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Women's Encounters with  
Pornographic Texts:  
Encoding/Decoding and Resistance

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## Abstract

The aim of the present study was to undertake audience research (from within the cultural studies paradigm) into ways that women watch pornography. Given that the dominant position within feminism towards pornography has been anti-pornography pro-censorship, the debate surrounding pornography within feminism has concentrated on harm-based analysis. My research is an attempt to address this imbalance, focusing instead on the possibilities of pleasure in pornographic imagery, and by asking specifically about issues that inhibit and generate pleasure in sexual imagery.

Using Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, the present study asked four groups of 3 to 4 women to respond to specific examples of hard-core male identified and women-identified pornographic images. Following viewing the clips each group entered into focus-group discussion concerning the way the images represented women, the degrees of identification with the women on-screen, and the possibility of pleasure in erotic imagery. Wider cultural considerations regarding cultural expectations and definitions of pornography and erotica were also discussed.

Textual analysis of the clips revealed that pornography is principally organised according to gender difference that *privileges male sexuality over female sexuality*. Women's responses to this 'preferred encoding' were organised according to whether the women agreed that pornography failed to offer pleasure for them as viewers, negotiated parts of pornography as pleasurable, or opposed the idea that pornography could not offer pleasure for women.

Whereas women are expected to abhor pornography, a view perpetuated by the harm-driven censorship campaigning of anti-pornography theorists, most of the women in this study negotiated pleasure in aspects of pornographic/erotic imagery. I found that although the text themselves do subordinate women's sexuality, women can and do take active pleasure in pornography. It was the textual construction of pornography that was found to be the most offensive aspect of pornography, as it is a construction of sexuality that often fails to represent women's pleasure and misrepresents women's sexuality.

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# Chapter 1

## INTRODUCTION

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Women watch pornography. A recent survey indicates that women rent approximately 25% of adult video store transactions in the United States, an estimate that doesn't account for women waiting for their lovers to bring it home. Another report estimates that 47% of adult videotapes were rented by women in couples or women alone (De Grazia, p.243). Studies that account for the many positions that women occupy and the different pleasures that may be found in the films can not be understood simply by industry-based or textual analysis, but must also be accounted for through analysing audience responses: how/why do women watch pornography?

It is important to acknowledge the ways that women consume pornography. Andrew Ross (1990) states that this is imperative to fully challenge the anti-pornography critique that I will argue has become the dominant response to pornography by the feminist movement. It is also important to account for female consumers of use of and complicity with 'male identified' pornographic representations. As Ellen Willis claims (cited in Ross), women have become adept at shaping male fantasies to their own purposes. Women who watch pornography are in a sense 'rebels' as they insist on aspects of their sexuality that have been defined within our culture as a male preserve (Ibid. p.190). In this sense, pleasure and the active role of the viewer are important concepts that have been overlooked in interpreting the role of pornography in our culture, particularly with regards to women audiences.

It is also important to acknowledge that any reading of pornography by women viewers is neither wholly contained nor neutralised by the form of the pornographic narrative. Researching women viewers of pornography allows for power to women in shaping narrative and fantasy in ways that diverge from the containing form of male-dominated pornographic fantasy (Ibid. p.206).

Any discussion of women's interaction with pornography must therefore account for the complex process of viewing pleasure. We must attempt to allow for a women's active desiring gaze, and not restrict women's viewing of pornography as simple acceptance of images portrayed. As Keller (1992, p.1305) states in her analysis of Royalle's films, "whether a particular work of

pornography will afford these (liberatory/degrading) opportunities depends not just on what goes into it, but also how it is viewed."

Chapter 2 establishes the framework of feminist theory regarding pornography and seeks to identify key issues and assumptions regarding women and pornography. This process also involves situating the different theoretical positions within the debate, paying particular attention to feminist theories of pornography. I establish the ascendant voice within feminist positions as the anti-pornography position. Anti-pornography feminists interpret pornography as a 'dominant ideology thesis', where society is perceived of as 'seamless whole' in which subordinated groups are ideologically incorporated into patriarchal beliefs through the operation of pornography.

My research exists as a challenge to the anti-pornography critique that posits pornography texts as transparent, meaning the 'sexual subordination of women'. 'Harm' based analysis has the effect of stifling exploration of pornography as a complex issue, keeping the focus on 'proving' a causal link between pornography and 'violence against women' within feminism. In this environment, feminist critics of anti-pornography theorists have succeeded in opening up the discussion to include an emphasis on pleasure and audience activity as well as danger and passivity.

Although codes within (particularly 'hard-core') pornography invariably privilege male over female sexuality, dominant textual codes don't necessitate a single reading of pornography. Even as the dominant ideology of a privileged male sexuality excludes women's sexual agency, women read the texts in terms of personal fantasy, and oppose textual codings in diverse ways. In the course of this research it has become clear to me that facilitating open dialogue about pornography is a constructive step in creating new languages of fantasy and sexual realities that represent women's sexuality in all its diversity, paving the way for women's sexual agency in images of sexuality in our culture. In Chapter 2, I foreground pleasure as integral to women watching pornography. I establish the anti-pornography movement as perpetuating the good girl/bad girl division associated with women's sexuality, by focusing on pornography in terms of sexual repression, restriction and danger (Ross, 1989; Vance, 1984).

Cultural studies of audiences have not addressed pornography, perhaps owing to the fact that subordinated texts and audiences have been the traditional areas of inquiry. Hence, there are many audience studies of 'women's genres' which may explain neglect of 'male genres' such as

pornography. Whatever the reasons for this avoidance, my own study fits into and extends the cultural studies tradition as it parallels similar studies such as Morley's (1981) study of how a current affairs show is read by subordinate identities. I argue that cultural studies is ideally suited to researching women's responses to pornography, as viewing pornography exists as a cultural process in constant negotiation with other forms of knowledge, within frameworks of production that perpetuate dominant ideological thought. In terms of pornography, this ideological control takes the form of a 'dominant' textual inscription privileging male over female sexual pleasure. Chapter 3 overviews Stuart Halls' encoding/decoding model, and outlines the way that I have adapted Hall's model to researching women watching pornography.

Chapter 3 also briefly outlines previous studies within the cultural studies paradigm that have employed gender as a primary signifier of social meaning. Cultural studies researchers Ang, Liebes and Livingstone, Radway and Fiske employ gender as a primary signifier of social meaning within culture, and look at the ways that the audience may 'resist' dominant ideologies within texts that have been traditionally associated with passive audiences. As well as these wider considerations concerning methodological issues, I also justify the relevancy of the texts chosen and the themes employed in discussion generating from focus group data.

I have chosen focus group research involving four groups with three to four women in each group in order to discuss women's encounters with pornography. The groups were shown video clips of both 'hard' and 'soft' core examples of pornography, produced for both women and male audiences. Chapter 4 deals with the practical logistics of focus group research, and outlines clearly the experimental steps involved in undertaking this research.

By modifying Hall's encoding/decoding model I examine the extent to which assumptions about women viewers of pornography are aligned with actual audience 'decodings' of pornography. In this research, I forward that pornography is negotiated via the textual practices of the audience that intersect with the production of pornography along different parameters. These include the levels of identification and representation the audience feels the texts reflect in both 'made-for-women' and 'made-for-men' pornography; the degree that the texts are interpreted as offering different pleasures for women (where the dominant codes within pornography are resisted); and personal conceptions of the form that a positive erotica would take.

Chapter 5 begins with an overview of the development of pornography as a particular social phenomenon, both reflective of cultural/historical developments in social discourse concerning

sexual representations and part of an active process involving the creation and reproduction of those social norms. This involves an analysis of the changing functions and representations of pornography within capitalism and the ways that pornography operates ideologically to reproduce meaning regarding sexual representations.

Given that audiences will accept, negotiate or oppose the dominant ideology of the texts, Chapter 5 identifies the codes operating within the texts that reveal pornography to be based on gender difference, with pornographic texts (particularly 'hard-core') invariably privileging and legitimising the supremacy of male over female sexuality. I argue therefore, that the dominant or preferred meaning in male-identified pornography is an evident privileging of male sexuality over female sexuality that is seen to facilitate the climax in the texts - the male orgasm. Women's responses to pornography can't be 'read off' textual analysis, I therefore employ the encoding/decoding model to identify three audience positions in relation to the dominant ideology within pornography. Audience positions are classed in terms of accepting, negotiating or opposing the dominant reading of pornography established in Chapter 5 in Chapters 6,7 and 8. Encoding/decoding as a model of interpretation allows for 'dissonance' in the communication process between the encoded text and audience responses to it. Audience negotiations with texts allow that production is more complicated than a 'reading off' texts, but is rather a circuit producing meaning within cultural forms, a site of struggle over gender inscriptions.

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## Chapter 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW-THEORIES OF PORNOGRAPHY

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*"If we do not want to be in the business of condemning the sexuality of villainous others, we need a better sexual politics. This sexual politics must be aware of the diversity of sexual fantasies which cannot be simplified into an easily scapegoatable aggression, perversion or evil. One way to explore this diversity would be to become aware that pornography is no monolith, that it has a history, and in that history it has appealed to many more 'bodies and pleasures' than are dreamt of in any feminist anti-pornography philosophy."*

Linda Williams, 1993, p.59.

Pornography in our culture is not simply a text that operates to perpetuate capitalist patriarchy, but rather is a complex dynamic involving an interface of power, sex, gendered 'difference' and fantasy that, as Linda Williams states, appeals to many 'bodies and pleasures'. The literature review in this chapter outlines the various debates surrounding pornography as it relates to my research. As there are three basic theoretical approaches to the issue, perspectives on what pornography is and how it functions or works (including an account of the role of culture and sexual difference) according to these positions will be discussed. Debate surrounding censorship and pornography as 'harm' will be examined with particular reference to the tendency of censorship legislation prosecuting minority 'deviant' groups. Frameworks that surround the debate on women watching pornography including why women are invariably problematised viewers when viewing pornography, the possibility of positive images of erotica for women, and accounting for the many ways women encounter pornography are discussed as well as the distinction traditionally upheld between 'erotica' and 'art'/pornography in feminist debate on pornography. I also develop my own position with regard to feminist interpretations of pornography, arguing that the dominant feminist interpretation of pornography (as having a unitary meaning for 'women') has had the effect of perpetuating the taboo already existing regarding women's agency, especially with regard to sexual imagery. Finally, research possibilities that arise from feminist theory regarding pornography are considered in relation to the 'dominant ideology thesis' in this chapter.



Lynne Segal (1993, p.6) claims that it is customary to identify three positions on pornography: liberal, moral right and feminist. The liberal position offers a non-evaluative definition of pornography, as "sexually explicit material designed for sexual arousal", and as there is no solid scientific evidence of pornography's harm, there is no reason to ban it or take other forms of action against it (Ibid.). This position, Segal claims, holds that although people might find pornography offensive, it may bring harmless pleasure to others. The liberal position asserts that public display of pornography should be limited in the interests of those who find it offensive, but calls upon the support of empirical research to prove that pornography may be harmful.

The moral right assumes a different position on pornography, as representations of sex removed from what is believed to be its legitimate function and context that Segal describes as being for procreation, and thus confined to marriage. The Moral Right holds that pornography is a threat to traditional family values precisely because its depictions of sexuality lie completely out of this context. This approach advocates rigid censorship of any public display of nakedness, pre-marital or extra-marital sex, information on birth-control, abortion and sex education in schools, of sexually explicit material designed for arousal and pleasure, particularly 'perverse' and homosexual imagery, held to threaten family life and create social and moral decay (Ibid. p.6).

In contrast feminist critique of pornography addresses the sexism and exploitation of women "represented in mainstream pornographic material" (Ibid. p.7). It is from within feminism that the most passionate battles have been fought in recent years, particularly over the relative harm of pornography. The very focus on 'harm' points to the ascendancy of the pro-censorship position in defining the parameters of feminist debate regarding women and pornography.

Pro-censorship anti-pornography feminists (the most notable of whom being Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon) claim that pornography lies behind all forms of female oppression, including exploitation, murder and brutality throughout human history (Dworkin, 1981). They argue that the courts should offer redress for individuals who could show that pornography has caused them harm, according to their definition of pornography as "the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women through pictures or words" (MacKinnon, 1987, p.176). Debate surrounding pornography remains centred around 'proof of harm' to women, particularly in anti-pornography campaigning.

Anti-censorship feminists passionately reject this analysis, claiming that it is a complete mistake to reduce the dominance of sexism and misogyny to representations of sexuality in our culture. (Ibid. p.8) Narrowing the focus of women's subordination to the explicitly sexual downplays the sexism and misogyny at work within all our most respectable social institutions and practices, "whether judicial, familial, occupational, religious, scientific or cultural" (Ibid. p.8). Further, anti-censorship feminists advocate the danger of forming alliances with the moral right, (which has been the case for many pro-censorship reform lobbies) who are seen to have an agenda contrary to feminist aims. They argue that blanket condemnation of pornography discourages women from facing sexual fears and fantasies. The anti-censorship position calls for more sexually explicit material produced by and for women, and more open discussion of all sexual issues, alongside continuing the struggle for economic and social equality (Ibid. p.9). It is from this approach that my research challenges the pro-censorship position regarding women watching pornography, as anti-censorship feminists acknowledge the complexity of activity and viewing pleasures, as well as passivity and danger involved in women's encounters with pornography.

### **Pornography and the Notion of 'Harm'**

The question of whether pornography is read as a charter for action is integral to any discussion of the relationship between pornography and women, is 'pornography the theory, rape the practice?' Definitions of pornography, and more specifically defining what exactly 'obscenity' is, is the central problematic of the harm debate. By introducing pornography as a shifting paradigm, discussing pornography as 'harm against women' (the pro-censorship position) is opened up for debate.

Pornography frightens us, according to Carol Clover (1993, p.3), owing to its power to arouse us even when we don't want it to, and when we don't approve of the images that make it happen, it 'over-rides' our sense of propriety'. Clover states that given these facts, it is no wonder that we fear its effects.

According to pro-censorship feminists, "pornography is not simply an idea or image, but a mechanism of sexual subordination..."(Itzin, 1992, p.412). Pornography is seen as the underlying cause of sexual subordination of women. Legislating against pornography, while not guaranteeing the elimination of sexism and sexual violence, can be used to end the sexual subordination pornography is taken to cause according to this position. The notion of proof of harm lies at the centre of anti-pornography campaigning (Segal, 1993, p.3).

There is evidence in support of both pro and anti-censorship positions in the harm debate. Segal cites experimental researchers Donnerstein, Linz and Penrod who claim that if following exposure to rape narratives where the victim was depicted as enjoying the rape the researchers explained that rape was a terrible thing, subjects displayed a greater sensitivity about sexist material and a heightened rejection of rape myths (Ibid. p.14). Segal further claims that men's reactions to depictions of sexual cruelty is more commonly that of anxiety and depression, of revulsion rather than arousal.

In contrast, Ray Wyre (1992, p.238) who works with sex offenders, claims that pornography is not simply an image, but rather is an image that creates sexual arousal and orgasm. Pornography is therefore instrumental in an active process where men use it to masturbate for sexual arousal and orgasm, thereby internalising the experience as erotic. From this basis, he claims that pornography feeds fantasy that may act upon a predisposition to sexually abusive behaviour.

Although there is evidence to support both positions in the harm/censorship debate, the "jury is still out" over the relative link between pornography and harm (Segal, 1993, p.3). Anti-censorship feminists have criticised the logic of pro-censorship feminists, who claim that pornography can't be read as a meaningful text where the meaning is clearly related to violence and hatred against women, summarised in the axiom: "read pornography right and you will understand rape" (Clover 1993, p.1). As anti-censorship feminists argue, this claim is too simplistic, as it is never possible to fix the meaning of an image and thereby predict an inevitable pattern of response. Pornography must therefore be taken in its wider representational context, within the particular recreational, educational or social context in which it is being received. Context is crucial. This is particularly true considering that men are capable of pornographising any image, from the "Arab women in her chador" to "any coding of anything as male and female" (Ibid. p.15).

Anti-censorship feminists claim that it is a mistake to claim that pornography is causal to hatred and violence towards women, as it is a mistake to reduce misogyny to representations of sexuality. They claim that narrowing the focus of women's subordination to the overtly sexual, attention is diverted away from sexism and misogyny at work in society. Pornography can rather be seen as an outworking of deeper, structural problems arising from basic gender inequity. -

Pro-censorship feminists posit male sexuality as a threat by primarily focusing their attack of pornography on male violence. According to Hughes (1995, p.14), pornography denies women an

independent sexual existence or sexuality, as their sexuality is perceived as being a tool for men's satisfaction. Male sexuality in this view is seen to be essentially controllable by pornography, in contrast to women's sexuality which is seen (when free from coercive male interference) as unproblematic, unpathological, gentle and good (Manion, 1985, p.3). Whatever the intention, pro-censorship feminists give the impression of wanting to rescue women from the 'threat' of male lust and desire. Women are assumed to have no lust and desire at all. Ironically, this way of addressing the issue objectifies women as passive objects of male lust, denying women's active sexual agency.

Manion (1985, p.69) argues that feminist condemnation of pornography unproblematically accepts the brittle male fantasy that the real life unreliable penis is 'powerful' while overlooking the fears and insecurities that such a fantasy is meant to dissolve. Therefore, accepting that pornography is instrumental in harm against women accepts pornography as a transparent text that is a charter for action while ignoring the interpretative role of the active viewer and the complexity of the act of watching. Pornography is not self-determining and can not be read simplistically. Although it appears to reinforce male sexual power through the privileging of male sexuality and male sexual power in the texts, pornography is a fantasy that allays the fears of sexual 'reality': that men fail to please their partners, and fail to produce the mighty orgasms that repetitively appear in the texts. It is therefore necessary to background the role of pornography within culture in order to examine what function pornography serves to its audience, rather than assuming pornography has an inherent meaning.

There are two further positions in the censorship/harm debate: conservative (or moral right) and liberal. The philosophy of the moral right is rooted in a strict interpretation of biblical ideas, that defines sexuality as a problem, a corrupting force that must be contained within the framework of marriage. Sexuality is organised in terms of the 'family', and outright censorship of library materials, sex education, and home-viewed videos is necessary in order to protect the sanctity of both marriage and the family (Burstyn, 1985, p.16-17). Therefore it is the political agenda of the moral right to contain all images of sexuality through censorship. A further conservative position is that of the extreme political right who outrightly reject Government intervention in the economic sphere, and who propose championing the rights of business to self regulate conditions of production. In this view, market conditions place the only regulations on what is produced (Ibid. p.16).

The liberal position is by no means unified in opinion. Burstyn claims that the best of the liberal approach has been the live and let live spirit behind the legal reforms of 1969, allowing that whatever consenting adults did behind closed doors was their business (Ibid. p.21). Also in the liberal camp are men who claim to be pro-feminist, but who belittle women's pain and anger when confronting pornographic imagery as an attempt to impose a sanitised version of politically correct sexuality on everyone, suggesting that feminists are politically backward puritans against whom they, the men, will champion rights of freedom of expression (Ibid. p.22). This denial of women's concern has pushed many liberal feminists into the pro-censorship camp.

Despite the existence of convincing arguments that go a long way to disproving pornography's inevitable link to perceived 'sexual subordination of women', feminist condemnation of pornography in the form of pro-censorship anti-pornography lobbying remains the axiom by which debate regarding pornography is framed. Casual 'effect-based' analysis denies the role of fantasy, and the role of women's activity in watching sexual display, instead ensconcing 'every-woman' as imagined sexual purists.

Intellectuals have tended to avoid audience study of pornography (Ross, 1989). Cultural studies has also avoided audience research of pornography. Whatever the reasons for this avoidance, I argue that cultural studies provides an ideal forum to study women viewing pornography, as previous studies within the cultural studies tradition (Morley, 1981; Ang, 1985; Livingstone, 1990) identify divergence in ways that apparent dominant ideologies within texts are read by subordinated social groups.

