Part V

All about Sex

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Sex and the Media

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Studying Sex and Media

Despite the continuing prominence of a view of sex as a basic matter of 'urges' and 'needs,' evidence from all kinds of academic disciplines has shown that sexual practices around the world and throughout history are extremely diverse, giving the lie to the idea that either sexual behavior or desire are natural or predetermined. Representations of these in literature, art, and other media have also varied dramatically. Pornography, for example, is a modern invention, created as a category for regulation to indicate images and artifacts that should be hidden away; indeed, until the mid-eighteenth century, the term itself 'meant nothing at all' (Kendrick, 1996 [1987], p. 2). In particular, images of children that would have once seemed innocent are now more likely to be seen as sexual. Today, an increasing number of media materials are being classed as child pornography, including works of art and the digitally manipulated images, drawings, and cartoons that in some countries are now classified as 'pseudo' and 'virtual' porn (Stapleton, 2010).

Recognizing these kinds of historical shifts has been instrumental in helping scholars to chart the ways that sexual values shift and change and the material implications that this may have. Perhaps the most groundbreaking piece of work in this respect has been Gayle Rubin's (1984) description of a modern Western 'charmed circle' of 'good' and 'normal' sexual practices. These are practices associated with heterosexuality, marriage, monogamy, and procreation, and also include sexual encounters that take place within the same generation, involve couples only, and are carried out in private. Set against all of these are 'the outer limits' of 'bad' and 'abnormal' sex; practices that are related to homosexuality; promiscuity; cross-generational, casual, sadomasochistic, solo, and group sex; and sex carried out in public. As Rubin points out, media and commerce are also used

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to differentiate between good and bad sex; pornography, sex work, and the use of manufactured objects are regularly associated with sex at the 'outer limits.'

The work of the French historian Michel Foucault (1976) has also been important in highlighting the role that public discourses play in producing sex and knowledge, whether in the pronouncements of the Church, in law and medicine, or in the media. Some issues and groups – often emblematized by cultural 'figures' such as the homosexual, the hysterical woman, and the masturbating child – became highly visible in nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century discourse, representing forms of out-of-control sexuality that were in need of intervention and regulation. Foucault's work has been crucial for developing an account of the ways in which sex and sexuality are produced in modern cultures, and for helping to establish this as an area of study that is distinct from the study of gender.

Research of this kind underwent particularly swift development in the 1980s, in the work of writers such as Jeffrey Weeks (1985) and of the activists and academics who attended the Barnard Conference, 'Towards a Politics of Sexuality,' in New York in 1982; an event that marked a turning point, not only in terms of developing a sexual politics, or foregrounding the study of sexual norms and values, but of making sex media and commerce the subject of academic enquiry (see Vance, 1984). With a focus on 'pleasure and danger,' the conference marked an attempt to move forward on a number of controversial issues, in the process becoming the focus of controversy itself. Anti-pornography groups worked hard, though unsuccessfully, to derail and discredit the conference and instigate a 'sex panic' (Vance, 1984, p. 434), accusing the conference organizers of allowing discussion to be dominated by minority groups and of promoting sadomasochistic sex and pornography. The study of sex, sexuality, and the media has continued to be controversial, but from these starting points in the emerging areas of lesbian and gay studies, queer theory, and 'sex-positive' feminist work has developed a body of knowledge dedicated to investigating how sex, its norms, its representation, and its regulation are socially and politically constructed and contested.

More recently, academics have discussed the shifting significance of sex in contemporary Western societies. As Ken Plummer has noted, sex now 'assumes many forms' and 'serves a multiplicity of purposes' (2003, p. 9). As sex has become more easy to separate from procreation and older romantic ideals of binding love, a new view has emerged of a sex life composed of a series of encounters that are relatively easy to begin and end and that are based on the desire for individual fulfillment. These may be pursued either within an 'episodic' and casual sexual lifestyle or in serially monogamous relationships that combine love with sexual pleasure (Giddens, 1992, p. 154). This shift is part of a broader informalization of social manners in Western societies by which relations between men and women and adults and children have become more relaxed, egalitarian, and open (Wouters, 2004, 2007). In addition, sex lives are more likely to be seen as 'adventures' (Illouz, 1999), incorporating affairs, one-night stands, auto-erotic practices that make use of pornography and sex toys, other forms of commercial sex, and new technologies. This 'recreational' mode of sex is overseen by a range of cultural intermediaries

who often present sex as part of a broader 'therapeutic' culture that promotes self development and fulfillment (Plummer, 1995, pp. 124–125). In addition, sex has become more openly associated with commercial practices, the result of developing patterns of household and work organization whereby a whole range of 'intimate' practices including childcare, domestic labor, and physical and emotional forms of care have become part of a broader service economy that 'serves to redirect an ever-expanding set of human needs from non-commodified, domestic space to the (newly privatized and domesticated) market sphere' (Bernstein, 2007, p. 175).

