Bad Girls and Dirty Pictures: The Challenge to Reclaim Feminism*, edited by Alison Assiter and Carol Avedon, 8–40. London: Pluto Press.
Segal, Lynne. 1998. 'Only the Literal: The Contradictions of Anti-Pornography Feminism.' *Sexualities* 1 (1): 43–62.
Smith, Clarissa. 2010. 'Pornographication: A Discourse for all Seasons.' *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics* 6 (1): 103–108.
Smith, Clarissa, and Feona Attwood. 2013. 'Emotional truths and thrilling slide shows: The resurgence of antiporn feminism.' In *The Feminist Porn Book: The Politics of Producing Pleasure*, edited by Tristan Taormino, Constance Penley, Celine Shimizu, and Mireille Miller-Young, 41–57. New York: The Feminist Press.
Smith, Clarissa, and Feona Attwood. 2014. 'Anti/Pro/Critical Porn Studies.' *Porn Studies* 1 (1-2): 7–23.
Thomas, Jeremy N., and D. J. Williams. 2016. 'Getting off on sex Research: A Methodological Commentary on the Sexual Desires of sex Researchers.' *Sexualities* 19 (1-2): 83–97.
Williams, Linda. 1991. *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the 'Frenzy of the Visible'*. London: Pandora.
Waugh, Thomas. 2017. '"Men's Pornography, Gay vs. Straight": A Personal Revisit.' *Porn Studies* 4 (2): 131–138.
Williams, Linda. 2014. 'Pornography, Porno, Porn: Thoughts on A Weedy Field.' *Porn Studies* 1 (1-2): 24–40.

Feona Attwood
Giovanna Maina
Clarissa Smith
editorspstudies@gmail.com