### **Censorship?**

Feminist debate about pornography has invariably centred around the question of censorship. Pro-censorship feminists claim that legislation is a viable answer to the problem pornography poses. Although pro-censorship feminists claim that censorship may function similarly to the way abolition of slavery contributed to an end to racism, as Itzin, (1992) suggests, there are several compelling arguments against censorship as a solution to the sexism and misogyny often found in pornography. Analyses of the censorship problematic identifies the ascendant position within feminism as considering pornography in terms of 'sexual subordination of women'. I argue that concentration on censorship is counter-productive to active sexual exploration as women, as this focus maintains a view of women as passive victims of male violence, assumed to be generated in pornography as a practice.

Burstyn (1993, p.25-30) claims that anti-pornography campaigning undermines feminist aims. She argues that pro-censorship feminists are complicit in patriarchy's undermining of feminism in three ways: through diversion (women's attention has been diverted from causes to the depictions of their oppression); co-option (the state trades off in state priorities by re-organisation that appears to be pro-actively helping feminist causes by containing the energies of feminism within state institutions, ('the apparatus of social control'), but actually diverts funds away from social services integral to women's health and welfare); and repression, that takes the form of sexual repression (of cultural alternatives to the models of sexuality offered in much pornography, and other resources that offer women freedom of their own sexuality). Burstyn claims that sexist pornography is a product of the economic and social conditions of our society - not vice versa.

Alliances with the state in censoring pornography often lead to ignorance in distinguishing what is offensive, obscene or erotic imagery. Kostash (1985, p.37) cites British Columbia's criminal code which refers to 'obscenity' as the 'undue exploitation of sex', however what this means in practice is unclear; with this definition are suntan ads any more obscene than explicit sex? Kostash claims that in defining that which is obscene, only the police appear sure of the difference between the 'tolerable and the intolerable'; with the censor boards tending to find "non-commercial explicit sex unacceptable and the commercial variety quite acceptable". She argues that the authorities aren't being coy, they "really aren't sure what is hateful and what isn't" (Ibid. p.38).

Kostash cites the case of the May 1983 issue of *Penthouse* which gained attention because of a feature article that pictured a "great number of erect and penetrating penises" which were subsequently blacked out with big dots, and the magazine was allowed to be sold. The customs officers didn't find the usual "split beaver" shots offensive or obscene, nor were they offended by a cartoon of a couple making love doggie-style at the beginning of the magazine, and the man holding a pistol to the women's head stating "Oh - you don't have to be worried about getting pregnant - I've taken all the precautions." Kostash rightly argues that (pro-censorship feminist) strategic alliances with the state produce just this kind of mistaken ignorance about distinctions between erotica and pornography, pornography and explicit sexuality, and between desire and hate (Ibid.).

Burstyn (1985, p.15) also claims that that legal reform is a trap, as any alliance with patriarchal institutions, where the motivation behind the similar demands are so much at variance, only



ensures that feminists will not be the ones to determine the way that these reforms will be carried out. In effect, collaboration with the state could well be a mistake.

Censorship has been shown to impact overwhelmingly on the sexual practices of minority groups, and those with alternative sexualities. Harm-driven censorship, according to Carol Clover (1993, p.4) leads to censorship falling heavily on these groups, which shifts blame for real sexual harm from the perpetrator to the pornographer, thus deflecting attention away from "what are surely the far more influential gender messages of the daily mainstream." Clover states that censorship politically operates to 'scapegoat'.

Similarly, Williams (1993) argues that when censorship actually operates, the line between what is obscene and allowable has increasingly been drawn between 'normal' and 'perverse', rather than 'non-explicit'/ 'explicit' representations. The focus in censoring pornography has come to centre on 'other' sexual practices, such as homosexuality, bestiality, flagellation, sadomasochism, fellatio, cunnilingus, and the like, which have been set in opposition to an assumed 'normality': "properly aesthetic, heterosexual, (and) non-sadomasochistic" (Ibid. p.49). Williams claims scapegoating of 'deviance' has been the practice of censorship when it does occur.

According to Gronau, (1985, p.97) the effect of censorship only accentuates the taboos that already exist surrounding women's open exploration of their sexuality. As human sexuality has been formed by a society that assumes the sexes are unequal, Gronau argues that notions of a sexuality that is based on equality are tentative and hypothetical (Ibid.). Gronau claims that women need to understand the machinations of violence and power, so that we know actions that are best for us to take. She claims that in an environment of censorship, our voices may well be silenced (Ibid. p.97-98).

In the end, as Segal argues (1993, p.19) "anti-pornography campaigns, feminist or not, can only enlist today, as they invariably enlisted before, guilt and anxiety around sex, as well as lifetimes of confusion in our personal experiences of sexual arousal and activity". Segal claims that women need space to produce our own sexually explicit narratives and images of women's desire if we are to embark on a journey of sexual empowerment, and can develop our own language of desire. Focusing on censorship perpetuates women's fear of pornography, which maintains a disempowered stance within feminism that doesn't critique the complexities of women's desires or the outworking of fantasy in culture.

A central question in the production of this research was the consideration of what exact form sexual empowerment may take given pornographic/sexually explicit material available today. As pornographic texts often devalue female pleasure, I consider the extent to which female audiences find pornographic texts pleasurable. This involves a critique of the ascendant position within feminism that holds women's responses can be 'read off' textual analysis as if the texts were transparent in conveying a unitary meaning: 'sexual subordination of women.'

Codes within pornography would appear (as outlined in Chapter 5) to comply with this reading of pornography within feminism; as the codes by which male-identified pornography is organised assume a privileging of male over female sexuality.

### **Feminist Theoretical Conceptualisations of Pornography**

Whereas the dominant interpretation of pornography within feminism assumes that pornographic texts convey a single meaning, other interpretations within feminist theory examine the complexities of pornography and power, acknowledging the role of historical precedents and the relationship between gender and power, sexual realities and contexts that structure the formation of pornographic fantasies. As Kathy Myers (1995, p.16) asserts "...we need to further our understanding of how the exercising of power produces forms of sexuality which work to structure the process of pleasure, fantasy and the imagination". This process precipitates alternative formations of women-centred pornographic fantasies.

In her analysis of 'hard-core' pornography, Linda Williams (1990, p.29) suggests that although much is written on the issue of pornography, little is written on the way pornography appears in the texts themselves. Williams follows the development of hard-core pornography from historical precedents, examining the way that 'pleasures of the body' are "subject to change in conjunction with historical and social constructions of female and male sexuality" (Ibid. p.3). She argues that pornography hinges on a modern compulsion to 'speak sex' and she examines the pornographic text in terms of Foucault's analysis of the knowledge/pleasure of sexuality.

Diderot's fable, 'The Indiscreet Jewels' written in 1748 pre-empted the modern compulsion to speak sex, according to Williams. Cucufa exclaims to the sultan that women (upon wearing the magic ring) speak 'from their jewels', "that which is most frank in them, and the most knowledgeable about things you wish to know" (cited in Williams, 1990, p.1). Williams claims that hard-core films makes sex speak to a modern audience.



The compulsion to 'speak sex' that Williams's posits also has its roots in the invention of cinema. Mybridge reproduced bodily movement: with photo 'confession' of body spasm. In these first film reels, Williams claims that Mybridge arrives at the possibility of cinematic hard-core. A 'scopic drive' for maximum visibility in body movements pre-empt the pornographic drive to reveal 'truth' of the female body (Fleck, 1991, p.2).

Williams suggests that both gendered difference and the voyeuristic drive to uncover the mysteries of women lie at the core of the pornographic text. She argues that Foucault offers a way of conceptualising pornography as "one of the many forms of knowledge/pleasure of sexuality" that contextualises pleasure as feeding into power and vice-versa. Thus, pleasures of the body are produced as "configurations of power that put pleasure to particular use" (Ibid. p.3). Williams links this understanding of pornography as 'speaking sex' to Foucault's notion of the 'confessional' in order to demonstrate that Diderot and modern pornography both attempt to make the "female sex speak" (Ibid. p.31).

Hard-core "(represents)..living, moving bodies engaged in explicit, usually unfaked sexual acts with the primary intent of arousing viewers". The organisation of pornography, while rendering sex visible, produces meaning based on "gender difference" (Ibid. p.30). This is evident in both hard-core and women-identified forms of pornography (see Chapter 5).

Writing about mass-market romance, Anne Barr Snitow (1983, p.247) argues that our culture produces a "pathological experience of sexual difference" where the sexes find one another "utterly mystifying". Geraldine Finn (1995, p.83) argues that the point of pornography is to constitute male and female sexuality differently, as masculinity under patriarchy, "needs an other from which a man can distinguish himself; for masculinity resides completely in what she, femininity is not." Further "since real women do not place man and his genitals as their 'natural' superior, man is obliged to construct an other that does."

Finn argues the basis of pornography lies in 'trading' images of women as commodities. As representations of women's bodies conventionalised, as nudes were sold, a process of commodification began whereby women's bodies became signs that designated the owner as a man to be envied. From this basis, Finn argues that the objectification of women in pornography reveals more about the nature of man. Women "does not disclose herself as subject in pornography" but is observed and constructed as an objectification of his idea, inevitably bearing the mark of her creator (Ibid. p.83). In this sense, Finn claims that women who appear in

pornography do not appear as themselves, but as man-made objects or artefacts, present to call forth male sexuality which offers men a certain kind of security. This security, according to Finn, "substitutes an image of an unreal prostitute for interaction with a real one and an exchange between men (money for access to female artefacts) for a relationship between an individual man and a real women - that most dangerous of encounters" (Ibid. p.85). Men must then 'exchange' women in order to realise themselves as men, according to Finn, who argues that the 'power' pornography offers to men is illusory, exacerbating the condition it attempts to remedy, as it perpetuates an ideal of masculinity that can not be realised in practice (Ibid. p.88) .

Although Finn accounts for the colonisation of sexual imagery through the economic basis of pornography which organises pleasure in terms of male sexuality, she discounts the importance of the interpretative role of the active viewer; 'meaning' can't simply be 'read off' the texts. The only place a women may occupy according to her argument is that of the object, screwed, lacking a desire/gaze of their own: "her desire is his desire for her" (Ibid. p.85). Interpreting pornography singly from an economic basis ignores the role of fantasy and the role of an active audience.

Sara Diamond (1985, p.41) argues that the pro-censorship definition of porn by MacKinnon and Dworkin (that it is "the sexually explicit subordination of women, graphically depicted, whether in pictures or words") is too simplistic, as it suggests that images themselves are responsible for women's subordination. She claims that pornography is many things: "a product made to be sold by a multi-million dollar industry; a set of coded messages about sex, and male and female roles in this culture; and a specific of sexual and cultural activity" (Ibid. p.41). Pornography, in Diamond's view is similar to advertising in that it is a fantasy, promising that which it cannot deliver, with the discrepancy between the real and fantasy encouraging further purchases.

Because there is a tendency in sexist society to reduce women to a fetishised object (a fragmented unit of body parts), rather than to cherish their individuality, Diamond claims that the viewer is able to distance (him)self from the real person, "avoiding the demands of relating to a whole, intelligent, emotional and active woman" (Ibid. p.43). Diamond also accounts for the role of voyeurism in fantasy, that allows the man to simply look without acting, and to "be sexually unassertive as the images or narrative act to arouse them, without having to deal with the potentially awkward or frightening social dynamics if they take the passive - the traditionally feminine - role in a sexual encounter" (Ibid. p.44). Diamond claims that the unconscious messages inherent in pornography mean that it is ultimately about men's fears "of inadequacy, of being controlled by women emotionally and sexually through dependency, of losing power"

(Ibid. p.44). Further, Diamond claims that the 'raw material' of pornography is women, who seldom have any ownership of or power over the images that they create (Ibid. p.42). Diamond's humanist approach, while presenting a compelling argument regarding the appeal of pornography in its promise of sexual fulfilment and its offering different positions for male identification with pornographic texts, is limited in the assumption that women-as-viewer may only identify with women on-screen who is thought to be 'exploited' as 'raw material'.

Myrna Kostash (1985, p.36) argues that despite the distortion and viciousness found in pornography, and despite the "systematic organisation of male desire in paradigms of power", it allows men to "make a connection" with a female, to be close to women. Kostash forwards that the pornographic fantasy is one of the few ways that women and men, captive together in social institutions that regulate sexual relationships, are permitted connection.

Kostash goes on to argue that establishing that which is pornographic is difficult, owing to the fact that fantasy is different for each individual. She claims that in the realm of fantasy, perhaps women do consent to 'pornographic suggestion', we do become 'aroused' (Ibid. p.36). Thus, the famous scene in the 'Thornbirds' where the heroine and the Priest consummate their relationship, or even an image of Richard Gere taking his shirt off has the power to arouse us. In this context, Kostash claims that it is difficult to condemn pornographic fantasies, as women partake of a 'pornographic imagination' also (Ibid. P.36). In this, Kostash acknowledges the possibility of an active viewing position for women.

From a socio-historical perspective, Gertrude Kosh attempts to define the popularity of pornography. She combines Foucault's concept of the "will to knowledge", with the obvious pleasure of voyeurism. As Foucault (1977, p.28) forwards, "...It is not the activity of the subject of knowledge that produces a corpus of knowledge, useful or resistant to power, but power-knowledge ...that determines the forms and possible domains of knowledge." In the context of pornography, the 'will to knowledge' or power is independent of a oppressor/victim relationship. It is rather a conceptualisation of pornography as a 'sieve' "through which power seeps into the inner regions of sexuality while sexuality flows out and becomes part of this power" determining the possible conceptualisations of knowledge regarding sexuality. (Kosh, 1993, p.31)

Central to Kosh's reading of pornographic power is the notion of *Schaulust*, where the fascination of seeing atrocities, violence and death, in short the "sensuousness of looking", has been turned upon sexuality with the relaxing of sexual taboos, as cinematic depictions of various

forms of violence has reached saturation. Thus, argues Kosh the success of pornography is the expression of a cultural-historical development (Ibid. p.30). She cites the Victorian pornographic fantasy of abundance which corresponded with real poverty, and contrasts this to modern pornography which reflects the world of machines. The fantasy of pornography alludes to modern subjugation of the body that suffers from want in the midst of material plenty.

Kosh acknowledges pornography as a process within communication, both reflecting and creating social discourse, acting a sieve through which knowledge/power regarding sexuality is known. Pornography therefore reflects the corresponding historical moment in which it is produced, thus the longevity and repetition in modern pornographic texts reflects the modern ethic of capitalist culture - endless production to meet endless demand. Primarily, the actual bodies involved are significant according to their function as producers of repetitive sex; thus the fantasy of pornography is about subjugation of individuality, reflecting the subjugation of individuality within an age of economic domination. This is certainly reflected in hard-core pornography, where characteristics of the genre; abundant bodies, repetition and male orgasm; are the specific mechanics of an economic organisation.

Kosh claims that there is a quality attached to pornographic cinema which places it in the category that Kracauer called 'phenomena overwhelming consciousness' that is "bound to thwart detached observation" (cited in Kosh, 1993, p.36). Pornography's optical appropriation of the world, that legitimates its lack of inhibitions in picturing spectacles that upset the mind, makes it "even more scintillating and enticing than any ideological criticism....has been able to account for" (Ibid.). Within this perceptual framework, Kosh claims that voyeurism creates distance whereby the observer confronts images that would otherwise frighten him or her (Ibid. p.37).

Carol Avendon (1993, p.70) suggests that the more complex pleasures of bisexuality, the capacity for identification with the opposite sex as well as enjoyment of passivity, and the eroticisation of pleasure and pain, all point to the complexity and allure of fantasy. Fantasy can not be reducible to wishful thinking or daydreaming about a desired experience, according to Avendon, who counters claims in the pro-censorship campaign that fantasy expresses ideology by arguing that 'ideology' is precisely what most fantasy does *not* express (Ibid. p.70). Hence incidences of fantasies of powerlessness from leading patriarchs, fantasies of sexual domination by black men (or women) from white racists, and rape fantasies from feminists" (Ibid. p.71). The fact that women have been made to feel guilty (by pro-censorship feminists) about the gulf between feminist aspirations and 'politically correct' erotic fantasies suggests ignorance regarding

the nature of fantasy, as pornographic fantasy has no straightforward connection with what would be presumed to be its real life enactment, unless it is stylised enactment under the fantasiser's own control (Ibid.). Fantasy, according to Avendon, allows multiple identifications from different positions, or "any other indulgence of the logically impossible" (Ibid. p.70).

While pornography offers a particular set of images that represent reality, it is literally highly stylised; a manipulated, constructed set of images. Camera angles, framing, picture composition, editing styles and sequencing, and implied plot are all point to the construction of the image (Ibid. p.46). Kosh (1993, p.40) argues that pornography's "endless merry-go-rounds of sex orgies, the reduction of a person to his or her sex organs, the mechanical, compulsive repetition in the action of pornographic films thus arise out of a male sexual organisation, rather than from a lack of imagination on the film-makers part".

Pornography, then, is constructed around a masculine sexual fantasy reflecting both the magical world of the child, where ordinary places become a secret site of sexuality, and the construction of a male-defined 'pornotopia', where the endless sexual bounty of the performers in the text "function(s) as a material correlative to the ideology that they express" (Ibid. p.40). The bounty of the pornographic text parallels developments within society as "producers speculate on the consumers current and projected needs and taboos" (Ibid. p.35).

According to Kosh, pornographic cinema reduces sexuality to a male perspective, one grounded in patriarchal myths regarding female sexuality. She claims that pornography is essentially sexist. She calls for "emancipation that would liberate women's sexual fantasies and prepare the way for a well deserved end to phallogocentric primacy in the prevailing sexual order" (Ibid. p.39).

Misogyny within pornography has ensured that consideration of it has focused on actual historical relations between men and women, according to James (1989). Erroneous insistence on the connection between pornography and violence has inhibited exploration of sexual representations; causing feminist debate on pornography to focus on pornography as a cultural practice that must be *controlled*. Feminists such as Diamond, Kosh, Kostash, Avendon and Finn approach pornography from its wider representational context, accounting for the role of organisation in its production, fantasy, pleasure and popularity. Largely, however, women remain assumed passive subjects if they are implicated at all as watchers of pornography in feminist theory.



### **The Problematised Viewer**

Kosh claims that despite the routine way that the socialisation of sexuality occurs, there is still attached to it a quality that Kracauer called 'phenomena overwhelming consciousness', that calls forth "excitements and agonies bound to thwart detached observation." In this context, the pornographic cinema's lack of inhibition in expressing spectacles that overwhelm the mind, has the effect of keeping us from "shutting our eyes from the blind drive of things" (cited in Kosh, 1993, p.35-36).

Diamond (1985, p.50) argues that the aversion that women feel to explicit sexual imagery can be (partly at least ) attributed to a combination of elements: that women are taught that to be treated properly we must "keep our legs crossed at all times", and that engaging in "public displays of sexuality is to be defined as a slut." In contrast to men who learn that sex makes them powerful, we learn that it makes us "powerless and bad" (Ibid.). Although Diamond's argument implies gender essentialism, she rightly defines sexuality as a site where, in terms of cultural expectations, women have been defined according to traditional notions of passivity and sexual submissiveness. Pornography perpetuates the existence of these expectations; with a privileging of male sexuality and a distorted representation of what turns women on, almost always positioning women in sexist, submissive poses.

The discomfort that women feel when viewing pornography may also be attributable to the dominance of masculine sexuality within it. Coveney, Kay and Mahony undertook an analysis of Forum magazine which identifies the misconception that women's sexuality is assumed to be based on male needs. Although Forum is a magazine that hails itself as freeing 'unenlightened' peoples attitudes about sex, it became clear to the researchers that the 'repressed', 'unenlightened' individuals were invariably women, whose letters were most commonly about overcoming 'problems' that they had in relating to their partners. Any fear, shame or guilt that they felt was as a result of their own repressions, and Forum advised that they contort themselves to overcome their feeling and become 'liberated'. Even in the context of a so-called 'liberal' magazine about sex, female sexuality was discussed in terms of male needs, and failed to offer women autonomous sexuality outside of male control (Segal 1985, p.90-91).