It is clear in these kinds of accounts that sex and the media are very closely tied together in the twenty-first century. Moreover, sex has become much more culturally *visible* (McNair, 2002; Attwood, 2006; Paasonen, Nikunen, and Saarenmaa, 2007) – a means of public rather than private self-expression – and media of all kinds have become central in the ways that sexual identities and lifestyles are understood and maintained. As Brian McNair has argued, these developments are also part of a wider media trend that foregrounds lifestyles, 'reality,' interactivity, and confession – a form of 'striptease culture' that can be understood as part not only of the latest 'extension of sexual consumerism' (2002, p. 87) but of a broader preoccupation with self-revelation, exposure, and 'public intimacy' (2002, p. 98).

Sex has also continued to be a hot topic for public discussion, though more frequently than in the past in ways that disrupt earlier models of control by Church, law, and medicine. Yet, while it is possible to see an increasing diversity of sexual practices and lifestyles made visible in the media, along with a general shift in which sexual 'stories of authority' have fractured and the emergence of ways of speaking about sex that are 'more self-conscious and reflective' (Plummer, 1995, pp. 133–135), a continuing division between the types of 'good' and 'bad' sex described by Rubin persists. As Jane Arthurs has argued, although there are new ways of talking about sex in the media, the representation of sex in mainstream television, for example, is marked by a 'continued conservatism,' with programs offering 'normative constructions of gender and sexuality,' representing sexual diversity as deviant, and emphasizing sexual performance over pleasure (2004, pp. 145–146).

Sex Media and Sex Technology

One of the major ways that Western societies have talked publicly about sex has been through discussions that focus on its depiction in the media and particularly in pornography. However, public 'porn debates' have often taken incredibly simplistic views, drawing on assumptions rather than evidence, on a highly conventional view of what sex is and should be for, and on the idea of pornography's 'harm.' Evidence based on the uses of pornography by its actual audiences has been almost entirely absent in this kind of debate, a fairly 'amazing omission given the kinds of claims that have been made' about its effects, as Simon Hardy notes (1998, p. 98). Until the mid 1990s most academic work on porn was not significantly different from these kinds of debates, though the publication of a number of books

(Carter, 1979; Vance, 1984; Kendrick, 1996 [1987]; Williams, 1989; Segal and McIntosh, 1992; Church Gibson and Gibson, 1993) marked the beginnings of a new form of 'porn studies' that began to investigate the history of pornography, its textual and generic characteristics, its significance for different groups and communities, and its relation to other media genres. As Henry Jenkins has argued (2007), as well as working to build a scholarly account of pornographies, this tradition of work has also been important for providing striking examples of the way 'different media can change our relationship to the same […] content.' Porn became 'more democratic' in print, more real in photography, more spectacular in film, and more private in video – most recently migrating online, in the process becoming much more diverse and with the possibility of combining media consumption with interpersonal interaction (Tang, 1999, p. 167).

While some work, for example Linda Williams' (1989) classic study of hardcore film, have focused on porn as a distinct genre, others have ranged more widely. In particular, Jane Juffer's book, *At Home With Pornography* (1998), worked to broaden the study of sex media by looking at erotic fiction, sexual self-help books, couples' videos, and lingerie catalogues. She argued that these could be understood as forms of 'domesticated porn,' marked by their classy, chic, and tasteful aesthetic and working to associate sex with style, fashion, and therapy, becoming in the process much more accessible to female audiences. Stylish forms of sex media like this have been able to achieve much more visibility and respectability than hardcore porn, especially if they are distributed 'in a bag adorned with the face of Virginia Woolf' (Juffer, 2005, p. 74) or take the form of contemporary 'performance, film, video, photography, painting, sculpture, and writing' (de Genevieve, 2004). Using a different mode of presentation, they distinguish themselves from hardcore forms, which often stress the 'reality' of their portrayals and their unrefined and 'dirty' nature; they thus become a kind of 'porno-chic' text that is sophisticated and glossy (McNair, 2002, pp. 64–68). As these kinds of textual studies demonstrate, porn is a genre with many 'internal distinctions and divisions' (Wicke, 1993, p. 68), while sex media more generally incorporates a very varied range of representations, requiring the same kind of scholarly attention that has been devoted to other media genres in order to understand and contextualize their various performance conventions and styles (see Williams, 1989; Paasonen, forthcoming; Smith, forthcoming).

