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Turning Up the Heat: Comparing Feminist and Mainstream Pornography

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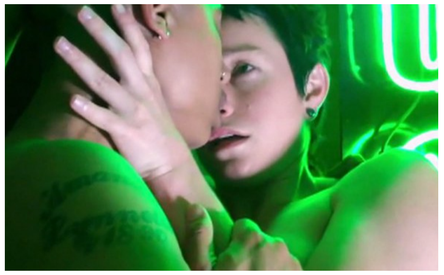
Turning Up the Heat:

Comparing Feminist and Mainstream Pornography



Jiz Lee and Pappi Cox in *Fuckstyles of the Queer and Famous*.
Photo courtesy of Courtney Trouble and http://troublefilms.com/fuckstyles

Stoya and James Deen in *unSEXpected*. Photo courtesy of Digital Playground and http://www.digitalplayground.com.

I propose that the 'theory' behind feminist pornography is demonstrably different from the 'theory' of mainstream pornography. Alison Butler says "women produce feminist work in a wide variety of forms and styles" (3), and this applies to feminist pornography as much as to any other feminist cultural practice. Angela McRobbie calls for "feminists... to be more present again in current public debate on [pornography], since a good deal is at stake" (11). This research attempts to turn a feminist lens onto pornography, to articulate the differences between feminist and mainstream pornography and understand how feminisms are (or aren't) being performed in these films.

Comparison: Two Films

Fuckstyles of the Queer and Famous (Fuckstyles) won the 2012 Feminist Porn Award for "Most Deliciously Diverse Cast" (7). *UnSEXpected* is a mainstream porn production that has not won any awards and has a less diverse cast. However, a behind-the-scenes account by Stoya, star of *unSEXpected*, indicates negotiation on set and consent to all acts filmed (15). This makes the films comparable in their ethical production and frees the research to focus on performance. I look at the performance of consent, agency, diversity and intimacy as counterpoints to the concerns raised by anti-porn feminists that pornography normalizes misogynist and violent behaviour, reinforces gendered power structures and casts women as passive and submissive in binary contrast to men who are active and aggressive (5, 10, 13, 18).

Theory and Practice

Rather than arguing against anti-porn feminist critiques, this research examines how feminist pornography presents a different 'theory' through the subversion or exclusion of key tropes, outlined below. Empirical data supporting the positive or negative effects of pornography is scarce (17, 2), and existing studies are problematic and incomplete (2). However, there is some evidence that pornography can normalize sexual behaviour (17, 14). If it is true that the damage caused by some porn is caused in part by portrayals of coercion, passivity, homogeneity and objectification, and that the corollary to this pornography as a theory is rape as a practice (12), then a different theory may result in a different practice.

The 'deliciously diverse' cast of *Fuckstyles of the Queer and Famous*. Photo courtesy of Courtney Trouble and http://courtneytrouble.com/blog/press.

TROPE 1: Consent | Coercion

One feminist definition of consent is the presence of "genuine desire for sexual pleasure and the expression of that desire" (6). Courtney Trouble, director of *Fuckstyles* says "[f]eminism is about equality and it's also about choice" (16). Feminist representations of consent are between partners of equal power who are able to make the choice freely. Ethically produced porn engages in consensual production practices, but feminist performances in porn need to include visible consent in the finished product. Although *Fuckstyles* does not give the viewer access to the negotiation process between performers, verbal consent is evident in every scene, and coercive behaviour is notably absent. In contrast, *unSEXpected* includes multiple instances of verbal coercion and few instances of verbal consent.

TROPE 2: Agency | Passivity

A feminist theory of sexual agency includes giving informed consent to sexual risks through negotiating safer sex, access to mutual sexual pleasure, and the ability to self-pleasure or to seek out pleasurable activities (6). Safer sex is performed through the visible presence of safer sex tools or through negotiation about safer sex practices on screen. Feminist sexual agency is also performed through masturbation (9), ownership of orgasm (through self- pleasuring or negotiating acts leading to orgasm), and direction of the sexual activity by women or marginalized groups, such as trans* individuals or people of colour. *Fuckstyles* contains some safer sex devices, whereas *unSEXpected* has none. Neither film depicts the on-screen negotiation of safer sex practices.