As Segal (1994, p.223) claims, active sexuality within our culture is still coded as 'phallic', as male. Men's sexual engagement with women is coded primarily as affirmation of his 'manhood' marking heterosexual practice as having little to do with women's pleasure. Breaking the codes that link active sexuality with male identity can't be achieved by ignoring the symbolic

dimensions of language and existing relations between men and women, but by acknowledging that codes linking sexual pleasure with masculine identity may be subverted and parodied, despite overdetermined gender encoding within most texts.

### **'Erotic Art' and 'Pornography'**

Whereas anti-pornography feminists have attempted to argue in favour of a clear distinction between 'erotic art' and pornography, anti-censorship feminists claim that the distinction isn't so clear. The utopic ideal of an 'erotics' that is distinguishable from 'pornography' is a historical conception that remains a central consideration in framing the 'pornography/erotica distinction in this research. It is a distinction that often takes the form of a high culture/low culture split.

The opposition between art and pornography, or the aesthetic and the obscene is one that classifies acceptable and unacceptable forms of culture according to Nead (1993). Pornography excites the body to action and deviates from the contemplative role of art, and in its singular onanistic intention to bring about sexual arousal in the viewer, it sweeps aside the imaginative preoccupations that are seen to be at the heart of artistic endeavour. Conversely, 'erotic art' is thought to dwell above the pulp-line, for it implies "a form of contained cultural consumption.." allowing the viewer to be aroused "within the purified, contemplative mode of high culture" (Ibid. p.147). The distinction between pornography and erotica has been adopted by pro-censorship feminists, who define the 'erotic' as a mutual sexual expression between two people who have enough power to be there by positive choice, not requiring identification with either a conqueror or victim, thus containing a contagion of pleasure. Pornography's message, however, is assumed to be violence, dominance and conquest used to reinforce or create inequality (Lederer 1980).

Likewise, Itzin claims that there is a distinction between 'erotica' and 'pornography' with pornography being a combination of sexual explicitness and subordination, whereas 'erotica' is about 'mutuality'. Itzin argues that pornography sexualises violence, subordinates women, and sexualises women's subordination. In clearly demarcating 'erotica' as fundamentally different to 'pornography', Itzin and other anti-pornography feminists have attempted to address the issue of sexual pleasure.

Maintaining a binary opposition between 'pornography' and 'erotica' fails to confront the specific ways that gender is encoded in sexual imagery in our culture. Whereas women are coded as 'passive' 'receptive' and 'vulnerable' in textual encodings of sexual representations, sexual pleasure is overwhelmingly coded as masculine within our culture. Codes that employ these

assumptions about pleasure are just as likely to occur in a text that claims to be 'erotic' as in hard-core pornography. (Segal, 1994, p.xv)

Many anti-censorship feminists emphasise the centrality of sexuality and pleasure for human liberation, and have attempted to spearhead movement toward women producing their own erotica. Ross cites 'anti-antiporn' feminists who reject Steinham's (and anti-porn feminists) notion of 'erotica' (as represented within the codes of romantic love; encapsulating 'feminine qualities' such as tenderness, softness, sensuality and passion) on the basis that it is 'feminine' not 'feminist', resting upon a utopian notion of 'good sex'. It is also important to acknowledge that anti-pornography feminist use of the term 'erotica' often excludes a whole range of sexual activity from casual, promiscuous sex to lesbian S&M, and other representations of 'wayward desire' and aggressive sexual activity (Ross, 1989, p.185). Williams points to the importance of proliferating sexual representations, arguing that gay, lesbian and s/m porn calls into question presumptions surrounding pornography, including: heterosexual desire; gay porn that refuses to be reduced to an aggressive male gaze at a feminised object; bisexual porn that makes a point of articulating a female gaze at male couples; and lesbian porn that refused gender expectations of women being the 'kinder, gentler' sex (Ibid. p.56-57).

James (1989, p.340) suggests that the 'erotic' exists as a utopic notion, therefore the possibility of non-sexist sexual representation "must be deferred" like the question of feminine language in general, pre-empted by present inequalities. Similarly, Kostash (1985, p.40) argues that the 'erotic' is situated beyond our grasp, the "project of a post-patriarchal, post-capitalist culture of lovers". Although correct in assuming that existing images of sexual representation are steeped in inequality, and that even so-called women's erotica often privileges male sexual primacy, it must be acknowledged that forming a new language of desire that reflects and privileges women's sexuality must begin by dialoguing about sex as women: by confronting images that exist in pornography and erotica, and by talking about what form sexual pleasure may take by talking in terms of 'utopias'. Conceptualising a new form of visual language in pornographic/erotic images involves also referring to existing codes present in visual images of sex, without falling into a trap of censorship or delineating between 'pornography' as sexually oppressive (as at the level of interpretation it may be liberating) and 'erotica' as sexually liberating (in many ways existing conceptions of 'erotica' are restrictive and unrepresentative of women's desires.)

Women are still marginalised in terms of access to producing and distributing images that reflect women's sexuality in a culture that accepts the primacy of male sexuality. There is a dearth of



sexually explicit material produced by women. It is possible to trace this phenomena from two strains of thought: the first the strongly puritanical stance of pro-censorship feminists towards pornography that holds the assumption that women's sexuality is free from lust, unpathological, and good; and the second being the conditions of production and distribution within capitalism that has consistently acted to repress female sexuality. The dominance of masculine sexuality within pornography and other forms of sexually explicit material is proof of this. Debate surrounding pornography from within feminism, best equipped to deal with inequity in media representations, has revolved around censorship. Feminists should, as Hollibaugh (1984, p.407) argues, "be seen as a critical edge in the struggle to allow more women to confront the dangers of desire" rather than being a critical edge in restricting debate to the censorship issue.

Maintaining a distinction between 'pornography' and 'erotica' is central to the arguments of anti-pornography campaigners. In challenging this distinction, I hope to question the fundamental basis of 'pornography' and 'erotica' as depending not on sexual oppression of women in the texts, but on the situation of the viewer. The dominance of the anti-pornography position within feminist debate surrounding pornography has perpetuated gender inequity though perpetuating assumptions that as the texts appear to define "power in sex (as) male" then this is the only way pornography may be read by women viewers. In maintaining a distinction between pornography and erotica that depends on a good/bad dichotomy, the anti-pornography position has assumed moral ascendancy over what images in fantasy are 'correct' for women. "Arousal felt by women (in watching the incorrect 'bad' fantasies of pornography) is deemed 'false consciousness' (Ibid. p.407).

Clearly, a reappraisal is needed of the distinction between pornography and erotica as there is no definitive distinction that applies to every situation between a 'pornographic' and an 'erotic' image. As Ryan claims (1988, p.231), definitions of pornography and erotica depend "more on personal taste, moral boundaries, sexual preference, cultural and class biases than on an objective distinction between 'good' and 'bad' sexual images." I maintain 'erotica' as best conceived of as textual encodings that attempt to redefine sexual agency and sexual power within the text from a 'women's perspective', as this is how a text was conceived as 'erotic' by most participants in my research. 'Pornography' was thought to be sexually explicit material that functioned to arouse its viewers.

According to Lynda Nead, (1993, p.154) a careful and critical re-examination of the 'erotic' allows a way forward "for a progressive and exciting form of sexual representation". Although

existing stigmas inevitably caused the participants to conceive of 'erotica' more positively than pornography, judgement in distinguishing between the two did not affect the fact that many respondents conceived of an 'ideal erotica' as involving sexually explicit imagery, therefore technically 'pornography'. The viewing context of the audience is not the only variable in determining the distinction between 'good' erotica and 'bad' pornography, as feminist artists and performers are producing performances and texts that attempt to combine the 'erotic' with pornography and pornography with 'art'.

### **Challenging the Distinctions: Pornographic Art and Erotic Pornography**

'Erotic art' and 'pornography' has become increasingly indistinguishable with both the commercialisation of 'erotica', and attempts from within the pornography industry to produce 'erotica'. Performance artists, such as Annie Sprinkle also break down any clear demarcation between art and pornography.

According to Chris Strayer (1993, p.174), Annie Sprinkle, in her live one-women performance art entitled 'Post Porn Modernist', attempts to break down boundaries among/between "pornography, art and everyday experience, spirituality and sexuality, queer and straight, homosexual and heterosexual, male and female, desirable and undesirable, slut and goddess, prostitute and mother, ...and female ejaculation." Williams (1993, p.177) claims that Sprinkle acts as a feminist agency that (arguably) moves beyond some of feminism's most troubling binary oppositions, "beyond the opposition that posits pornography as inimical to women; beyond the opposition that posits pornography as inimical to art, (and) beyond the opposition that posits women as powerless victims of male sexual power and thus as colonised in their desires." Certainly, what constitutes art is questioned in her show, as her public orgasms, and her show and tell recital of her life as a sex-worker testify.

Citing the presence of Candida Royalle behind the camera producing pornography for women, Williams (1990) argues that pornography is a fluid process that is developing with 'revisionist' elements. Royalle's 'erotica for women' is part of this trend, according to Williams as it is aimed at couples with high production values, literate scripts, relatively good acting and has handsome female and male performers. Further, Royalle's production company includes scenes of extended foreplay and afterplay which, she claims seriously attempt to "visualise women's desire in a genre that has consistently continued to see sex....from the viewpoint of the phallus" (Ibid. p.247). To Royalle, the 'essence of feminism' is "for a women to stand up for herself, take charge and do it" (cited in Keller, 1992, p.1301).

Unfortunately, although Royalle's films are progressive in many ways, they avoid confronting the issue of power "in their potential to play a role in the subversion of power relationships themselves" (Ibid. p.1307). Despite Royalle's tendency to ignore issues of power in 'femme' productions, they point to an increasing trend in porn to attempt representing a specifically female desire in the genre in an attempt to capture the women's 'erotica' market.

Arguing as a feminist photographer of 'erotic' imagery, Grace Lau (1993, p.193) claims that a "timely and indignant reaction to the traditional and male-monopolised industry is beginning to emerge". She argues in favour of women's experimentation in the sphere of creative practice in order to "produce work motivated by our gut feelings in order to mount a challenge to the male-dominated sex industry." She claims we must show the world that we want - and need - erotica.

Lau confesses to being a "complete scopophiliac", while once only 'looking sideways' at sexual imagery. She claims that in the last ten years, women have progressed beyond the notion that it was unacceptable for women to be the consumers of sexual images, to taking an active part in their production (Ibid. p.195). In her work, Lau reappropriates images of the erotic as a woman.

As the pornography industry attempts to colonise the 'women's market' through producing erotica that claims to represent 'women's desires,' and feminist artists reappropriate images of 'erotica', the clear demarcation between erotica and pornography is breaking down. However, the issue remains that in terms of the political economy of pornography, those with control of production in this male dominated field ultimately determine what is shown.

As Ryan (1988) argues, pornography provides a space in which cultural attitudes about sexuality are rehearsed. Analysing the specific context and use of sexual codes within both pornography and erotica does not limit the meaning of 'pornography' to the sexual oppression of women and 'erotica' to a limited conception of images that are more 'feminine' than 'feminist' (Ross, 1989, p.185). Analysing contexts and audiences of pornography and erotica paves the way to developing a trajectory by which radical and exciting new women-centred images of sexuality may be birthed.

### **Women's Interaction with Pornography - Towards Possibilities for Research**

Although pornography constructs sex in terms of male sexual privilege, it also hold potential to disrupt traditional stereotypes of women's function. For example - women are often shown to be

enjoying anonymous sex outside marriage or the 'home', and women who *watch* pornography and enjoy it transgress expectations regarding women's sexuality (being non voyeuristic for example.)

Lynn Darling (1985) interviewed four women who accounted for the ways that they enjoyed pornography. Some of the appeals cited include: affirmation of the power of (her) own sexuality; education about women's sexuality/a sort of 'road map' to erogenous zones; realising the ability to be sexually autonomous; finding a safe place to expose (herself); a way to keep monogamous sex interesting and freedom to watch fantasy that isn't realisable in real life. Tisdale, 1992) writing in 'Harpers' magazine, offers a confessional article expounding on her taste for porn. She gives a compelling account of the ways that pornography addressed her, as a tool for her imagination, as a charm for the body, seeing sex 'off the leash', and seeing depictions of various power fantasies

Women who partake of pornography aren't the 'dupes of men', content to accept the assumed single position of submissive of male lust, but are often actively seeking their own pleasure in ways that are largely unaccounted for. It is important to acknowledge however, that women in the study who admitted to enjoying pornography were not content with the depictions of women's sexuality found in it, rather desiring sexually explicit images that offered women a sense of agency in the text.

### **The 'Dominant Ideology' Thesis and Feminist Interpretations of Pornography**

Within feminism the anti-pornography position has accepted pornography has a single meaning: a one-way conveyance of a 'dominant ideology' which interprets the genre as 'sexual subordination of women'(Clover, 1993, p.4). According to Ryan, (1988, p.238) "the dominant feminist approach to pornography" sees pornography "as a site of unmitigated male power". Assuming that pornography "is what pornography does, what it does is subordinate women through sexually explicit pictures or words" (cited in Itzin, 1992), this view addresses pornography as sexually explicit subordination. 'Women' as defined by this position, will be "ready to swear that they find none of that sleazy, pornographic sex interesting..." conversely, "women who like talking dirty, anal sex, voyeurism or even vibrators are suspect, certainly not feminists" (Webster 1984, p.393). Women who partake of pornography are seen as victims of 'false consciousness.' My research challenges this dominant position within feminist response to pornography, even though the persistant misogyny of pornographic texts themselves appear to comply with simplistic forms of analysis.

As a 'dominant ideology thesis', anti-pornography feminists argue in favour of society being based on gender divisions, with the dominant gender enjoying "control of both the means of material production and the means of mental production" thus controlling ideological production (Abercrombie et al, 1980, p.1-2). According to the feminist dominant ideology thesis, the dominant gender supervises the construction of a set of beliefs which penetrate the consciousness of subordinate groups. Anti-pornography feminist interpretation of pornography can be classified as a dominant ideology thesis.

According to Abercrombie, Turner and Hill's (1980, p.159, 190) interpretation of a 'dominant ideology thesis', "ideology" can't be "theoretically located and elaborated at the level of the mode of production." Therefore, "any valid theory of ideology must treat human beings as the bearers or carriers of belief" rather than taking on faith a variety of unsubstantiated generalisations which are derived from theoretical positioning and 'read off' the texts themselves. Anti-pornography theorists, in seeking evidence that pornography indeed means the sexual subordination of women, read meaning off the texts without acknowledging the role of viewers as bearers and carriers of belief. Importantly, societies are fractured in unapparent ways, not forming a 'seamless whole', thus the 'dominant ideology thesis' of anti-pornography feminists forges a view of society as a 'seamless whole' especially in the assumption that subordinated groups are ideologically incorporated (Ibid. p.158-159).

This reading of pornography by anti-pornography feminists must therefore be challenged in terms of audience readings of pornography, rather than assuming pornography is a set of transparent practices that produce social meaning. As Ryan (1988, p.231) argues, "what feminists need is an analysis and politics of pornography that is alive to both its oppressive features *and* the opportunities for pleasure that it offers."

There are very few studies that examine the interaction of women audiences of genres that are considered 'masculine'. Most studies that examine the position of women audiences in popular culture have centred on 'women's genres'; soap operas and romance novels. By approaching pornography in terms of its largely ignored audience, I wish to analyse whether the assumptions present in anti-pornography feminist theory regarding women audiences are founded, particularly regarding the anti-pornography coding of women's sexuality as essentially passive and 'pure'. In responding to anti-pornography feminism, my research explores the possibilities of pleasure within sexually explicit imagery, proposing female sexuality and viewership as active and

desiring. Focus groups provided an ideal forum to discuss the viewing activity and responses of women audiences of pornography.

This chapter has established the framing considerations in feminist theory regarding women watching pornography. The anti-pornography feminist position has been established as a 'dominant ideology thesis' that has determined both the parameters and focus of feminist debate regarding pornography. Challenging the anti-pornography feminist position necessitates a reading of the texts in terms of the cultural and historical conditions in which the texts are produced, and semiotic analysis of the pornographic texts chosen for my research to reveal the 'dominant encoding' present in (particularly) 'hard-core' pornographic texts, which takes the form of privileging male over female sexual pleasure. Firstly, however, the encoding/decoding model of interpretation must be established and justified as the basis of this research. Encoding/decoding shows that in audience readings of pornography, meaning formation escapes textuality.



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## Chapter 3

### METHODOLOGY: ENCODING/DECODING

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Using Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model as a theoretical base, this research looks at women as audiences of pornography. This chapter is comprised of two main parts. The first section analyses Hall's encoding/decoding model and establishes my research within the cultural studies paradigm; while the second section outlines and justifies the themes in my discussion of focus group findings regarding women watching pornography, including definitions of what constitutes a pornographic text, issues of identification and representation, cultural expectations and possibilities in pleasure and resistance.

#### **An Overview of Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model**

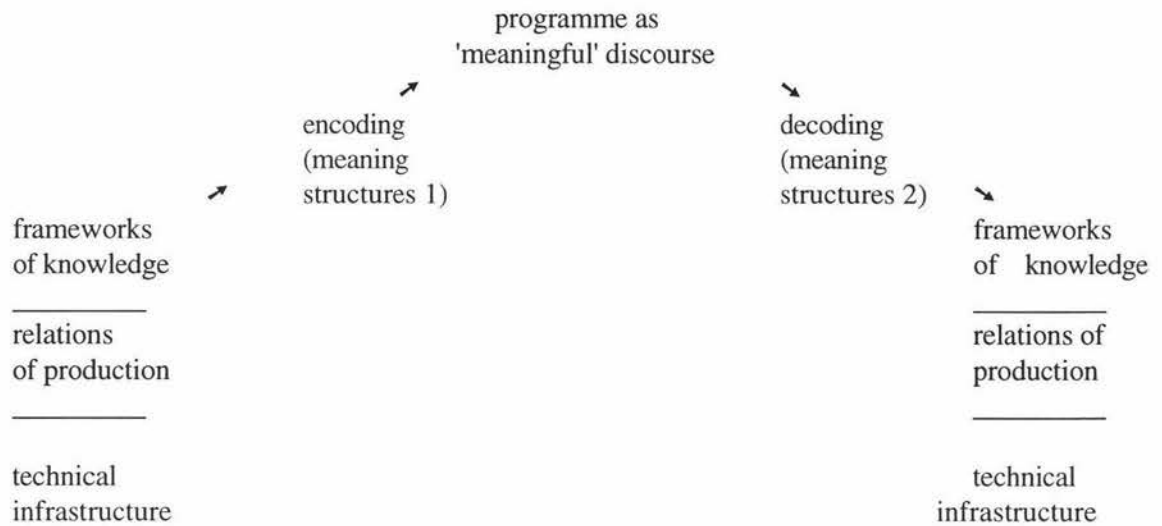
Hall's encoding decoding model addresses the complexity of communication by moving beyond a linear sender/message/receiver loop of traditional mass communications research, to an approach of linked but distinctive moments of production, circulation, distribution, consumption, and reproduction. What is needed, according to Hall, is an articulation of connected practices, each with its own distinctive forms and conditions, sustained through a passage of forms. Thus Hall proposes a circuit of communication where the distinctive 'moments' in the communication process are linked.

Hall demonstrates how meanings and messages in the communication process are comprised of meanings and messages organised through the operation of codes, "symbolic vehicles constituted within the rules of language" (Hall, 1973, p.128). In this discursive form, circulation of the product takes place. Once accomplished, discourse must be translated into social practice if the circuit of communication is to be both completed and effective.

In decoding, the receiver of the message interprets the code in order to yield meaning. The decoding process of the audience can not therefore be understood in the simplistic terms of behaviourism, as gratifications, uses or effects. These isolated elements are themselves framed by structures of understanding and are produced in and by social and economic structures, which

need to need to be realised by the audience in order for the message to acquire social use value or political effectiveness.