Other kinds of porn studies have focused more closely on the use of sex media by particular groups and their meanings for those groups; for example, young people using mass media or the Internet (Buckingham and Bragg, 2004; Knudsen, Mànsson, and Màrtenson, 2007), regular users of porn (McKee, 2005; Smith, 2007; McKee, Albury, and Lumby, 2008), audiences of sexually violent films (Barker, 2007), and gay and lesbian viewers (Waugh, 1985, 1996; Dyer, 2002; Butler, 2004; Cante and Restivo, 2004). As these studies show, sexual media representations have a diverse set of meanings for their audiences, and a broader – and often more positive – range of uses than are commonly acknowledged. In the large Australian study carried out by Alan McKee, Catharine Lumby, and Kath Albury, adult porn consumers associated their porn consumption with pleasurable

arousal and stimulation, as well as becoming more comfortable about sex, more willing to experiment sexually, more tolerant of other people's sexual pleasures, and more knowledgeable about bodies, ideas, and techniques (McKee, 2009).

Porn is often politically important too. In gay male culture, for example, it has assumed its particular significance not only because porn is the one area of cultural representation where 'gayness is unquestionably *much, much more* commonly represented than in any other category of U.S. moving-image product' (Cante and Restivo, 2004, p. 147, emphasis in original) but because it also offers 'a representation [...] and [...] validation – of the desires and experiences of this culture' (Mowlabocus, 2007, p. 63). Nor is pornography's significance necessarily always and only sexual. Clarissa Smith's study of *For Women* readers shows how women's choices of porn can be about engaging with the politics of sexual relations or related to the acquisition of self-knowledge (2007, p. 152). Some lesbian porn – as distinct from the 'girl-on-girl' numbers often featured in porn for straight men – gains part of its appeal from its evocation of strong images of lesbian community and politics, while queer pornographies often work to subvert and challenge power dynamics, opening up a world of play where 'everything is possible' (de Genevieve, 2007, p. 233). What porn *is* and means becomes a different matter in each of these instances, a fact that is almost always overlooked in public debates and commonsense views of pornography.

While a 'porn studies' focused largely on old media – especially film – continues to thrive (Williams, 2004; Church Gibson, 2004; Lehman, 2006; Williams, 2008; Kerr and Hines, forthcoming), an interest in online pornographies has more recently emerged (Lane, 2001; Waskul, 2004; Ray, 2007; Jacobs, 2007; Jacobs et al., 2007; Attwood, 2010). The accessibility of new technology has opened up the market for sex media dramatically; online, porn has become much more accessible for a wider range of producers and audiences. Web 2.0 practices, which stress the breakdown of a division between media producers and consumers and are associated with a call to participate and network, have worked to reframe the ways in which porn is made, distributed, and used. As a result, there is now much more niche, specialist, and independent pornography online. Given the widespread association of porn with highly conventional portrayals of sexuality and gender and with a marked address to male consumers (to the extent that porn is often seen as a men's genre), it is not surprising that there has been a great deal of interest in the kinds of pornographies created by 'alternative producers and activist sex workers, younger pro-porn feminists, queer porn networks, aesthetic-technical vanguards, p2p (person to person) traders, radical sex/perv cultures, and free-speech activists' (Jacobs, 2007, p. 3). Some of these offer interesting examples of the way porn is now being distributed in quite different commercial, taste, and generational communities, often placed in a much broader cultural context alongside music, art, and politics (Attwood, 2007). The SuicideGirls community ('an adult lifestyle brand that has redefined ideas of beauty,' http://suicidegirls.com) and Nerve site ('the cultural center of the Internet for sex, love, and culture,' http://www.nerve.com), for example, demonstrate a reframing of porn for younger audiences as part of a new 'smart sex culture' (Attwood, 2010).