TROPE 3: Diversity | Homogeneity

Jill Dolan notes that "playing with fantasies of sexual and gender roles offers the potential for changing gender-coded structures of power" (4). *Fuckstyles* "plays with" a variety of roles, separating both sex acts and gender performance from biological sex, and including multiple visibly trans* performers while leaving room for cisgender and heterosexual performances by Maggie and Ned Mayhem. Diversity of gender and sex acts allows for "power, sexuality and desire [to be] recuperated from the strictly male domain" (4). The inclusion of multiple visible ethnicities and body types also "recuperates" sexuality, desire and power from white Western beauty ideals. In contrast, *unSEXpected* presents a homogenous view of beauty standards, ethnicity, gender and sex roles.

TROPE 4: Intimacy | Objectification

There are multiple possible subversions of problematic objectification in pornography. *Fuckstyles* utilizes aftercare (extended post-sex intimacy, typified by cuddling, kissing, and exchanging endearments) as a primary subversion. Aftercare scenes demonstrate performer value beyond their sexuality. Scenes ending with ejaculation, as in *unSEXpected*, present performers with no value beyond sex. Intimacy works as a subversion of objectification because the discourse of intimacy is strongly embedded in North American culture (8). This discourse is not the only possible subversion of objectification. Berlant and Warner say "[c]ommunity is imagined through scenes of intimacy" (1). Aftercare intimacy in *Fuckstyles* allows the performers (and the viewers) to participate in a community that challenges heteronormative patriarchal ideals.

Future Research

Research should include a comparison of pornographic productions of similar type: feature films, all-sex films, and award-winning films. A comprehensive analytical comparison would further elaborate how feminisms are performed (or not) in pornography.

Feminist Pornography *Fuckstyles of the Queer and Famous*	Mainstream Pornography *unSEXpected*
Consent	
» Verbal consent evident at least twice per scene, non-verbal consent or negotiation evident in each scene (8/8 scenes) » Mayhems outliers with ~20 instances of verbal consent and negotiation (1/8)	» Coercion evident in 4/5 scenes and directed at 4/7 characters: "pussy" used as an insult directed at a man to instigate sex (3/5 scenes), "are you afraid?" directed at a woman and a man to instigate stripping and sex (1/5). » Verbal consent or non-verbal negotiation evident at least once per scene, but often following coercion
Agency: Orgasm and Pleasure	
» Female ejaculation (1/8 scenes), male ejaculation onto back or breasts (2/8), giggling and laughing during sex and after orgasms, orgasm not always evident in the scene, orgasm not the focus or end of the scene	» Male orgasm onto face (3/5 scenes), or back (2/5), male ejaculation ends scene (5/5)
Diversity: Gender & Sex Representation	
» Wide range from butch (4) to femme (6) to androgynous (5), not tied to biological sex. Visibly trans* (3).	» Femme cisgender women (4) and butch cisgender men (3).
Diversity: Body Type and Ethnicity	
» 2 black performers, 1 Latina performer, wide range of body diversity (slim to fat), range of pubic and body hair styles for male, female and trans* performers	» All appear Caucasian, all slim and athletic, all men shaved (3/3), women either trimmed (2/4) or shaved (2/4)
Diversity: Sex Acts	
» Strap-on penetration: male (1), female (1) and trans* (3) recipient » Fellatio performed on strap-on or dildo (6) » Dildo penetration (3) » Fellatio performed on bio-penis (2) » Cunnilingus (7) » Penis-in-vagina penetration (2) » Anal penetration; male (1), female (1) and trans* (1) recipient » Manual penetration (8) » Masturbation (7) » Mutual masturbation (2) » Manual stimulation (8/8)	» Penis-in-vagina penetration (5/5 scenes) » Anal penetration: female recipient (1/5) » Cunnilingus (5/5) » Fellatio (4/5) » Manual penetration; vaginal (1/5) and anal (1/5) » Manual stimulation (5/5)
Intimacy	
» Kissing before, during and after sex (8/8 scenes) » Cuddling and aftercare after sex (8/8)	» Kissing before (2/5), and during (5/5) sex » Scene ends with male ejaculation, no aftercare (5/5)

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