Thus, the process of communication is summarised by Hall as follows:



(Source: Hall, 1973)

Degrees of understanding or misunderstanding in the communication exchange depends on the symmetry or asymmetry between the codes of the sender (or source) and the codes of the receiver of the message. Distortions or misunderstanding arise, according to Hall, from the lack of equivalence between encoder and decoder.

To Hall, audience research must utilise the semiotic paradigm in order to dispel behaviourism, which posits representations of violence as being equivalent to violence itself. In pornography, this behaviourist paradigm is evidenced in theorists who attempt to prove a causal link between pornography and violence against women in order to prove 'pornography is the message, rape the practice'. Dominant meanings do not necessitate a determined understanding, but is comprised of the 'work' needed to enforce, win plausibility for and command as legitimate a decoding of an event within dominant definitions. Encoding will have the effect of constructing some of the parameters within which decoding will operate, but it can't necessitate how any message is decoded, therefore Hall suggests three decoding positions.

Hall's first proposed position is that of the 'dominant-hegemonic' position, where the viewer decodes the message full and straight, operating within the dominant code. Operating within



hegemony, the dominant order within a technologically sophisticated society gains consent for the status quo, the way things are. The hegemonic viewpoint defines all things within its mental horizon (society, culture, the universe, the nation, relations, possible meanings) and it carries the stamp of legitimacy, appearing both 'natural' and 'inevitable'. Professional broadcasters operate within the dominant codes of ideology. At a future communicative moment, the operation of professional 'codes' are employed that reproduce hegemonic definitions through non-overtly biasing their operations and practices. In this way, ideological reproduction is inadvertent and unconscious.

The second audience position is that of the negotiated code. The majority of audiences understand that which has been defined and signified, but negotiate meanings to suit local/personal interests and understandings. While acknowledging the legitimacy of the dominant code, negotiated readings operate through locational or situated logics, exceptions to the rule. Hall cites the example of an industrial dispute where workers, while understanding and accepting the dominant hegemonic position that it is in the nation's interests for individual workers be paid less in order to keep inflation low, may still go on strike for better conditions for themselves (Hall, 1973, p.137).

The final audience position is that of the oppositional code. A viewer operating within this audience position understands the inflection inherent in a discourse, but decodes the message in a globally contrary manner, detotalising the message of the preferred code and retotalising the message in an alternative framework of reference. Hall uses the example of a viewer who listens to a discourse on the need to limit wages, but who 'reads' every mention of 'national interest' as 'class interest' (ibid. p.138)

### **Redefining the Encoding/Decoding Model for Interpreting Data Concerning Women Watching Pornography**

In Chapter 2, I established the anti-pornography pro-censorship position as the position that has dominated discourse on debate regarding pornography within feminist responses to the form. This feminist reading interprets pornography as a 'dominant ideology thesis;' where society is thought to be based on gender divisions, and where the dominant gender controls ideological production through ownership and control of the means of producing pornographic discourse.

In the context of my research, this 'dominant ideology thesis' is distinct from the dominant ideology within (particularly male-identified) pornographic texts. According to the codes that

reveal gender-based domination within the form, a 'preferred/dominant' interpretation of pornography takes the form of a 'privileging of male over female sexuality'. Chapter 5 offers a detailed account of the textual codes operating within pornography to this effect.

I have interpreted the 'dominant/hegemonic reading' as an evident privileging of male over female sexuality in the texts, which implies female audiences will *not* read pornography as pleasurable (see Chapter 5). Each group is categorised according to whether they accept, negotiate or oppose the dominant reading of pornography from this basis.

A negotiated reading of pornography in the context of this research, is one where women accept the dominant or preferred encoding that the text privileges male sexuality. However, according to individual logic and experience, these viewers negotiate their responses to agree and identify with some (particularly the already-negotiated 'made-for-women' erotica) representations within pornography.

An oppositional reading of pornography is one where the women read pornography in a contrary way to the dominant position. Therefore, the oppositional position is where women read even male-identified pornography as pleasurable for them, even as they recognise that the textual codes privilege male sexual pleasure in hard-core pornography.

Within each group, discussion of pornography is focused around themes pertinent to the act of watching different forms of pornography/erotica as women. Before examining the themes that my discussion is based on, it is necessary to background my study in relation to relevant issues and previous research within the field of cultural studies.

### **Encoding/Decoding and Ideology**

In the field of cultural studies, ideology *is* the site of political struggle. Traditional conceptions of ideology within cultural studies conceptualised ideology as an all-powerful and deterministic force. More recently Gramsci's theory of 'hegemony,' and post-modern theories that privilege sensation over meaning, have encouraged a retreat from ideology as a determining force (Turner, 1990).

Gramsci's theory of 'hegemony', acknowledges that there are different ideological formations at work in any society, therefore cultural leadership is secured not by domination, but through negotiation with opposing groups, and resulting in genuine accommodation. In this view, popular

culture is both dominated and oppositional, determined and spontaneous. The concept of hegemony accounts for culture as a site of struggle between those with and those without power, thus allowing for the more active position of a viewer whose consent must be won and rewon as long as people's social experience constantly reminds them of their social subordination. Hall's encoding/decoding model is based on communication being a process of negotiation. Although there are dominant meanings within texts, audiences do not necessarily accept those readings, rather they constantly negotiate texts according to alternative frameworks of knowledge.

Pornography operates as an institution of cultural thought, ideologically reproducing as social discourse imagery reflecting dominant thought regarding sexuality. It assumes patriarchal dominance in its construction, a dominance of male sexuality over a passive female sexuality. Even as pornography reproduces social thought regarding sexuality, particularly in the dominance of male sexuality within the texts, pornography is a site of constant ideological struggle. My research examines women as a subjugated audience of pornography, particularly with regards to how women, disempowered by the texts, negotiate the texts from alternative frameworks of reference, proposing different forms of sexual knowledge in their interpretations.

### **Audience and Cultural Studies**

This section on audience places my research within the cultural studies theoretical paradigm through tracing previous studies within the field of audience research in cultural studies.

Whereas resistive reception models document audience autonomy and resistive/redemptive readings of popular texts, theorists such as Livingstone and Morley claim that the text permits multiple readings only in as much as it provides the audience a forum offering a range of moral and cultural positions on an issue. Morley (1992) claims that the affirmative model has a tendency to neglect the political, economic and ideological forces acting upon the construction of texts.

Ang argues that actual audiences consist of "an infinite and ever expanding myriad of dispersed practices and experiences that can never be, and should not be contained in any one system of knowledge" (Ang, 1991, p.155). She proposes audience research that aims at reaching ethnographic understandings; interpretations that look at the ways actual people deal with television in their everyday lives (Ibid. p.165). Ang's ethnographic approach discounts the notion of a 'real' audience, rather arguing in favour of audience research addressing audiencehood as dynamic, where "variability rather than consistency of viewing behaviour is the order of the day"

(Ibid. p.164-5). In terms of seeking understanding about women watching pornography as a subordinated audience, Ang's argument is significant in acknowledging the importance of recognising the diversity in audiences, a diversity that can best be understood from ethnographic research.

Any media text has a potential of meanings, which are activated by different readers according to their social and cultural situations. Each media text inevitably bears the ideology of the capitalist institution that it is produced in. Subcultural or 'resistive' meanings are made in relation to the dominant ideology, and owing to the different relations to the dominant ideological systems, each group will vary according to that relationship. As there is an unequal distribution of power in social relations, meanings arise in part from a political base, which may be the politics of acceptance, rejection or opposition, but in all cases involves negotiation of meaning. Cultural analysis, therefore "can help us to reveal how the (television) text serves as an arena for this struggle over meanings" (Fiske 1992, p.318).

Several authors such as Ien Ang, Janice Radway and David Morley are generating interesting insights into what people 'do' with texts through audience research.

Morley (1981) undertook focus group research into the decodings made by various groups of the popular current affairs show 'Nationwide'. Morley compared group interpretations to one another in order to apply the three ideal type viewer positions posited by Hall; those of dominant, oppositional or negotiated. Morley concludes that all three viewer positions are used by viewers, though often in combination or in inconsistent ways. He found that social class relates to code use, and that viewers vary in how critical or accepting they were of the programme. Morley found that subordinated groups were more likely to take an oppositional stance to the text.

Radway's (1984/5) investigation into readers of popular romance novels looks primarily at the ways women interpret the novels in relation to their social situation. She argues that women form different interpretative communities; thus they 'read' romance novels differently to the way the texts appear. To illustrate, when the heroine in a book acts subserviently, readers remain committed to the idea of her as first described in the book, as independent and strong. Radway asserts primacy to an active reader, acknowledging that the reader is affirmed through her understanding of texts and human actions. However, Radway also acknowledges the institutional practices of romance writing that operate to perpetuate patriarchal ideology:

*"Although this process must be taken into account and attributed to a positive desire to assert the power and capability of the female self, it cannot be overlooked that the fictional world created as its consequence also reinforces traditional female limitations because it validates the dominance of domestic concerns and personal interaction in women's lives.....[readers] therefore inadvertently [justify] as natural the very conditions and their emotional consequences to which [their] reading activity is a response."*

Radway, 1984, p.214

Cross cultural reception to 'Dallas' was the subject of various studies undertaken by Katz and Liebes (Katz & Liebes, 1986; Liebes, 1984; Liebes & Katz 1986; Katz, Iawo & Liebes, 1988). Their research was initially formulated to examine cultural imperialism of American media on other cultures, however they found that in comparing different readings of 'Dallas' in different countries, culture played a major role in how audiences respond to the programme, particularly in the different degrees of 'critical distance' to the text they displayed (Livingstone, 1990, p.48).

Ien Ang undertook a similar study of 'Dallas', using an open-ended methodology to examine viewers' experiences of the programme with Dutch respondents. Ang based her analysis on letters that viewers wrote in response to a magazine advertisement around two key issues: pleasure and ideology (especially feminist). Ang acknowledged that involvement with characters and a sense of 'tragic realism' were key considerations in pleasure for the viewers. Ang argues that owing to the often ambivalent and contradictory responses of many viewers to the programme, the role of the viewer was mainly as a mediator of ideological meanings.

Although Ang's findings point to the interpretative role of the viewer, she doesn't account for larger methodological or theoretical considerations such as the relation between the ideology of mass culture (as alienating and cheap), and the populist ideology (as pleasure-oriented, experience-based) according to Livingstone (1990). Ang does, though, acknowledge gender as relating to domains of everyday perception, offering a feminist/cultural studies perspective on women audiences that moves beyond a notion of a passive unified audience, by looking at the dynamics of pleasure and resistance for a female audience.

Each of these studies has in some way challenged research based solely on texts. However, most audience research within cultural studies has focused on subordinated texts and audiences, neglecting non-traditional audience identifications with media texts, such as women watching

pornography. Perhaps this is owing to pornography's classification as a 'male' genre. Equally it may be argued that cultural studies tends to favour studying texts to which multiple meanings can be assigned, thus the generic rigidity in the structure of pornography appears less interesting.

My research fits into and extends the cultural studies tradition. I extend the encoding/decoding model to include gender (rather than class) as the primary signifier of social meaning in interpreting pornography. I also consider the role of pleasure as a means of resisting patriarchal ideologies manifest in pornography. I interpret responses to the form according to themes that reflect women's own experience and knowledge regarding the realm of sexuality and depictions of sex in our culture.

### **Pornography and Sex Role Stereotyping of Women**

Literature concerning women's experience with pornography, such as that carried out by Charlene Senn (1993) has invariably centred around the derogatory effects of pornography on women, rather than acknowledging women's complicity with and use of pornography themselves. In approaching pornography in terms of the 'pleasures' of the texts, by framing my agenda to debate issues that involve the women in my research specifying what elements they found both pleasurable and offensive, positive and negative in actual texts, I hoped to move beyond harm-based analysis. A further strength of my approach in asking the participants to specify which pleasures and offences existed in the texts, was in realising an emergent self-expression among group participants as they spoke about their fantasies, what images they would like to see, and which images are considered liberating.

Given that gender-role norms, to a large extent, control various aspects of sexual interaction, the fact that women are stereotyped as less "aggressive, independent, objective, dominant, active and worldly than men", (Stockard, J. et al, 1980, p.146) it is not surprising that women are somehow seen as "asexual creatures who dislike sex" ( Assiter, A. et al, 1993, p.16). This form of sex stereotyping, perpetuated by the 'dominant ideology theory' of anti-pornography feminists who appear to "resonate the ancient patriarchal message: 'good girls don't'" limits the possibility of sexual expression for women (Chen, 1992, p.12). Even though the stereotyping of women as passive and non-initiatory exists, my research attempts to challenge these gender assumptions regarding women's sexuality.

### **Justification of Themes in Encoding/Decoding Discussion**

Focus group data is organised into themes relevant to the objectives of my research. The themes I have based my discussion regarding women watching pornography on is therefore factors that



influence decisions regarding what 'pornography' and 'erotica' can be defined as; perceived cultural expectations of women watching pornography; issues of interpretation, identification, and representation in 'made-for-men' and 'made-for-women' examples of pornography; and discussion of possibilities of pleasure in each of the forms of pornography and erotica. Each of these themes, generated from discussing different forms of pornography/erotica, is reflective of areas of audience experience and knowledge that mediates the transmission of meaning in pornographic texts.

Anti-porn theorists have spoken for women in defining what both 'pornography' and erotica means for women. However, each of the groups interpreted 'pornography' according to their own experience and knowledge of sex and sexual imagery. Discussing pornography as a topic depended on working out a definition of both 'pornography' and 'erotica' in the participant's own words, opening up discussion of what textual elements are 'erotic' and 'pornographic' in the texts chosen. Beginning the discussion by defining 'pornography' and 'erotica' in subjective terms according to personal experience, inherently challenges the ascendant position within feminism that pornography inherently (and unequivocally) 'means' violence against women.

The second theme of the discussions is what 'cultural confines' the participants felt affected them, as personal interpretations of pornography and erotica are shaped by cultural expectations concerning pornography, particularly expectations regarding women watching pornography. Group discussion concerning what pornography means in our culture, and what cultural expectations are perceived about women watching pornography revealed varied responses that ranged from 'betraying your feminism' if you were perceived as enjoying porn (group 1); to 'New Zealand society (having) a very 'clear' double standard...men and women don't want women to enjoy pornography (or erotica) because it's just not 'nice' is it?' (group 3). Every group communicated feeling that they were contained in discussing pornography within a social climate that inhibits freely discussing sexual/erotic images.

Following discussion of the cultural climate regarding pornography, the groups discussed questions revolving around issues of interpretation, identification and representation in both male and female-identified examples of pornography. Particular attention was paid to both pornography and erotica in terms of different pleasures that the participants took from the texts

Representation, the way in which an image is constructed to reflect the 'real', refers primarily to the way in which women are both constructed and represented within the text. Each group



interpreted both 'made-for-men' and 'made-for-women' pornography according to the ways they read the encoding of bodies, sexual pleasure and different scenarios of sexual fantasy as representative of 'women' as a gender.

Discussion of identification revolves around each individual 'subject' discussing the relative 'realness' attached to the sexual fantasies and situations depicted, and the different degrees of identification among participants regarding the women performing and the depictions of women's sexuality on-screen.

Engaging with the texts, and formulating responses to textual encodings of gender empowers women to form their own language regarding sexually explicit images. In turn, responding to sexually explicit images on screen opens up the possibilities of pleasure within a culture that has coded sexual pleasure as male, and female sexuality as passive and subordinate. Ascertaining degrees to which the groups felt they identified with the depictions of sexuality, and represented 'women' necessitates a response to pornography based on textual codes. Although the texts privilege male sexuality, even in apparently 'made-for-women' erotica, the women do take pleasure in aspects of pornography that haven't been acknowledged in anti-pornography feminist theory. This is not to argue in favour of a celebration of the liberation that pornography offers, but to forge open the possibility of a distinctly women's pleasure in sexual imagery.

The final theme within each discussion is that of 'pleasure and resistance'. The concept of 'divergence' is important here, as discussing pleasure in pornography develops the encoding/decoding approach to include specific *ways* that women resist patriarchal ideologies in pornography. Pornography as a cultural form is made-over to include possibilities of sexual pleasure for women in the act of interpreting what is in the texts. In responding to pornography in terms of the pleasure of the form, the participants conceive of what form textual 'utopias' of sexual imagery may look like, thereby challenging the textual codes found in both pornography and 'erotica' that link sexual pleasure to "hierarchical polarities of gender.. (that) are never fixed and immutable.. (but are) chronically unstable." Thus, Vance claims, there is potential to subvert this fragile gendered 'difference' that links sexual pleasure and sexual power with masculine domination however repeatedly they occur (Vance, 1994, p.243).

When women watch pornography and engage in debate around images of our identity and the ways that we have been represented, we come to conceive of images of sexuality that reflect a uniquely female sexual agency.

### **The Role of Pleasure and Resistance in Cultural Studies**

Halls' encoding/decoding model marked the shift from text-based media analyses to an idea of an actively interpreting viewer who creates meanings from texts that in turn become part of the communicative process. Hall offers proscribed categories of decoding in terms of three viewer positions; where viewers either negotiate, oppose or accept the dominant or preferred meaning inscribed in the text at production. This is an important starting point for studying the communicative process, but doesn't account for the many frameworks of understanding that forms the basis of negotiation in audience interpretation of texts, such as the different origins of pleasure in viewing texts. This section overviews different cultural studies theorists who have approached the issue of pleasure, and the implications of divergent readings of the same texts.

Livingstone discusses divergence and resistance, arguing that if the text is somewhat open, allowing different interpretations, and leaving sufficient ambiguity; then viewers cognitive involvement with the programme must be analysed in the nature of those interpretations, and in the ways in which interpretations diverge from one another. In undertaking research with 27 'Coronation Street' fans, Livingstone employed multidimensional scaling to find categories of divergence in the different readings of texts that the viewers made. Viewers were shown to respond in 'clusters' that she organised into 'romantics', 'negotiated cynics', 'negotiated romantics' and 'cynics' in their responses to the same story lines. Livingstone discusses her findings in terms of Hall's three viewer positions; arguing that there are problems assigning viewers into clusters of dominant, oppositional and negotiated. She argues that negotiated readings may not necessarily fall between dominant and oppositional readings; but may attempt to reconcile two dominant but contradictory discourses. To illustrate, the 'cynic' category while on the surface presenting an oppositional reading by rejecting the dominant ideological reading of romantic love, accepted the dominant position in their endorsing of a patriarchal father who treats his daughter as property. Livingstone calls for a view of the text where a number of normative positions are encoded, where viewers may select different readings yet still remain within the dominant framework.

Fiske looks at Madonna's appeal to audiences in terms of the ways they negotiate meaning from their social knowledge of the star, and their divergent readings of her appeal for them. Fiske uses the example of 'Madison's gay community' who find attraction in her "campy, playful control of her own image, and in her ability to change that image at will" to illustrate how Madonna consistently parodies stereotypes about images of women and the ways they are constructed (1992, p.316). The 'excess' of Madonna's parodic style, according to Fiske, offers space for resistance to ideologically dominant perceptions of women's behaviour.

According to Fiske (1989, p.56), popular culture forms in reaction from the social allegiances of subordinated people in relation to different forms of power. Pleasures associated with this 'bottom up' power involve 'evasion' (which centre around the body and which tend to cause offence and scandal) and those of 'producing meanings' which centre around social identity and social relations and which operate through semiotic resistance to hegemonic force. The pleasure of popular culture are pleasures of 'micropolitics' where subordinated identities resists, offends or evades disempowering, dominant meanings. Fiske argues that in order to be popular, a text must 'have points of relevance to a variety of readers in a variety of social contexts, it must be 'polysemic in itself' and distributed by media whose modes of consumption are equally open and flexible (Ibid. P.141).