The development of gift economies in which porn is shared and the rise of porn 'tubes' such as XTube, which are based on YouTube and which have become a platform for the recirculation of both commercial and amateur pornography, have marked a challenge to older models of porn distribution. Small-scale female-friendly, trans-friendly, and worker-friendly producers such as No Fauxxx can be found alongside large established mainstream companies such as Vivid. Some new porn producers and performers have adopted personae that associate porn with feminism, youth, and cosmopolitanism (Nikunen and Paasonen, 2007), and even the more mainstream of the 'alternative' sites such as SuicideGirls disrupt and play with conventional ideals of beauty and femininity (Magnet, 2007). Some of these new productions not only challenge the 'charmed circle' of norms that Rubin identified in 1984 but disturb many assumptions that are made about pornography – for example that commercial sex work is devoid of politics or ethics, that sex workers are inevitably damaged by their work, and that porn inevitably presents women as passive or only 'represents a limited range of body types as sexually appealing' (Albury, 2003, p. 198). In this changing context, as Kath Albury (2009) notes, it has become important to reframe questions about the ethics of sex media so that they are much more focused on the material questions of labor; are performers informed about the work they carry out? Are they properly paid? What are their working conditions like? These kinds of questions tie the way we might study the production and consumption of sex media much more effectively into broader debates about cultural, affective, and immaterial labor (see Senft, 2007, and Mowlabocus, 2010, for discussions).

New technology has also made it possible to access representations of a more diverse range of sexual desires and practices, undermining the visual regime of a clear separation of mainstream and kinky images; as Susanna Paasonen has observed, alternative pornographies such as she-male and hentai are feeding back 'into the imageries of commercial pornography that they seem to subvert' (2007, p. 163). But concerns about kinky and what are sometimes perceived as 'deviant' or 'extreme' representations have also helped to fuel the resurgence of anti-porn movements. These concerns also underpin the use of the term 'pornography' to describe images that are not necessarily sexual; for example, in describing a type of horror film as 'torture porn' or combat images as 'war porn.' This usage tends to be part of a more general argument that mainstream culture is becoming more pornographic, or that both mainstream culture and pornography are becoming more 'extreme'; for example, Robert Jensen (2007, p. 17), an anti-porn campaigner, has argued that 'pornography is increasingly cruel and degrading,' in line with the mainstream values of American culture where – alongside war, the death penalty, and economic inequality – it stands as an emblem of a 'cruel culture.'

As media and communication technologies have become a part of everyday life, and as new participatory forms of media-making have emerged, it is not surprising that amateur porn has experienced particularly strong growth, whether this is shared publicly online for money or for free, or circulated privately, becoming part of many people's everyday sexual repertoires. Online sexual activities now

encompass the viewing of pornography, purchases at sex shops, the provision of sex education, the development of networking among sexual subcultures, and a range of interpersonal encounters that may remain online or draw online and offline sex lives together (Döring, 2009, pp. 1090–1091). Film, video, erotica, art works, cartoons, photography, gaming, and a variety of other forms and performances are drawn together with the newer practices of camming, chatting, messaging, and blogging, along with contact pages, dating, and networking sites.

In the process, new kinds of sexual interaction have become possible – notably forms of cybersex in which users 'claim to learn new sexual techniques, discover new sexual turn-ons, and vicariously experience sexual arousal in ways that they would not, or could not, experience in "real" face-to-face sexual encounters' (Waskul, 2003, p. 21). Sexual encounters have become steadily more varied – enabled by chat rooms, messenger services, online communities, gaming environments, virtual worlds such as Second Life, and mobile applications such as Grindr – working to rub away at the idea of distinct spheres of sexual representation and practice. This aspect of the development of media for sexual purposes, more than anything else perhaps, is most striking in terms of the way it challenges how we have become used to thinking about this area, complicating older ideas about separate spheres of production and consumption, and of media and everyday life.

The Age of Onscenity

Expressing concern about sex and the media has continued to be a major way of talking about sex in public, and most recently this has focused on the dangers of new online and mobile media: online sex and porn addiction, prowling pedophiles on social networking sites, and the distribution of child porn and of 'extreme' imagery. Concern has also spread to a broader range of sites, often expressed as part of a critique of 'sexualization' or 'pornification.' Here a wide range of media texts (pornography, music videos, men's magazines, celebrity publications), goods (toys, clothes, accessories), and practices (pole exercise, 'sexy' dancing) are described as having a new and pernicious impact on young people. Underpinning this critique is a horrified fascination with the figure of the pedophile, who has been the major figure representing dangerous sexuality in the West since the 1990s, usually imagined as a monstrous creature 'removed from the species' (Kincaid, 1998, p. 88). Focusing on 'dangerous strangers,' a panic around pedophiles has worked to focus public attention onto media images, not as a record of child abuse but as the sign of deviant intentions and interpretations (Kleinhans, 2004). In this way, fears of a pedophile gaze – and the possibility that, at least potentially, someone somewhere is looking at images of young people in the 'wrong' way – has worked to render all images of children potentially pornographic; the first four levels of the COPINE scale, devised by Taylor, Holland, and Quayle (2001) to classify media texts as types of child pornography, actually describe images that are widely found in family photography, advertising, and art.