In women's readings of pornography, meaning escapes the confines of texts. Women audiences, who demonstrate pleasure in both 'evasion' and 'producing meaning' in watching pornographic texts, do so in the context of a genre that offers a dominant reading that excludes women's identification. Therefore, in the case of pornography, polysemy is activated at the level of audience interpretations of the text.

Jenkins (1995) claims that although readers play an active role in defining the texts they watch, they do so within a cultural and historically specific context which shapes their access to different discourses and generic models of decoding material, in relation to institutional powers that may satisfy or fail to satisfy audience desires, and in regards to texts that may facilitate or resist different audience interpretations.

In terms of analysing women's responses to pornography, allowing for divergence in response to the text is central to my approach. Textual analysis is an essential starting point to analysing decoding practices, particularly in relation the ways that gender is encoded. Although I see encoding/decoding as a viable theory in terms of understanding the dynamic of communication at each stage in the communicative process; I also acknowledge the fact that viewers are resourceful, and make sense of text in ways that I can't conceive of. I have therefore organised my research findings in terms of themes that concentrate on exploring the ways that pornography has been coded. How women both conceive of pleasure in erotica/pornography, and how they visualise pleasure in representation and identificatory forms is crucial in defining a positive and active attitude toward sexuality and sexual imagery for women.

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## Chapter 4

### METHODOLOGY: THE STUDY

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#### **Experimental Design**

Media analysis of pornography has essentially failed to give an account of how women audiences make sense of and 'read' pornography as a text. Although within the cultural studies paradigm, many studies of women audiences of 'women's genres' such as soap operas and women's magazines have been undertaken, their focus has failed to account for the fact that women do watch pornography and can take various pleasures in it. My research focuses on the 'active processing' of pornographic texts by women in four focus groups consisting of 13 participants, and in so doing I look at pornography from a cultural studies perspective. This chapter outlines the practical parameters of my research design, including the relevance of focus groups to my methodology.

#### **Focus Groups**

Focus groups are small groups of research participants who discuss issues relevant to the researchers aims. These groups are thought to replicate real social interactions, with individuals who share common identities or interests discussing relevant topics. My research consisted of four groups of who shared common identities and/or interests: a professional group; a university educated group; a community-based women's motorcycle group; and a university women's activist group.

Cultural studies theorists have employed a variety of ethnographic methods to research 'audience', including semi-structured and/or in depth interviews. In this context, small group interviews provide a unique forum to discuss specific media products. Cultural theorists such as Morley (1980, 1986), Silverstone (1985) and Radway (1987) have argued in favour of the importance of audience research of media being an active, social process. Focus groups allow for exploration into how different social groups actively create meaning from texts within specific social and cultural contexts.

Practically, focus groups are less costly and time consuming than one on one interviews and they provide a large amount of data that can be interpreted variously; from fine grain discourse analysis and semiotics to more thematic social and cultural analyses. In the context of media studies, focus group interviews have value in that the group functions 'dynamically' which benefits both the researcher (in that he or she plays the dominant role in determining what is discussed), and the group participants (in that group members, in their commitment to gain a shared understanding of the structures that dominate their lives). For both, focus groups can be empowering.

Potential for 'empowerment' in focus group research was evident among the groups involved in this research. Many of the women had never openly discussed pornography, and the group participation provided the first forum for discussing sexuality and sexual fantasy that they had experienced. In particular, one group reported relief at 'confessing' to watching pornography and enjoying it in a safe environment. Tony, a schoolteacher in this group reported her desire to make pornography!: 'I want to make my own - I do!' The desire to speak openly about representations of sexuality was evident in all the groups. Some participants enjoyed the freedom to critique the offensive construction of pornography. Debating in the forum of the small group where the participants all knew each other gave effect to personal agency in debating about the representations of women's sexuality in pornography: 'the film-makers pass off their own desires as women's desires!' (Justine).

Burgess et al claim that focus groups replicate *real* social interactions as far as possible in research design, even as they admit such an objective is inevitably unnatural to a point. Burgess, Harrison and Maitney (1991) undertook focus group study with two groups of audiences of a documentary on nature conservation. These researchers report that all members of the group expressed positive feelings about their participation. They claim that the group rapidly develops trust and intimacy which leads to "all it's members.... gain(ing) insights by exploring beyond their immediate reaction to issues, hearing views they might not normally encounter and thereby recognising and challenging contradictions in their own and other's positions" (Ibid. p.503-504). This fact was evidenced in my own research where initial responses were often challenged resulting in participants considering alternative views. The feminist group debated, for example, what response 'a feminist conference' may have to a women admitting to watching pornography for pleasure:

Zona: (the pleasure factor) is 'not acknowledged though because they (feminists) see it is that pornography is objectifying women so how can you gain pleasure from that?'

Justine: 'part of the problem'

Andrea: '..and obviously there's something really shaky if you're actually watching something like that'

Zona: 'but that's a really simplistic view of it'

Andrea: 'are you gonna stand up in a women's conference and admit that you watch pornography - yeah yeah right!(sarcastically)

...Zona: 'well I would if there was actually something decent!'

Andrea: 'would you? - I'd be scared I'd actually be (lynched?) yeah! ...I wouldn't feel safe about it, no I wouldn't'

Bertrand et al (1992) offer further advantages to focus groups as methodology, claiming they provide more in-depth insights into how the populations feels on specific issues and, more importantly, why they feel this way. Groups also provide information or opinions that the researcher may not have anticipated, but are important to them as an audience. These researchers claimed practical advantages to focus-groups: they can be conducted in a short space of time within a limited budget and with a small staff. Focus groups also allow for researchers with little or no formal training in the social sciences, and they produce easily digestible data as results are most often presented in narrative form. Bertrand et al claim particular advantage to researchers in using focus groups "when they are exploring new approaches.... provid(ing) a wide range of ideas and opinions in a relatively short period of time" (Ibid. p.199). I found focus groups, though difficult to organise, enormously beneficial in this sense. In the space of a few hours each group generated many pages of discussion of personal and group debate regarding pornography.

Focus group research is then an obvious and attractive option to studying women as an audience of pornography. Little audience research had been undertaken on the topic of women watching pornography. Much of the research that has been undertaken by feminist theorists has been consistently biased with regards to proving a link between pornography and 'harm to women'. I therefore recognised the need to provide a safe environment for viewing the material and the need to allow for divergent opinions regarding the relative pleasure in pornography. Focus groups provided an ideal forum for these aims.

### **Consciousness Raising as a Research Objective**

In focus group interactions, the feminist concept of 'consciousness-raising' is seen as integral to the research process, as a "systematic attempt to break through ideological assumptions." (Brown, 1990, p.14). Stanley and Wise (1983) suggest that while 'consciousness raising' has



traditionally been conceptualised in terms of 'feminist consciousness' being 'true' and other consciousnesses being false; feminist 'consciousness raising' is best thought of not as a linear process from a 'false' to a 'true' consciousness, but rather as a circular process whereby 'feminist consciousness' is comprised of varied and equally valid individual experience. An understanding of women's oppression emerges according to Stanley and Wise through "understanding and analysing everyday life"(Ibid. p.135).

While I recognise that consciousness-raising is integral to further understanding of women's interactions with pornography, my research is not concerned with educating women as to a 'correct' or 'true' consciousness, but with recognising the importance of validating all women's experiences. I found that participants, in talking about their experiences of pornography realise the forms of control that were in place regarding the available images of sexuality within the pornography industry which fail to depict sexually assertive women on-screen, and in various ways that their lives are controlled by traditional notions of women's sexuality, and social norms regarding how women are expected to behave. 'Consciousness raising' in the context of my research provided an opportunity for women to feed into the wider discourse regarding sexuality.

### **Defending Focus Group Validity**

Focus groups as qualitative methodology offer the ideal forum to better understand the attitudes, beliefs, practices and values of a women audience of pornography. Despite its obvious strengths, both the applicability and validity of the focus group approach has come under criticism.

Defending the validity of the focus group approach can be organised into weak and strong responses: strong responses qualify the relevance and applicability of the critique itself; while weak responses qualify the scope of focus-group validity. While accepting that there are basic problems of representation and reliability in focus group research, weak responses qualify the claim that focus groups can't be used as a basis of statistical inference only owing to inadequate sampling and funding.

Mechanical conceptions of media effects give way to social, semiotic and diffusion based media processes in strong responses to focus group criticism, where emphasising the social nature of communication avoids the often reductionist social science research of individuals. A further basis of a strong response to defending focus groups is to claim that the aims of reliability and validity in social science research is inextricably linked to quantitative methodologies, and therefore do not apply to focus groups. However this response discounts the fact that in the



context of groups discussion, group members act as if conducting an inquiry, thereby providing reliability checks on pragmatic norms that don't exist in quantitative research (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996, p.90).

In groups it is common for individual identities to be submerged within the group, where the group exerts pressure on individuals to conform to group norms or consensuses about issues (Paulus, 1989, p.6). In debating often contentious issues surrounding pornography, such as whether 'made-for-women' erotica represents women's sexuality more positively than what was evident in hard-core, many participants disagreed with one another, and often an unpopular or difficult to assimilate opinion was challenged on various fronts. However, challenges seldom caused participants to vary the original opinion, although I believe that there were responses withheld owing to prevailing opinion within groups. Internal 'reliability checks' were evident in conducting this research, where challenging divergent opinions in the groups often yielding fascinating results. Conflicting responses to hard-core in group 2 illustrate:

Kelly: (in women's 'erotica') 'you can get off on what their faces are doing and what their hands are doing instead of just genitalia, ..makes the whole thing animalistic - that whole thing I was just thinking of dogs rutting'

Carol: 'But that's what goes on - that's what happens when you're making love!

Even as focus groups have limitations, they provided the ideal forum to deconstruct the processes involved and concerns of women in watching pornography. Focus groups also provided a safe environment within which pornography as a highly contentious media form, could be examined by women. To this end, I attempted to focus on inquiry about *ways* that the women were interpreting the texts rather than debating the validity of the texts themselves.

Although the dynamics of a group situation can limit responses, I found that participants maintained accountability through challenging one another. Groups also generated findings and discussions that I hadn't considered regarding women watching pornography. For example, although I personally found any distinction between 'erotica' and 'pornography' to be dubious, many participants thought the distinction to be relevant and important, even though each group employed different criteria in defining the distinction. As a methodology, focus groups were the most suitable forum for discussing women's responses to pornography in a safe environment.

### **Collection of Focus Group Data**

Focus group interviews consisted of questions regarding pornography, pleasure and sexuality. Each group began with a viewing session of selected film and television examples of 'pornography' and 'erotica' (see Chapter 5 for an explanation and justification of the chosen texts). Group discussion according to my discussion guide (see appendix A) ensued, involving each group responding to the texts viewed. These discussions were audio taped and fully transcribed on paper according to the themes described earlier in Chapter 3. They are:

1. Defining elements that influence whether a text is received as 'pornography' or 'erotica'.
2. Cultural expectations regarding women watching pornography.
3. Personal and group interpretations of textual codes in both male-identified and women-identified examples of 'pornography/erotica' according to the degree of *identification* with sexual action present in the texts; and the degree to which the participants felt that the text *represented* 'women's' sexuality (including personal sexuality). Chapter 5 outlines the codes in 'made-for-men' and 'made-for-women' pornography that signify the intended audience is male and female respectively.
4. Looking at different forms of '*pleasure*' the participants found in the texts, and the ways that women 'resisted' cultural proscriptions about women watching pornography, particularly with relation to hard-core, male-identified pornography. This section includes how participants conceived of a pleasurable pornographic/erotic text.

### **Organisation of Focus Group Material**

Bertrand et al (1992 p.23-25) have suggested three different ways of analysing focus group information. Following data collection on paper, my analysis was synthesised according to the suggested 'margin coding' approach where the analyst establishes a set of codes that refer to themes identified upon a preliminary reading of the transcripts.

The first stage of my analysis was to report participant responses on paper from transcribed audio tapes. Following transcription on paper, the data was cut and pasted according to the general themes of *definitions*, *cultural expectations*, *identification*, *representation*, and *pleasure and resistance*. This allowed a relatively quick data sorting process for discussing relevant issues that were raised within each group regarding the general themes, and for comparisons between groups. The 'margin coding' approach formed an accurate and relevant basis for discussion of the themes.

According to the evident dominant encoding of pornographic hard-core, male sexuality precludes female pleasure in pornographic texts. From this basis, focus group responses to the themes set out were grouped according to whether each group agreed with, negotiated or opposed hard-core pornography as precluding pleasure for women. Chapter 6 therefore comprises of a 'preferred reading' where both male and female-identified pornography is rejected as being devoid of pleasure for the group; Chapter 7 comprises responses of the two groups that negotiated aspects of pleasure in both hard-core and 'made-for-women' pornography; and Chapter 8 comprises of an oppositional reading of the dominant textual as women in this group agreed that pornography is pleasurable for them.

### **Participants**

To attain participants for the study, I went through both professional organisations and personal contacts. The aim of the groups was to get a good mix between groups, thus I attempted to get groups that were fairly homologous. They were:

*group 1:* A group of university women's activists. Most participants in this group had not seen hard-core pornography before.

*group 2:* A group of (university educated) acquaintances who agreed to participate. Participants had some experience of hard-core pornography, though none had watched a pornography film before.

*group 3:* A group of professional women. All three participants in this group had watched pornography before and two of the three regularly watched it with their partners.

*group 4:* A group of women in a women's motorcycle association. Two of the three participants had watched pornography before the group. One woman watched pornography regularly as porn films feature as part of the 'bikey' culture in which she circulates.

Group 1 and 4 were contacted by phone, the contact number secured by asking Citizens Advice Bureau about women's groups in the area. I contacted several groups, but the only groups who had sufficient members and the desire to participate were group 1 and 4. I phoned the leaders of these groups and sent them an information sheet with details about the research (see appendix C). When the group next met, the leaders asked for members who were willing to take part. Members of the groups who wanted to participate were contacted by phone, and were sent an information sheet individually. I notified each participant of the venue, time and place of the focus group of which they were a part by phone and by sending a letter. Groups 2 and 3 were contacted through personal acquaintances. I asked my acquaintances for people they knew who may be interested, and followed up those people myself.

The study consisted of four groups, with three or four participants in each, comprising a total of 13 participants who ranged in age from 21 to 41. I organised the groups to meet at Massey campus at different times during weekend hours. Groups began with participants being shown the films/television pre-edited video clips on a large screen 50" television in a viewing/discussion room. Each session took around 2-3 hours, with the video-viewing time comprising approximately 2 hours, and the audio-taped discussions ranging in time from 45 minutes to 1.5 hours. Discussions were transcribed off the tapes onto paper where I literally cut and paste the responses according to evident themes. There were approximately 40 pages of typed transcribed data generated from these discussions. My research agenda informed my discussion guide questions (in appendix A), which revolved around the issues of defining what consists of 'pornography', issues of identification, representation and pleasure. Each participant was asked to fill out an individual question sheet at home and send it to me upon completion (see appendix B). These questions were very similar in nature to the questions discussed in the groups, and were considered as a supplement to group results, as group coercion could not be thought to influence these results.

Ethical considerations were of utmost importance considering the sensitive nature of pornography, considering that participants were required to watch various examples of hard-core pornography. Privacy and informed consent were important issues, and were dealt with by:

1. Ensuring all women who wanted to participate had read the information sheet which included a warning about watching explicitly sexual material. Participants were also informed of their rights in participation (see appendix C).
2. Prior to each session, a consent form was read and signed by all participants (see appendix D).
3. Also prior to each session, I verbally informed the group of their right to decline to take part in the group at any stage, or to withdraw from the group at any point, and of their right to request that either the audio tape of the interview (following the viewing) or the video tape of the excerpts be turned off at any time. I assured them that it was important that they feel safe in the group, and that if they wanted to leave, they were free to do so without any negative consequences. I also asked specifically that the group members refrain from mentioning anyone's name in the group for the privacy of all participants.

Having outlined the practical aspects of my research design, the following chapter overviews pornography in terms of its function and representations within capitalism. The chosen texts are

then analysed semiotically in order to establish the codes that signify the texts as either 'made-for-men' or 'made-for-women'. Establishing factors within the process of production forms the encoding part of Hall's communication circuit, as Hall's model of communication depends on both the encoding of the texts and audience interpretations of these encodings. The textual encoding of pornography reveal it as a genre that relies heavily on repeatedly contrasting women's 'difference' in order to render the text meaningful. Semiotic analysis establishes the framework from which participants of my research interpret the texts.

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## Chapter 5

### SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

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Pornography is subject to change and transformation, reflecting and contributing to sexual discourse that forms social attitudes. This chapter on semiotic analysis traces the historical and social development of pornography as an institution, and establishes the role and significance of semiotic analysis to studying pornographic texts. I then overview and justify the use of each of the clips chosen, which are in turn analysed in terms of the codes that mark them as 'made-for-men' or 'made-for-women'. It is evident that in 'made-for-men', and (despite codes that attempt to indicate the opposite) in 'made-for-women' pornography, the encoding of sexual pleasure privileges male sexuality. It is from within this framework that audience decodings occur which don't necessarily comply with popular expectations regarding women watching pornography.

### **History of Pornography - Cultural, Social and Historical Developments**

Pornography doesn't exist in a cultural void, but rather reflects social and cultural developments within society. Before relaying the content of the texts used, and analysing the various codes present in the texts that mark them as gender-specific, I would like to briefly trace the way in which pornography has developed as cultural phenomena; both reflective of cultural/historical developments in social discourse concerning sexual representations and part of the communicative process that contributes to the creation of social discourse regarding sexuality. This involves analysing the ways that representation within pornography has developed within capitalism, and the ways that pornography operates ideologically to reproduce meaning regarding sexual representation.

As discussed earlier in Chapter 1, Gertrude Kosh (1992, p.36-7) argues the success of pornography expresses cultural-historical development, with modern pornography reflecting the world of machines and a modern subjugation of the body that suffers from want in the midst of material plenty. Pornography reflects the corresponding historical moment in which it is produced, thus the longevity and repetition of modern pornographic texts reflects the modern ethic of capitalist culture - production on demand and subjugation of individuality. In the text



this is evident in constant sexual action where the actors are never seen to tire of mechanically repetitive sex.

Pornography reflects the historical context in which it is produced. David James (1989) claims that one of the most influential factors determining the way sexually explicit material has developed, is the industrialisation of the field of sexuality, combined with an extensive invasion of the private sphere that occurred in the sixties. This 'invasion' largely took the form of the sexual revolution of the 60's, where the traditional reproductive function of sex (within the traditional family) gave way to the non-utilitarian function of sex as 'pleasure'. The process of this change 'all but disintegrated' the traditional family (Ibid. p.340).

1969 to 1972 saw the rise of the anti-pornography movement within feminism, where sexually explicit representations were seen to be pivotal practice within patriarchy. Segal (1994, p.62) cites Snitow and other socialist feminists who claim that it was no accident that the prioritising of pornography as a political issue for feminism came in the eighties, as the defeats of (in the U.S.) state funded abortion, and the new right attack on the Equal Rights Amendment caused the women's movement to be less concerned with wider issues of equality and more concerned "with the narrower, defensive politics linking sex and violence". James (1989) asserts that the movements erroneous link between violence and pornography has inhibited consideration of sexual representation per se, and the insistent misogyny of practices within pornography has insured that feminist interaction with it has taken the form of arguing in terms of the actual historical relations between men and women (Ibid. p.339-340). The historical form of anti-pornography politics as reactionary still remains dominant in feminist discourse regarding pornography as a cultural form.

James argues that pornography, as a vocabulary of the representation of sexuality within culture, cannot be separated from the production of modes of sexuality. James argues that three distinct modes of production produced three distinct modes of sexual representation in: the stag film; 35mm films made for general release by major studios; and 35mm 'art' or 'exploitation' films that included female nudity. 'Nudie' exploitation films became melodramas exploring violence and sexuality and genetic mutations replaced the nudity as the cinema's potential for transgression was explored. As cinema was explored in terms of it's transgressive potential, and European imports showing in art-house theatres featured increasing sexual explicitness, full-length features such as *Behind the Green Door* (1972) and *The Devil in Miss Jones* (1973) included graphic sexual displays. So too, did the 'stag' films evolve, from purely underground and illegal 16mm



films to full-length 'adult films'. What Williams posits as pornography 'speaking sex' to a modern audience was carried to its logical conclusion with home video 8mm release of 'beaver' films. This pornography served no other function than to frame sexual display.

In place of a clearly distinguishable studio, art or stag film, sexuality within film became transformed by industrialisation, 'recolonised' by the forces that made its autonomy first possible. The potential of sexually explicit images to transgress and challenge social and sexual norms was impeded by the process of capitalism. The Widespread liberal acceptance of pornography signalled pornography's impotence to this end, pre-empting any authentic negation of sexual norms that pornography may potentially challenge. Invoking the legitimate feature film, and in reflecting traditions of the underground mode, *Deep Throat* (pr., Gerard Damiano, U.S., 1972), argues James, was a crossover into mainstream cinema that offered subversive potential as it considered both the deep contradictions within representations of sexuality in western culture, and the role of psychoanalysis in explaining sexual behaviours.

During her search for sexual fulfilment in orgasm, Linda Lovelace (the protagonist of *Deep Throat*), discovers (with the help of her doctor) that her clitoris is located in her throat. Thus, while offering a female protagonist who reaches sexual fulfilment on the one hand, the film simultaneously invokes the male pleasure of fellatio. The failure of future films to explore sexuality in terms other than as a sexual economy following the mainstream success of cross-over films such as *Deep Throat* reflect, according to James, the "shift from manufacturing to information industries." As sexuality is liberated from reproduction, it is recolonised by capitalism, reflecting the modes of production where the sexual is "privileged as the sign of pleasure and possession" (Ibid. p.340).

Andrew Ross claims that the conditions of consumption of pornography, in providing a fit between the set of images it can offer, and an 'individual libidinal economy', generates a desire for something more exact. Pornography's success is therefore attributable to its creation of desire for more - a staple of the capitalist economy. To argue, however, that pornography is an institutionalised capitalist organisation of pleasure in the form of a simple commodity fix planned to increase demand and profit is only half of the equation; it must also intersect with needs and desires already present in society (Ibid. p.202).

Ross claims that conditions of the general ideology of consumption have changed also, as well as conditions that affect popular change within this ideology. He traces the development of

discretionary income in the post-war period that created a change in ethics - from the frugality and restraint of the 'nineteenth century producer ethic' to 'a controlled form of libertinism', where (by the Sixties), consumer capitalism created new needs that it could not contain through established channels of consent. Therefore, a new range of pleasures was permitted in order to better control and contain mass culture (Ibid. p.202). Creation of new sexual identities and subjects under late capitalism were forged as much in new commercialised sites of courtship as in 'the abstract body politic'. Simultaneously, the marketplace contained these new sexual identities and desires making it easier to contain and regulate them. According to Ross, the 'unholy triumvirate' of sex, drugs and rock'n'roll, complement free market culture produces a culture where all demands, desires and pleasures are legitimate (Ibid. p.203).

Pornography, having cornered the market on sexual representations within society, acts to recolonise pleasure. While pursuing the women's market, the industry has come to address the issues of representation of women's pleasure and desire in 'made-for-men' 'erotica'. Efforts within the pornography industry to capture the women's market, reflecting what Ross calls the "latest phase in the history of pornography's bid for respectability", have attempted to reconstitute images of sexuality in pornography from a women's perspective (Ibid. p.172). Unfortunately, though, even in the creation of new sexually explicit material, pleasure is reconstituted within existing structures of fantasy and gender relations, thus the issue of ideological, gender-defined power must be addressed.

In examining the content of the chosen clips, and in the textual decodings that follow in terms of the codes employed in relaying gender-specific pleasures, it becomes clear that within the organisation of pornography, sexual meaning is generated through gendered difference. Pornography is a 'sign system' based on a patriarchal ordering of sexuality that perpetuates 'myths' about women's sexuality, relying on the perpetuation of these myths to give it meaning. Semiotic analysis of the texts shown to the focus groups is necessary in order to frame the constrictions that audience decodings occur within.

## **Background to Textual Analysis**

### **Semiotics**

Cultural studies articulates the text as a site where cultural meanings are accessible to an audience, rather than a privileged object of study in its own right. Where the emphasis in meaning creation is visual, a tool of analysis that relates to the codes and conventions established within

our culture is needed. Thus semiotics, the study of 'signs' is a useful methodological tool for examining the cultural specificity of a 'sign'.

A 'sign' must have a physical form, must refer to something other than itself, and it must be recognised as doing so to other users of the sign system. Thus in pornography, a staple of the generic form is for a 'cum-shot' to accentuate the man's pleasure in sex; the cum-shot however also signifies the fact that the focus is on the man's pleasure. Although the woman is present in the act of sex, in traditional pornography, she is never seen to orgasm. The 'cum-shot' also signifies the 'proof' of pleasure - the sexual act can be taken as real, unfaked pleasure for the male actor and by association, the male spectator. The sign system refers to all codes present in a text; thus music, gesture, clothing, actions, and photographic images are included in semiotic analysis.

Selecting and combining signs in relation to the codes and conventions established in our culture determines to a large extent how they are read by an audience. A further proponent of semiotics is the way in which social meanings attach themselves to signs, which in turn become part of the larger sign system "in a chain of signification of ascending complexity and cultural specificity" (Turner, 1990, p.19). Barthes (cited in Turner) names the attachments of cultural associations and social knowledge with signified 'myths' that operate similarly to those of primitive societies, to 'explain' our world for us (Ibid. p.19). Thus pornography as a 'sign system' refers to a patriarchal (male dominated) ordering of sexuality that perpetuates 'myths' about women's sexuality in particular. Pornography is part of the larger 'sign system' in which the patriarchal privileging of masculine sexuality is evident.

The semiotician Volosinov's influence is clear in relation to cultural studies appropriation of semiotics. He argues that the prime determinant of the sign is the social context of its use, and not its relationship to other signs in the structure of a sign system. (cited in Allen, 1992, p.299). This concept of 'multiaccentuality', where the sign may be appropriated by various social groups is an important feature encoding/decoding, as the same text can be read in variant ways according to the social context in which they are viewed. Where women may negotiate social discourse (contexts and experiences) with textual discourse, the possibility of 'variant readings' of texts occurs.

Social and ideological domination is seen to work where homogeneity and the construction of social difference takes place through limiting meanings present in a sign (Fiske, 1992, p.301). It is never possible, however to fix the meaning of any sign and to predict the ways that a sign will

be interpreted or appropriated by audiences in a different context. Fiske claims that although it is difficult to describe the complex relationship of different social groups to the dominant ideology, they can all be placed on a scale that ranges from acceptance of to opposition to the dominant ideology (Ibid. p.298).

Reader-oriented theories recognise that in both theory and practice, a unique, fixed and bounded meaning can't lie inherently 'in' a text as readers make very different but equally meaningful readings of the same text. Livingstone cites Iser:

*"The work itself cannot be identical with the text or with its actualisation but must be situated somewhere between the two. It must inevitably be virtual in character, as it cannot be reduced to the reality of the text or the subjectivity of the reader."*

Livingstone 1990, p.39

Multiaccentuality allows for 'ethnographic audience research' where audiences are studied in relation to how they use media as part of their social experience and therefore themselves. Operating in opposition to 'screen theory' where theorists employ a combination of approaches (psychoanalysis, structuralism, Marxism and semiotics), ethnographic audience research asserts the heterogeneity of audiences, and allows that social discourse negotiates with media discourses in a variety of ways (Ibid. p.300). In the focus groups textual meaning was negotiated according to different frameworks of knowledge and experience of pleasure; demonstrating a contestation of the dominant ideological encoding of the texts by the subordinated audience. Social discourse was found to be in constant negotiation with textual discourse in audience responses. This research acknowledges both the constraints of the texts in limiting meaning, while still allowing for active interpretation of the signs by the focus groups.

According to Fiske, all texts are polysemic to a certain extent, for a structured heterogeneity of the audience requires a corresponding structured heterogeneity of meanings in the text. In the case of pornography, however, polysemy is activated at the level of audience interpretations of the text as women take different meanings from the dominant encoded meanings. Women portray pleasure in both 'evasion' of the dominant encoding of pornography as a privileging of male pleasure, and at the level of 'producing meaning', demonstrating what Willis calls a sense of 'rebellion' in insisting on aspects of women's sexuality that is a male preserve (Cited in Ross, 1989, p.190). Even as women are shown to resist dominant encodings evident in pornography, it is important to note as Jenkins (1995 p.265) claims, resistance is not, " a sufficient response to dissatisfaction with the images currently in circulation....(as) resistant reading risks becoming a catch-all solution for the problems within popular culture". Present need for ideological criticism

and the need for subordinated social groups to receive representation within the media may be ignored by theorists who only 'celebrate' resistance to hegemony.

In the context of defining the pornographic texts that I have chosen to show the audience, it is essential to refer through codes in the text to see at the positioning of the intended audience as a gendered subject, and to examine to levels of ideology at work for women viewers of pornography. While there is room for divergent opinion, it is important to acknowledge that divergence in interpretation exists against the dominant social thought that women refuse to watch pornography, an ideology that discounts women's active participation and pleasure from pornography as a cultural form.

## **Textual Analysis**

### **Justification of Textual Choices**

As Hall's model leans heavily Marxist and structuralist assumptions, it has limitations in dealing with the notion of pleasure in mass culture. By adapting Hall's encoding/decoding model to focus-group interpretations of women watching pornography, I explore the implications of pleasure from decodings of texts by audiences thus shifts the focus of Hall's model to deal with localities of audience interpretations, in order to demonstrate that even as encoding/decoding privileges textual analysis, meaning escapes textuality.

Livingstone (1990, p.63) outlines aspects of texts that need to be identified: the role of context; levels of textual meaning; rhetorical devices; the role of genre; cultural codes of gender, authority, class; modes of address and preferred ideological readings. Textual analysis defines the parameters within which decodings will operate (Hall, 1973, p.135).

In order to examine the way that 'text' is encoded in pornography, I refer through the codes present to the encoding of gender as a cultural form. Semiotic analysis of the textual codes is undertaken in order to identify the privileging of male sexuality in 'made-for-men' pornography, and ostensibly women's sexuality in 'couples' and 'made-for-men' 'erotica.'

Both *Baywatch* (dir./pr., David Hasslehoff), and *Basic Instinct* (dir., Paul Verhoven, U.S., 1992) clips were included in the selection shown to the groups as they can both be considered 'soft-core', or 'erotica'. Codes evident in *Baywatch* point to a privileging of masculine sexuality; mimicking the codes found in pornography particularly in camera focus on the women's bodies

and the fact that most women acting in *Baywatch* look remarkably similar to women in hard-core pornography. *Basic Instinct* can be defined as 'erotica', according to the codes of the film where (in terms of sexual pleasure) the female protagonist is invested with sexual power. Both *Baywatch* and *Basic Instinct* were chosen as texts that were both mainstream and controversial in their depiction of women's sexuality. In choosing these texts, I hoped to generate debate about these sexually suggestive depictions of mainstream texts in terms of where in the spectrum of 'soft-core' to 'hard-core' they can be classified. In particular, defining 'pornography' becomes unclear and often subjective in discussing 'soft-core' evident in texts such as these.

The women in the groups often clearly distinguished between 'pornography' and 'erotica' according to notions of perceived equality in depicting sexual activity, and the relative activity of the women in initiating sexual action. Erotica was viewed in terms of personal preference which often coincided with the presence of codes that privilege women's sexuality in the texts.

Both *Sex II* (dir., Michael Ninn, U.S.) and *Geheime Traum* (dir., Harry S. Morgan, pr., Carol Lynn, Ger.) were chosen on the basis that they included the classic codes of male-identified pornography, and are 'hard-core' in their explicit depictions of sexual activity. In terms of popularity, both of these films represented the most prevalent form of pornography found in video outlets in New Zealand. *Deep Throat* (dir., Gerard Damiano, U.S., 1972) was included as it is considered a pornographic classic, and as it has various elements that suggest the subversive potential of pornography that are absent from later hard-core feature films.

*Sacred Sex II* (dir./pr., Cynthia Connop) was chosen as a good example of 'couples' 'erotica', which reflects an increased demand for women-identified 'erotica'. Candida Royalle's clip *Three Daughters* (dir./pr., Candida Royalle, U.S., 1986) was also chosen as a women-identified example of 'erotica'. Both male-identified and women-identified examples were interpreted according to whether participants within the focus groups felt the texts represented 'women's sexuality', whether they individually identified with the images of sex on screen or not, and on the merit of whether the films succeeded in providing adequate figures of representation and thus the possibility of pleasure.



## Overview of Films

### Soft Core/Erotica - Basic Instinct and Baywatch

#### Baywatch

The *Baywatch* clip begins with a mirror scene where three women lifeguards who are standing behind a table are approached by their reflections (fantasy projections) dressed as Charlie's angels. The 'angels' stand opposite the corresponding 'real' lifeguard, and talk to the women they are identical to 'C.J.' the lifeguard is 'Jill' the angel; 'Caroline's' reflection is 'Kelly' and 'Stephanie's', 'Sabrina'.

The Charlie's Angels music backgrounds the glamorous angels entrance. Asked by the lifeguards if they are 'qualified'; Stephanie says 'college swim team and CPR training'; Kelly: 'advanced first aid and paramedics expertise' and Jill 'licence to perform open heart surgery' at which point she laughs prettily at her joke. Jill (the 'angel') then shifts the conversation to how she always wanted to be a lifeguard and had always fantasised about it. Her reflection C.J. claims that she always wanted to be a private eye.

After holding a brief conversation with the lifeguards at the desk, the 'angels' prepare to dress undercover as lifeguards, preening themselves in the women's changing room and discussing the various merits of which lifeguard they liked most and why. 'Stephanie' comments that 'Sabrina' is obviously the smart one; Kelly thinks Caroline is 'adorable' and Jill claims that 'C.J. could be such a pretty girl' if she learned to do her hair. Sabrina proceeds to make plans about how to capture the criminal; and the other two women talk about using their looks to catch men. They each offer their wisdom on how 'Jack Ripley' is dangerous: Sabrina claims that he is 'cunning, clever and worst of all violent'; Kelly says he is 'cunning, cruel and worst of all deadly' and Jill argues 'he is maniacal, irrational and worst of all handsome'. Sabrina comments that Jack Ripley is insane owing to a 'performance of Rich Little' whose celebrity impersonations sent him 'over the edge'. The trio then discuss the best way to capture the criminal; ending the discussion with a contrived pose mimicking the Charlie's Angels classic trio stance.

#### Basic Instinct

Sharon Stone and Michael Douglas dance erotically in a fashionable night-club, with Sharon Stone's girlfriend looking on. The scene cuts to the couple undressing back in Stone's apartment, moving to implied sex, although genitals are edited out. A variety of cuts, including the reflection off the ceiling mirror show the couple in various sexual positions. Both cunnilingus and fellatio



is implied, but again, close-up shots of genitals are omitted. The mood of the scene is enhanced with intense music and apparent mutual arousal evidenced by the couple's heavy breathing, moaning and eager groping.

As the sex progresses, Stone rakes Douglas's back with her fingernails, then moves to a straddling position. As she moves toward orgasm, and Douglas is weakened by desire, she ties each hand with handily available cotton ties. Following tying him up, she rocks in tumultuous pleasure back and forth, until her orgasm, when she suddenly lurches forward. This scene mimics the opening scene where a blonde woman, who we think is Stone, lurches forward during sex, and violently murders her lover by repeatedly stabbing him in the face with an ice axe. It is implied that both Stone and Douglas reach a shattering mutual orgasm. The sex is 'hot'.

## **Pornography Made-for-Men**

### **Deep Throat**

Two women are sitting outdoors beside a pool. One woman (Linda Lovelace) explains to her flatmate that no 'bells' go off for her when she has sex, and that even though she enjoys sex she is left with a feeling of disappointment afterward. The flatmate devises a plan where she advertises for willing men to try to fulfil Linda. They arrive and are given a number. The scene then shifts from Linda in various sexual positions in one room to her flatmate in various sexual positions with different men in another. There are several close-up shots of intercourse and frequent shots of the women receiving cunnilingus and performing fellatio on the men. There are several 'cum' or 'money' shots where the man ejaculates somewhere on the women's body (including in her mouth.) The music is groovy seventies music that complements the action with humour; as the music gurgles the men are ejaculating, and the tone of the film is considerably lightened by the 'fun' music.

Following the sex marathon all the men are exhausted and lay on the couch as Linda's flatmate tries to convince them to have another go, but they are all spent.

### **Sex II**

A scene featuring two women forms the opening of the chosen excerpt. The basic plot revolves around a woman searching for her boyfriend 'Pike' and her various escapades whilst trying to find him (he eludes her for the entire film). Both the women are blonde and big-busted and move quickly into a lesbian love-scene involving performing cunnilingus, sex with a manually

manipulated dildo, sex with a strap-on dildo and a double-headed dildo and performing fellatio on the dildo at various points.

Following the lesbian love scene the two women go in search of Pike, asking after him at what we suppose is his previous place of employment. There are two people there; an older woman and a 'photographer'. The older woman urges Pike's 'girlfriend' to get a few shots done of her while she waits (what she is waiting for is never quite clear). The photography session quickly turns into a sex scene with various positions including rear-entry sex on a cow-skin chaise lounge, and the woman straddling the photographer in different positions once her stockings are ripped open for easy entry. The scene includes fellatio and masturbation. As the older woman watches, she masturbates herself while remembering (shown in flashback) her having sex in a taxi with Pike. Finally, the money-shot features in both encounters: Pike ejaculating on the older woman's pubic hair, and the photographer ejaculating on the woman's chest and in her mouth.

As *Sex II* has been shot on 35 mm film, the film quality is superior to most readily available mainstream pornography. The producers have gone to efforts to include lighting effects and elaborate costuming to add to the effect of 'quality' pornography. The women are dressed in black patent leather bustiers and black lingerie.

### **Gehgime Traume**

Carole Lynne (Producer and actor of *Gehgime Traume*) makes pornography in Germany, thus this clip features German dialogue, so the plot is less comprehensible than usual in a pornographic film. The first excerpt features an outdoor scene with a man in a long black cape being led to a blonde woman sitting mostly nude apart from skimpy black leather accessories by a dark-haired woman who is dressed in a leather negligée and a long black cape. The blonde woman fellates the man while he is standing behind the sofa. The couple then have intercourse in various positions while the dark-haired woman acts as a sex aid, fondling the man and woman at different times.

The second scene features a gardener, who is not surprised to discover a woman in a long black cape tied facing a camellia bush. He cuts her hands free and then releases his penis from his overalls to have sex with her from behind while both are standing. This scene includes fellatio, cunnilingus, masturbation, and again various sexual positions. The third scene is a brief lesbian sex scene, also outdoors (by a pool) featuring mutual masturbation, digital penetration, kissing and rubbing each others breasts. The fourth scene begins with a woman waking up (most scenes

are briefly established as one of her dreams) and, hearing a noise in the house, descending the stairs to investigate. She sees a woman lying in a crotchless negligee on a table with her legs skyward forming a 'v'. Another woman (again in a black negligee and cape) performs cunnilingus on her and the woman on the stairs masturbates as she watches. A man in a cape arrives and the woman in the cape turns and fellates him. He then has sex with the woman with her legs still high in the air. The woman standing on the stairs is transfixed by the couple having intercourse in front of her. The gardener, now dressed as a butler, descends the stairs and the woman in the cape (who moves to perform cunnilingus on the woman on the stairs when the couple began to have sex), turns and fellates the butler, who then has sex with the woman on the stairs (although no close-up genital shots are shown). Part way through the scene, the man moves into a position of anal sex with the woman on the table. The man ejaculates on the woman's pubic hair and the other woman moves back upstairs.