It is hardly surprising in this context that artists' images of young people have come under scrutiny, in some cases becoming the subject of controversy. Well-known artists such as Nan Goldin and Bill Henson have had their work removed from art galleries and been accused of producing pornographic images of children. Just as porn debates have become a major means of talking publicly about sex, concerns about children, sex, and sexuality have tended to become focused on 'sexualised *images* of children' (Kleinhans, 2004, p. 71), a move that unfortunately works to obscure the actual material sexual abuse of children, which is usually carried out not by shadowy online figures but by adults who know them very well (Stapleton, 2010).

Concerns about sexualization have also begun to have an impact more materially on young people who engage in sexual activities using technology – or 'sexting,' as it has been called. Some teens have found themselves on the wrong side of laws that were designed to protect them, accused of making 'self-produced child pornography' (Soderlund, 2008; Goldstein, 2009). Alongside many other commentaries on sexualization that take young people's safety as their starting point but end by restricting their sexual practices and media engagements, or even punishing them for these, this kind of response also works to obscure the extent to which the ways in which both adults and young people now incorporate media technologies in their lives has changed (Soderlund, 2008, p. 71) and to close down discussion about the actual and changing conditions of the way people practice sex in contemporary societies.

Critiques of sexualization have also tended to revisit earlier feminist debates about the sexual objectification of women. Rosalind Gill has argued that the contemporary sexing up of culture involves a 'deliberate *re-sexualisation* and *re-commodification* of bodies' and the 'sexual subjectification' (Gill, 2003, pp. 101–105, emphasis in original) of women in ways that reinforce conventional ideas of female attractiveness and desirability for men (Gill, 2008, 2009). Her work has been immensely useful in attempting to map out how a 'technology of sexiness' has become part of a contemporary postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007). Yet, as Duits and van Zoonen (2006) also point out, debates about the sexualization of women – and more especially girls – often leave their voices out of the discussion and fail to consider what women's and girls' contemporary engagements with bodily display might mean in a variety of contexts and for the women and girls themselves. This problem is evident in the stance taken in a number of policy reports on sexualization in the US (American Psychological Association, 2007), Australia (Committee of Australia, 2008), and the UK (Papadopoulos, 2010), and in the numerous popular books on the topic (Levy, 2005; Paul, 2005; Durham, 2008; Tankard Reist, 2009; Walters, 2010; Dines, 2010), which do little more than replay the familiar set of anxieties around sex, technology, women, and young people that have been apparent in responses to sex media in every successive form throughout the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries (McNair, 2002). They are 'saturated in the languages of concern and regulation,' often linking things together that have no real relation (Smith, 2010, p. 104); missing any sense of the relationship between

people, media, sexuality, and technology; and devoid of any historical sense of the way sexual norms and relations have developed (Buckingham et al., 2010; Egan and Hawkes, 2010). As more sophisticated work on sexualized media and commercial goods demonstrates (see for example Buckingham et al., 2010; Duits and van Zoonen, forthcoming), the ways in which young people are growing up, the complex meanings people craft in relation to sexualized media and goods, and the tactics they adopt to deal with them suggest a set of practices that are more thoughtful than most public discourses about sexualization.

In the early part of the twenty-first century, amid claims that we live in a thoroughly sexualized society dominated by permissive attitudes, anti-porn and anti-sex movements are reviving. Religious and feminist campaigns such as Porn Nation, XXXChurch, and Stop Porn Culture in the US and Safermedia and Object in the UK, despite their apparently differing starting points, are repurposing a much older set of objections to sex media. These are based on a suspicion of sex and its representation, especially in relation to practices and images that contravene conventional sexual norms. They also ignore the very real shifts that have taken place in the role and significance of media and communication technologies in many people's lives. In their accounts, older figures of deviant sexuality (the hysterical woman, the masturbating child, and the homosexual) are replaced by new ones (the sex addict, the online predator, the postfeminist Lolita, and the deviant viewer of 'extreme' images). The use of these figures to express concern does little to develop any understanding of the changing world, or of the contemporary social and cultural practices within with sex, media, and technology are combined. The resurgence of such groups, moves to increase the regulation of commercial sex (Scoular and Sanders, 2010), and the renewed interest around the world in finding ways of restricting and policing media use sit oddly with the widespread view that we now live in an 'anything goes' world of sex where culture has been 'pornified' and its regulation has become impossible. It is in this profoundly contradictory context that contemporary studies of sex and the media are currently positioned.

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