### **Semiotic Analysis of Made-for-Men Pornography**

We can read several codes in the texts that signify both *Sex II* and *Gehime Traume* as pornography that is directed at a male audience:

- \* Privileging male sexual pleasure. This is signified by the repetition of the money-shot and the absence of (even signified) female orgasm.
- \* Although there are several counts of cunnilingus, fellatio is mandatory and the women are shown to invariably enjoy the man not ejaculating inside her. Rather, they beg him to 'come on my tits' or 'come in my mouth' as if the man's ejaculation is as pleasurable to them as the orgasm is to the man, although they aren't shown to experience orgasm themselves. The focus on male pleasure is evidenced by this ability to 'satisfy' the women (signified by her moans and begging him to ejaculate on her) when in actuality he hasn't; and by producing the 'goods' in the form of the mandatory 'money shot'. This is further evidenced by the complete absence of female orgasm.
- \* The men are plain - they are often overweight and undesirable. This signifies the fact that the men are intended to represent the 'man off the street' i.e.-the buyer of the pornography.
- \* Plot is minimal and is immediately followed by sexual action. Any eroticism or gradual build-up of sexual tension which would signify a woman's sexual response is sacrificed for 'action' that is constructed to signify a male audience (see Fiske, 1987).
- \* Although oral sex occurs frequently, cunnilingus occurs far less frequently than fellatio, which indicates a privileging of male sexual pleasure in the narrative. In both these films the focus is on frequent and repetitive and extended scenes of genital sex that always

results in the 'evidence of pleasure' of the 'money shot'. The women is often entered without any digital or oral stimulation, signifying a lack of concern with women's pleasure as this would invariably be painful sex for a women.

\* In both films the shots are comprised of a revolving camera movement that moves from close-up face shots (mostly of the women's faces) in poses of ecstasy, to close-up genital shots of sex, to body shots that are composed for maximum visibility of sexual action. All other elements are sacrificed for maximum visibility and reassurance that the sex is unfaked and actually occurring. The obviously staged nature of the sexual action that lacks a believable plot signifies that the sex is not spontaneous or naturally occurring therefore it is difficult for an audience to maintain critical distance. The focus on unfaked genital sex appears to emphasise male sexual prowess texts. Critical distance is sacrificed for another apparent aim in the text; reinforcing male sexual power through repeated displays of virility (men in the texts always apparently please the women, the 'money' or 'cum' shot providing 'proof' of that pleasure).

In coding hard-core texts as privileging male sexuality; narrative context, build-up of relationship between characters, evident tenderness and eroticism is sacrificed. Not only is hard-core slow and repetitive, it lacks erotic tension through its obsession with visibility. Texts that the majority of women reported as most erotic were those based not solely on visual elements but on a conceivable context, evident sexual attraction, and build-up of sexual tension. This is not to conclude that women do not take pleasure in hard-core, rather that maintaining a narrative that reinforces women's sexual pleasure provided the most strong points of identification among participants. *Basic Instinct* is perhaps the best example of erotic tension that builds within a context as points of signification within the text indicate the characters (Stone and Douglas) experience heightened sexual attraction.

Elements of fantasy that are included in hard-core are predominantly cliché male fantasies involving such props as black leather, capes and women who are perpetually ready and willing (without any courtship ritual or foreplay) to have sex in different situations. It is the men who happen upon the women, for instance in the Carol Lynn clip, the scenes involving the gardener have him 'discover' a women conveniently tied to an camellia bush, and a women at a chess table, who are both simply bent over for immediate sex. This is not to suggest that women do not fantasise about anonymous sex, but rather to suggest that women's sexual availability signifies a predominantly male fantasy. Codes that refer to women's sexual power, such as the black leather trappings of a dominatrix used in Carol Lynn scenes are there as appendages to sexual action that

is directed by the protagonist. This is evident in the fact that female dominatrix figures featuring in different scenes act passively, as sex aids to the couple or as passive recipient of male sexual attention.

There are also several indicators that the lesbian scenes are staged for a male audience. In the Carol Lynn segments, the lesbian scenes, although omitting phallic objects, lacks build-up of sexual tension or explanation that would provide a seemingly absurd sex scene' by a pool with a context. Also the camera movement and staging of the shots indicates that the focus is on visible exposition of the women's genitalia and breasts; indicators of a 'male gaze'. Although there is more tenderness evidenced by their frequent kissing, the visual aspect of the narrative is stressed again as the tongues of the women are visible as they kiss. The preoccupation of the film with interpreting women's sexuality in terms of exposing their sexual 'hiddenness' is most evident in lesbian love scenes. Although they are pleasuring each other without a male presence (even symbolically) the 'tease' is superficial - both the women are more interested (if numbers of scenes are indicative) in sex with men.

In *Sex II*, the lesbian scene shows both women to be taking immense pleasure in each other, however the scene revolves around phallic objects: a strap-on dildo and a double-headed dildo. Both these objects are central to the sexual action, with their lovemaking focusing on the penis-objects. Perhaps what reveals the sex to be most constructed for men are various shots showing both women fellating the strap-on dildo, which is obviously not intended to pleasure the other, but exists solely to signify the intended audience.

Pornography demands that bodies in the texts conform to certain body, makeup and costume stereotypes which also signify a male audience. The films are unconcerned with the physical desirability of the men; they are intended to be 'everyman', representatives of men who watch pornography and are therefore often plain and overweight. This is in contrast to the women who are chosen according to their physical attractiveness, 'made up' to signify in costuming, cosmetics and physical composition popular male-identified notions of what form a sexually attractive woman takes. They always have generous-sized breasts (often obvious silicon implants) and are toned without obvious fat deposits. Their remarkable similarity to other pornographic stars identifies them as precisely not-real, figments of a pornographic fantasy who are invariably depicted as enjoying sex in many different positions, anytime.

## **Erotica for Women and Couples**

### **Sacred sex II**

I began this clip by running through the spiel given at the beginning about *Sacred sex*, and how it intended to improve lovemaking through employing techniques that the ancient civilisations employed in lovemaking to enhance pleasure. In the spiel, a video voice-over tells us that tantric lovemakers experience lovemaking as a path to God. The voice-over is of a women's breathy, gentle voice.

The second part of the *Sacred sex* clip featured sections on both erotic 'massage' and a 'bathing ritual'. The massage clip shows a couple massaging one another naked, and includes advice about how massage benefits lovemaking 'creat(ing) a circuit of love between you'; releasing 'orgasmic energy', and includes tips on enhancing the pleasure of massage. By touching both the man's penis and his heart, we are told (as the couple perform to illustrate) that the women connects his 'penis centre' and his 'heart centre', thus releasing his feelings of love.

Finally, the clip features the 'bathing ritual' involving advice on creating a love-making environment by lighting candles around a bath; with a couple providing visual illustration by bathing together. The couple talk quietly and enjoy touching one another, signified by their laughter. Finally, the clip shows a brief segment on the couple talking about their experience. The man describes the ritual as one of 'meditation in sexuality'; and the women asserts that 'as a women, it is wonderful to play', as this play causes 'love' to be released 'between you'.

### **Femme - Candida Royalle**

Candida Royalle's production company, Femme, produces 'erotica for women' The Femme clip begins also with the spiel at the beginning of the video about 'Femme videos': "now - at last Femme brings to the screen fantasies that women have been dreaming about all these years"; "'Femme' explores human desire from the exhilarating perspective of a women who knows." (From the spiel at the beginning of *3 Daughters*). The breathy voice-over briefly introduces different femme series productions and different actors who star in them (who are mostly named as couples).

I then briefly explain the plot of the film *3 Daughters* as being about the youngest sisters coming-of-age, where following spying her sisters' sexual encounters, and through reading saucy books about sex comes to have a romance herself. I explain that the older sister gets married and



the middle sister (who features in the chosen excerpt making love to her piano tutor) ends up getting caught by the parents and forbidden to see each other again.

At the beginning of the scene featuring one of the 'daughters' sits at the piano, but grows bored and decides to put on some snazzier music which she proceeds to dance to. The piano teacher arrives and walks in to discover her dancing. She turns the music off and she moves to play at the piano. The teacher, beside her on the stool, corrects her with a small performance of his own and tells her she is too tense. He rises to massage her shoulders and kisses her neck. Responding to his caress, she kisses him back and quietly suggests the carpet. They move to the carpet (shag-pile) and slowly remove most of their clothing. The music becomes dominating as the love-scene develops. She fellates him as he performs cunnilingus on her and they eventually end up in different positions of coitus, however no close-up genital shots are featured, and the camera disguises whether or not actual intercourse is happening. The camera focuses on her face and her pleasure as they appear to come to a mutual climax, with the man apparently ejaculating inside the woman. Afterwards the couple cuddle and talk a little with the man calling her a 'bad girl', but he 'like(s) it'.

### **Semiotic Analysis of Made-for-Women Pornography**

We can read several codes in the texts that signify both *Sacred sex II* and the Candida Royalle's 'Femme' production *Three Daughters* as intended to appeal to a female audience, including:

- \* An obvious attempt to include ample foreplay and afterplay that are thought to more in line with women's desires in a sexual relationship.
- \* Men who have been selected for their desirability: who have handsome faces and muscular physiques.
- \* Repeated efforts to signify female pleasure - seen in the focus on women's ecstatic facial expressions. The women (in the 'femme' clip) experience orgasm during sex, shown in the expression on her face and in her 'bucking' with pleasure.
- \* Different use of camera shots that focus on 'whole body' scenes and omit genital shots, and cum or 'money-shots'. This is thought to reflect women's sexuality as soft, romantic, uninterested in close-ups of genital sex.
- \* A narrative structure that includes build-up to sexual encounters and full introduction of the actors that emphasises the importance of an unfolding narrative as integral to framing sexual action. Sexual action isn't privileged as the only source of pleasure, rather narrative build-up to sexual encounters is emphasised.

- \* Non-phallogentric organisation of sexual content with narrative emphasis placed on mutual pleasure.
- \* In *Sacred sex II* and in the trailer introducing 'Femme' productions the narrators soft, husky voice is intended to signify women's sexual pleasure.
- \* *Sacred sex* employs 'real couples'; in it's advertising 'femme' productions advertise the actors featuring in the films as if they are 'real couples.' The use of couples is intended to signify non-exploitative, loving sex. This avoids stigmatising the texts as 'exploiting' (in particular) women, often perceived as 'victims'(particularly within anti-pornography campaigning).
- \* Soft lighting, smooth camera movements with soft-focus shots, careful editing and emphasis on music ('the music alone will sweep you off your feet!' - [Femme' spiel]) and camera angles (that conceal rather than reveal whether penetrative sex is actually occurring), all signify a softer, 'feminine' appeal, which are thought to like.

While the ordering of both *Sacred sex II* and *Three Daughters* employ codes that are intended to signify women's pleasure, the performance evokes a 'feminine' fantasy - ordered according to assumptions about women's fantasy, while (particularly in the case of 'femme') laying claim to reflecting 'every-women's fantasy.' Both films assume that women are not interested in the 'harder' aspects of pornography. This assumption does not allow for pleasures that women watching hard-core experience: - such as the revelation of the penis, finally having emerged from shrouds of phallic mystery and performing for the viewer.

Power as an issue that is inseparable from sexuality is avoided in these texts as well. *Basic Instinct* engages expressly in demonstrating women's sexual power, by Sharon Stone, who features as a 'phallic woman' who exercises sexual dominance over Michael Douglas. She also engages in bisexual activity that signifies a the phallogentric, heterosexual order of sexuality, However, both 'made-for-women'/'couples' films, although intending to portray women's sexual agency, fail to engage in issues of power. Determining sexual agency for women in images of sexuality is essential to challenging traditional notions of women's sexuality stereotypes of sexual behaviour. Images that depict women in positions of genuine sexual power and the presence of sexually assertive women would signal the arrival of a genuine 'women's' 'erotica'.

This chapter has contextualised pornography in terms of it's history as a cultural artefact that reflects and perpetuates ideologically dominant notions of sex in our culture. Each of the clips chosen has been justified, explained and semiotically analysed in order to demonstrate that

pornography as it stands in both 'made-for-men' and 'made-for-women' examples can be said to privilege male sexuality. The encoding of pornography provides the backdrop against which women read pornography. These decodings, we will see, pre-empt a need for erotic texts that reflect women's sexuality and sexual pleasure.

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## Chapter 6

### A PREFERRED DECODING

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*'A counter-history...helps to produce a counter-identity, and therefore, even more importantly, a counter-future.'*

Fiske, 1993 p.289

*"...it needs to be accepted that pornography is not 'just' consumed, but is used, worked on, elaborated, remembered, fantasised about by its subjects. To stop the analysis at the artefact, as virtually all the current books and articles do, imagining that the representation is the pornography in quite simple terms is to truncate the consumption process radically, and thereby leave unconsidered the human making involved in completing the act of pornographic consumption."*

Wicke, 1993, p.70

#### **Introduction to Discussion**

Interviewing women about their views and responses regarding pornography involved asking small focus groups questions that clustered around the following themes: definitions of a pornographic text; issues of interpretation, representation and identification and pleasure, fantasy and 'resistance' to convergence. I have organised group responses into preferred, negotiated and oppositional categories according to whether the respondents shared (preferred), modified (negotiated) or rejected (opposed) the dominant textual encoding of pornography; that of a privileging of male sexuality that precludes women's pleasure.

Pornography as ideology has long been the subject of feminist debate. Before any discussion of my findings can be entered into, I establish my discussion of pornography as a critique of the 'dominant ideology thesis' of anti-pornography feminist theorists. I also briefly outline the framing concepts of my discussion, before explaining what comprises 'dominant' 'negotiated' and 'oppositional' readings of pornography. Finally, I introduce the factors that inform my discussion of the viewers interpretations of pornography.

My research exists as a critique of the 'dominant ideology thesis' proposed by the ascendant position within feminist debate regarding pornography. As a 'dominant ideology thesis', anti-pornography feminists claim that through owning and controlling both the means of material and mental production in pornography, the dominant gender has supervised the construction of a set of beliefs which penetrate the consciousness of subordinate groups.

As anti-pornography feminists have located ideology at the level of the mode of production they have neglected the capacity for audiences to determine meaning within texts autonomously, and have assumed the role of speaking for all 'women' in defining what 'pornography' is and does. Importantly, societies are fractured in different ways, not forming an audience mass that absorbs and agrees with encoded meanings without thinking. In discussing women's responses to pornography, I acknowledge women as consumers of pornography who do not passively accept the dominant encoding found in pornography.

Defining elements of pornography and erotica have been interpreted by anti-pornography feminists according to their own agenda. The clear demarcation made by anti-pornography theorists between 'pornography' as 'sexual oppression of women' and 'erotica' equating to 'equality' in representations of sex, avoids neatly the complexities involved in sexual representation, particularly in relation to the way that real audiences view the texts. To illustrate, *Three Daughters*, though appearing as 'erotica' in emphasising mutual pleasure, was found by the feminist group to be degrading in its depiction of sex as the woman featured was passive, and the text appeared to the group to be 'a man's fantasy' despite the efforts of the film-makers to represent women's pleasure on screen.

'Pornography' for the purposes of my research is defined as on-screen representations of explicit sexual acts. 'Erotica' refers to textual encodings that attempt to offer women's sexual agency. Beyond this, I have left the notion of both pornography and erotica open to interpretation.

Culture is perhaps the central consideration when applying the encoding/decoding model to a textual product, as culture is the setting within which meaning is produced and transmitted. For my purposes, I use Van Zoonen's (1994, p.6) adaptation of Corner's definition, as "the conditions and the forms in which meaning and value are structured and articulated within society". This process is twofold; both in institutional form where production and reception of mediated and constructed meanings are created and at the level of everyday symbolic interactions between people. The central component of pornography as a cultural form is gender.

As Segal (1994, p.239) claims, women are held back in affirming active sexual desire by both by language and culture that inherently reinforces existing codes of gender. Pornography's construction of the 'sex' act remains central to the social formation of sexuality, that robs women of a sense of sexual agency. In terms of production, meaning is structured specifically according to gender 'difference' in pornography. This can be argued to effect the focus of all media products where woman's 'difference' is repetitively fetishised: her curves, her breasts, her 'femininity'.

Culture operates also at the level of everyday symbolic interaction, therefore discussing the perceived cultural confines regarding watching pornography as women renders visible gender expectations regarding pornography. Women are not expected to talk about pornography unless it is to vilify it. In talking about pornography as women, the taboo surrounding women discussing sexual discourse is challenged, which in turn introduces a challenge to existing pornographic representations based on masculine pleasure. The second theme of the discussions is therefore what 'cultural confines' the participants felt affected them in considering sexual imagery as women.

Representation refers to the way in which women are both constructed and represented within the text. Audiences in my research responded to 'made-for-men' and 'made-for-women' pornography according to the ways they read the encoding of bodies, sexual pleasure and scenarios of sexual fantasy as representative of 'women' per se.

Identification is the next category of discussion. Discussing identification involves the participants describing the extent to which they identified with both the women performers and the construction of sexual fantasies in the situations depicted, and the from a personal standpoint.

Engaging with the texts, and formulating responses to textual encodings of gender empowers women to form their own language of what gives them pleasure in sexually explicit images. In turn, responding to sexually explicit images on screen opens up the possibilities of pleasure for women within a culture that has coded sexual pleasure as male, and female sexuality as passive and subordinate. Ascertaining degrees to which the groups felt they identified with both depictions of sexuality, and women performers necessitates a response to pornography based on textual codes. Although the texts privilege male sexuality, even in apparently made-for-women 'erotica', the women do take pleasure in aspects of pornography that haven't been acknowledged



in anti-pornography feminist theory. This is not to argue in favour of a celebration of the liberation that pornography offers, but to forge open the possibility of a distinctly women's pleasure in sexual imagery.

The final theme within each discussion is that of 'pleasure and resistance'. The concept of 'divergence' is important here as discussing pleasure in pornography develops the encoding/decoding approach to include ways that women resist patriarchal ideologies (dominant encoding) in pornography. Pornography as a cultural form is made-over to include possibilities of sexual pleasure for women in the act of interpreting what is in the texts. In responding to pornography in terms of the pleasure of the form, the participants conceive of what form textual 'utopias' of sexual imagery may look like, thereby challenging the textual codes found in both pornography and 'erotica' that link sexual pleasure to "hierarchical polarities of gender.. (that) are never fixed and immutable.. (but are) chronically unstable." Thus, Vance (1994, p.243) claims, there is potential to subvert this fragile gendered 'difference' that links sexual pleasure and sexual power with masculine domination however repeatedly they occur. When women watch pornography and engage in debate around images of our identity and the ways that we have been represented, we come to conceive of images of sexuality that reflect a uniquely female sexual agency.

Although it has been the practice of feminist anti-pornography theorists associate pornography with harm to women, and to assume that women don't choose to watch it or take pleasure in pornography, I have attempted concentrate my analysis on the specific ways the participant groups respond to aspects of pornography. Extending analysis of pornography beyond the product itself involves considering the human 'audience' aspect of interpreting pornographic consumption, thereby challenging the heavily production-based analysis of anti-pornography feminists which keeps focus on sexuality within feminism on sexual restriction and danger rather than pleasure and interaction.

### **Dominant, Negotiated, Oppositional Readings**

Group responses are organised according to whether the participants in the groups accepted, negotiated or opposed the dominant textual encoding of pornography as an evident 'privileging of male over female sexuality precluding women's pleasure' in the texts (as outlined in Chapter 5). Even though the textual codes operating within pornography appear to be complicit with the feminist 'dominant ideology thesis' in subordinating women's sexuality, I argue women's responses can not be 'read off' the dominant ideology of the texts. Audiences are rather in a

constant process of negotiation with the texts, and while some viewers accept the dominant encoding that women are excluded from finding any aspect of pornography pleasurable, others negotiate pleasure in aspects of the texts.

A dominant/ hegemonic or 'preferred' reading of pornography therefore assumes that women will agree that the dominant ideology within (particularly male-identified) texts which precludes their pleasure as women viewers. Even apparently 'women-identified' 'erotica' is seen to privilege male sexuality and subordinate women's pleasure, as one respondent from the 'preferred reading' group replied in reference to Candida Royalle's *Three Daughters*:

'do women watch a video about a virgin.. is that a women's fantasy? So whose fantasy was it? It's a man's fantasy again, it's s'posed to be by women for women, with women - oh crap!'

A negotiated reading of pornography is one where women accept the dominant ideology that the texts privilege male sexuality, but who negotiate their responses according to individual logic and experience. Therefore, aspects of pornography, particularly the already-negotiated 'made-for-women' texts, are found to be pleasurable.

An oppositional reading of pornography is one where the women read pornography in a contrary way to the dominant ideology, where even male-identified pornography is read as pleasurable. Even while recognising the textual codes within pornography privilege male sexual pleasure in hard-core pornography, viewers who take this position regularly consume hard-core pornography.

### **The Process of Negotiation**

A constant process of negotiation occurs as viewers engage with texts, images represented on screen are negotiated according to personal experience and knowledge which acts as an interpretative filter on the text. Knowledge that contributes to the individuals' 'filter' includes: specific textual knowledge regarding genre; genre expectations: conceptions regarding the production process; expectations of cinema conventions and practices; personal experience; emotions at the time of viewing; the relative intimacy that the viewing context offers; and the nature of the individuals relationship with others watching. Importantly, personal experience includes experiential knowledge relating to the text - for pornography this knowledge would include personal experience of sex, and how that experience relates to on-screen representations of sexual encounters.

There are also social, cultural and most importantly for this study, gender-based knowledge about the way the social world operates, which relates to how an individual will read the text. There is a strong taboo on watching pornography in our culture, especially in regard to women watching pornography of their own free will. Participants of my research reported that participation itself was often frowned upon. As one respondent asserted 'I don't think society distinguishes between erotica and porn I think they all lump it into the porn category and look on it still as taboo/dirty'.

Basically all of the respondents negotiated their responses to pornography to different degrees. While each group is categorised according to the whether they agree with, negotiate or oppose the dominant encoding of pornography as 'a privileging of male over female sexuality precluding women's pleasure', each response was negotiated. To illustrate the professional women, even though they reported finding hard-core texts erotic, found aspects of hard-core unpalatable. Similarly, participants in both 'negotiated' and 'dominant' readings reported repugnance in the construction of the sex in pornography, not repugnance with sexually explicit images themselves.

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### **Feminist group - a Preferred Reading**

There were varied responses to the different types of pornography were viewed by the group, the main response to the pornography directed at both men and woman by this group was that the best kind of porn was 'none!' (Zona) This fits what I have defined as a 'preferred reading' where pornography is interpreted as male-identified and precluding women's pleasure.

#### **Definitions of a Pornographic Text.**

What constitutes pornography and what distinguishes it from 'erotica' or 'soft' porn that is commonplace in advertising and mainstream films and television is a central consideration in an audience study of pornography. Preconceived ideas surrounding the word 'pornography' and what actually makes a text 'pornographic' are highly contentious, depending on our experience, background and the level to which we partake of watching pornography ourselves. This section discusses the personal negotiations of this group in defining 'pornography' and 'erotica', as well as the cultural expectations the group reported regarding women watching pornography.

When engaging with the issue of what constitutes pornography, the feminist group held various opinions centring around notions of porn being 'violence' against women, sexist, constructed in such a way as to fetishise women's bodies, and objectify women's sexuality. Zona used the 'objectification' of women as pivotal to any definition of pornography:

'In short.. they all (objectify) women.. and I still think that that is a definition of pornography ..you can call it soft porn, you can call it what you will, but it's still pornography'

Zona claimed that *Baywatch* was as much pornography as hard-core pornography, owing to the objectification of women therein.

Within this group, the notion of pornography being inherently 'violent' against women was an unchallenged assertion. Andrea claimed *Sex II* was definable as pornography as it 'was violent'. Justine claimed that pornography was also definable owing to the way it sexualised women in all aspects of their lives, accordingly both *Baywatch* and 'made-for-women' 'erotica' (the Candida Royale 'made-for-women' clip where the woman and her piano teacher make love) were considered as much pornography as hard-core:

Justine: '..for example, a women playing the piano sexualised...the lifeguards are sex objects ..these strong competent women who swim out and save lives..'

Zona :(re *Baywatch*), 'Yeah yeah, so they walk out of the shops.. but they walk out with their butts'

Zona went on to reinforce this opinion by claiming that construction of the 'gaze' being concentrated on 'breasts' and (women's) 'bodies' reduced a women's significance to her function as an object of a male 'gaze'.

The importance of context in defining pornography was also stressed, as one respondent replied:

'I also think that part of it is context ..the context in which your viewing certain things ..I'm not one to think that meanings lie just within the text - I mean they circulate between the people who make it, the text and the audience...that's part of it too.'

This recognition is important, as is the claim made early on by Zona that it is 'quite hard to differentiate and there (are) many different views' regarding where creation of meaning resides in pornography.

### **Cultural Expectations**

When asked if they felt guilty about watching porn, the feminist group had mixed responses, but asserted a right to not feel guilty, even if it does 'turn you on':

Millie: 'cause that what seems to me to be quite a common response - you're turned on, but at the same time you feel guilty ..do you guys feel the same way?'

Zona: (in response to Millie) '..even if I am turned on I don't have to feel guilty'

Andrea: .. 'One of the few ways you could get away with watching that sort of stuff and not feel guilty if it did turn you on ..is if you're just by yourself, or if you're watching with just one other person (interviewer - it's an unnatural environment) yeah'.

Justine: 'I'd feel guilty if I watched it by myself ...I think it would be the whole idea of being found out'.

It was a common response in all the groups that the secrecy that surrounds pornography in society has created a climate of fear and secrecy regarding the subject for women. This group was the only group that acknowledged the discrepancy between a general tolerance to men watching pornography, and women watching pornography (especially taking pleasure in it!) being thought of as sexual deviants who 'shouldn't' like it, and who 'betray' other women by watching it:

Justine: 'I think there's an aspect of 'be a sport' (Zona -yep!) in terms of that's how a lot of women feel about pornography because their partner and their partner's flatmates would be sitting there and you'd feel uncomfortable leaving the room - so there's that kind of 'be a sport' aspect about it ...but then outta that sort of context there's 'oh - you shouldn't be watching that 'because it's y'know a sort of overtly sexual thing and women aren't 'sposed to be sort of overtly sexual and enjoy things like that' ...and in terms of feminist groups ..you're not to like it at all and not to even study it...'

There were mixed reactions to how the group perceived other feminists would receive women watching pornography:

Justine: 'There's this whole idea that a ... 'feminist' however ..is not gonna like pornography and any representations of it... it's gonna say that everything's sexist and you can't get any pleasure from it at all...'

Andrea: 'I think that expectation's on anyone really ..it's not the done thing'

Zona: (the pleasure factor?) 'is not acknowledged because they see it is that pornography is objectifying women so how can you gain pleasure from that?'

Justine: (agreeing) 'Part of the problem!'

Andrea: '..obviously there's something really shaky if you're actually watching anything like that' (Zona: but I think that that's a really simplistic view of it) - 'Are you gonna stand up in a women's conference and admit that you watch pornography? Yeah, yeah right!'

Justine went on to reiterate the distinction between pornography and erotica:

'I don't like porn and I don't get anything out of it, but then there's erotica, but then you say well, o.k, what's the difference between pornography and erotica and that's where the

debate ends in some circles aye? But not in others like there's a whole lot of feminists who are lookin' at this stuff ..where you'd feel fine talking about it'.

Thus the discussion on this point ended with a positive realisation that there were feminists who were exploring the notion of feminist erotica.

This group reiterated the fact that pornography was a complicated issue and that there were no clear-cut distinctions regarding what 'pornography' was. Although there was a strong belief that women could and should have increased sexual agency in the area of 'erotic' (even hard-core) images, it was believed that the very nature of pornography (with its perceived basis in the notion of harm) was contrary to this aim. The distinction between 'erotica' and 'pornography' was considered clear, the nature of the distinction thought to lie in the inherent 'equality' of erotica as compared to pornography's 'inequality' with regards to women.

### **Issues of Interpretation, Identification and Representation**

In terms of identification with porn 'made-for-men' and 'made-for-women', the feminist group rejected any points of identification and rejected any notion that the texts represented women's sexuality. There was also a strong feeling that the texts 'misappropriated' women's sexuality and falsely interpreted women's fantasies.

### **Issues of Interpretation and Representation in Pornography Made-for-Men**

Pornography that was directed at men was rejected on the basis that much of the sex that took place looked 'unsafe', 'harmful' and to differing degrees 'violent':

Andrea: 'The look on some of the actors faces ..that lesbian scene where she looked like she wanted to hurt that ..other woman ..she really looked like she wanted to hurt her ..it was horrible.'

Millie responded similarly to the same scene :

'Like that ..*Sex II* where the two women ..it had to end in some sort of violence, some sort of aggression y'know ..as if it just had to.'

In terms of safety there were two consistent themes in the discussion: that the women on scene weren't protected by practising safe-sex; and were being 'harmed' by sexual practices that the group felt to be painful and misleading about women's sexuality:

Zona: '.. in so many of them the women weren't aroused they were entered without them (the man) basically even touching (the women's) bodies, so often things like anal sex or rear-entry sex which is quite a degrading position especially when it wasn't anything



sensual - y'know there was no sensualness about it or no safety about it ..I mean there was no safe zone there for the majority of them ..'

Porn that was made for men was considered a misleading interpretation of women's sexuality:

Justine: 'I really hate the way that they try to ..they misappropriate women's sexuality ..in terms of filming something that is really a male fantasy and certainly doesn't link into a lot of women's desires ..but y'know it's misappropriated and it's made to look as this is what the woman's dreaming of and these are women's fantasies..'

Andrea claimed that 'made-for-men' pornography was not reflective of her sexuality, and Justine claimed that although some women took pleasure in porn, the pleasure was in the fact that 'these are the only images that we get of sexuality', and seeing as 'this part of your life is reflected in a certain way' (the only way), any representations of sex could be read as liberatory, in spite of the nature of their construction. She claimed that 'there are bits in there that are reflective of women's sexuality'. Although there was a concession that 'other' women get enjoyment and pleasure out of watching hard-core, Justine clearly placed herself outside the framework of identification. The only point of identification was in what Justine termed 'the look on the women's faces ..like it's really painful aye?'

The feminist group was the only group to identify the heterosexist portrayal of the 'made-for-men' pornography, particularly in the construction of lesbian/bisexual scenes. This led to a critique of the heterosexist construction of porn:

Zona: 'It's definitely not reflective of a lesbian('s sexuality), or anything but a heterosexual ..because in every lesbian what do you call it ..sequel ..there were men involved'.

Andrea: 'and if there wasn't men there was a dildo, yeah!'

Zona: 'Lesbians, if you don't use dildos, are excluded from having sex'.

The presence of the dildo wasn't necessarily what the group took issue with, but the way in which it was used:

Zona: 'see if it was used in a different way it wouldn't have been, I don't think, an issue, but with the way in which (Anne: 'yeah that's right') it was used, I mean there could still be a dildo there and could have been used really beautifully and it wouldn't have been...'

Later in the discussion Zona raised the point that pornography perpetuates myths about sexuality, in particular '.. that whole thing that sex is only penetrative .. that whole thing that sex begins and ends with penetration'. Zona reappropriates her own sexuality as very different to pornography's

narrow constructions, comprised of a 'spectrum' where sex itself is not a fixed property of expression.: 'As far as I'm concerned I've had sex and had no penetration.'

Some of the representations of women's sexuality were considered so misleading to be absurd, particularly one lesbian scene in *Sex II* where one of the woman had a strap-on dildo and the other woman performed 'fellatio':

Anne: '..where they had that strap-on dildo I mean (others laugh)I mean she was giving her a blowjob for God's sake! (More laughter) Come on! Yeah - it was really bizarre!'

Hard-core 'made-for-men' was rejected on several counts, the notion of perceived 'harm' central to this rejection. The women in this group also felt the examples of hard-core shown were unrepresentative of women's sexuality and as such misleading. They also felt that pornography perpetuated damaging myths about sexuality in its representation of heterosexual and lesbian sex, in its narrow constructions of sexual/erotic imagery, and in its presenting sex as phallogentric, excluding alternative constructions of sex .

### **Issues of Identification and Representation in Pornography Made-for-Women**

Pornography that was directed at a women audience fared little better than the pornography made for men in terms of the degree of identification and representation felt by the feminist group. Although they conceded that films like Candida Royalle's *Three Daughters* attempted to reframe sexual imagery from a 'women's' perspective, it was generally held that it failed to address their fantasies and they didn't identify with the text or feel that it was representative of women's sexuality.

*Three Daughters*, self-termed as 'erotica for women', was judged to be a male fantasy - particularly in the fact that the film was based around the sexual awakening of a virgin:

Zona: 'Do women watch a video about a virgin ..is that a women's fantasy? So whose fantasy was it? It's a man's fantasy again, it's 'sposed to be erotica by women for women with women - oh crap!'

Most of the group felt that the attempt made at creating erotica for women was a positive step, but still rejected any identification with the text, owing to evident sexism in the film's construction:

Zona: 'I think that there were things about it that were good or a hellava lot better - the fact that you got full-body shots and not just genitals, and there was some intimacy ....although the narrative sucked badly - there was some dialogue and some communication.'

Millie: 'I mean he stood behind her ..he gave her a neck rub and he initiated basically, didn't he? You know she just played the wrong key'.

Anne: 'and wasn't she a 'bad girl'?.'

In the narrative that I briefly overviewed in the group, the sister who featured in the sexual encounter in the clip was 'found out' and grounded for having her piano teacher as her lover. The group felt that this contradicted the claims of the director that *Three Daughters* is 'women's erotica' as it represents women's sexuality in terms of a 'good girl/bad girl' dichotomy. This good girl/bad girl split was reinforced in the dialogue where the piano teacher says 'you are a bad girl!' twice. Justine notes: '.. it's like sexuality is o.k. in some situations and not in others..'

Most of the group agreed that films like *Three Daughters* were a positive step and that it was a 'recognition in itself' that there is a need for women's erotica.

Some group participants liked the way that the *Sacred Sex II* video was handled sex on screen, considering the film to be unique, not really erotica but an educational tool. The construction of *Sacred Sex II* however was also found to be sexist, particularly in its generalisations about what women want. One section was singled out as representative of this, where the voice-over comments 'romance is foreplay to a women'. In reference to this scene, Zona commented: 'Patronising! That's what it was wasn't it - patronising!' Both Zona and Justine agreed that even the more benign representations of women's sexuality in 'made-for-women' texts saw women serving male interests rather than their own:

Zona: 'It's still what men...(Justine: 'yeah') There are still the really (Justine: 'sexist')..bloody rude comments made!'

### **Pleasure and Resistance**

Although group members define themselves as rejecting pornography in all the forms we saw, there were points of both resistance and pleasure, which are important in terms of negotiating meaning. Although the group dynamic operated in a manner that fits a 'preferred reading' of pornography, there were individually negotiated and defined meanings with regards to the complex question of pleasure in the text. Discussion regarding defining personal pleasure and positive ways of representing this were explored.

When asked about positive aspects of pornography, Justine responded by claiming that any vague positive was outweighed by 'inversion' in the texts construction:

Justine: 'The only (positive) aspect that I could see is if a women wasn't familiar with (sex)..and even that wouldn't be very good actually - great .. get it off pornography, but to see other women, to see lovemaking ..in that respect I think could be a vague positive ..I mean it could be quite liberating to see a woman masturbating and touching herself, yeah, but then again could be so inverted it could be equally as bad and make them so potty ..and have quite a bit of guilt about what they do and what they don't ..and dictate to how they should be, so nah, not really.'

Zona took a similar line and claimed that the positive (the curiosity/voyeur factor) was negated by the texts construction: 'I didn't see many women taking pleasure the way they wanted to ...wasn't sort of overt for me in watching that stuff, it was more the men...'

The group framed pleasure within a different paradigm, as their experience of pleasure was seen as being incompatible with pornography's construction. Although Zona argued that her ideal pornography was 'none', she went on to speculate that the inclusion of: '..some realism? some pleasure (..and maybe that does come through using real couples'..) 'sensuality, equality, (and) mutual(ity)' in erotica would address her sexuality and offer the possibility of personal pleasure in sexual imagery.

Andrea closely linked 'realism' and 'perceived pleasure' she felt the women performers to be experiencing with possible pleasure in 'voyeurism'. However, she still situated herself outside of 'enjoying' the text owing to the perceived 'harm' she felt the actresses to be experiencing:

'That one (Carol Lynne) actually looked to me in that one like some of those people were actually getting off on what they are doing ..she looked like she came in that stairs one ..it actually looked real, now that, yeah, that I - it was a horrible one to watch, I don't like watching it but when I saw something real ..that looked really happening ..it was different.'

It is important to note that earlier on in the discussion, Andrea agreed that the context of the group setting in an unnatural (group rather than an private) environment, influenced the level of guilt that she felt in watching: 'you could only get away with watching that sort of stuff and not feel guilty if it did turn you on is if you're just by yourself or if you're with one other person...' It is thus safe to assume that the group influenced her to monitor her responses although she clearly did express a fascination with the 'realness' of one particular pornographic text.

Another group member, Millie admitted to enjoying the Candida Royalle clip and *Sex II* but said she 'didn't know why' and made no attempt to elaborate. It was inevitable that owing to the prevailing belief in the group being that pornography was harmful to women, opinions that

diverged from this basic tenet, and suggested pleasure in texts, were difficult to express and self-censored. There was, however a recognition in the group that 'diversity' in women was something to be celebrated.

Millie also admitted earlier on that she felt guilty about watching the clips:

'I felt guilty 'cause I was laughing in the first three minutes ..and I felt guilty (me: 'why?') I dunno, 'cause that what seems to me to be quite a common response - you're turned on but at the same time you feel guilty ..do you guys feel the same way?'

Thus her enjoyment was tempered by feeling 'guilty' at her pleasure, and feeling that enjoying watching indicted her in some way.

Justine thought it important that women-centred initiatives needed to be truly alternative, presenting a different 'cannon' of sexuality that is more representative of women's fantasies:

Justine: '...the thing is that men have been making these things, and I know women are coming in and making them now ..which makes absolutely no different as far as I can see ..I think women have to start looking at our fantasies and being able to ..get some of the media skills, there are all those structural things that you have to talk about as well...but that's what we have to do in order to start building our own canon..'

Zona: 'Good erotica could be a vehicle for that ..?'

Justine: 'What I want to say is that it's really hard on a women who's making this ..a film, erotica or whatever it's gonna be ripped to bits isn't it by ..it's gonna have so much expectations on it to be able to fulfil all these thing ..we have to, women have to do this and it has to be lots and lots and it'll take a while to get somewhere'

The notion of 'agency', the right to produce and have access to women-initiated and women-centred erotic images is a crucial consideration in addressing what is taken to be a real power imbalance in pornographic representations of sexuality. Redefining that which is received as erotic in 'women defined' erotica would better represent women's desires and fantasies in all their diversity. This would pave the way to changing the inequalities that pornography is seen to perpetuate.

Zona admitted that one of the principal reasons that she didn't enjoy watching pornography was owing to the lack of difference in women. She rejected the homogenising of women in the texts, in their construction as 'blonde', 'big-breasted' and having unending sexual appetites. Erotic texts that recognise and celebrate diversity in and between women, depicting a range of sexual

pleasures and textual constructions of sexuality were seen to have the potential to appeal to many different women. In this, Zona acknowledges that pleasure itself is highly personal, and recognises that any conceptual shifts begin from discussion about pleasure, and respect regarding pleasure as personal choice.

'...I think that's what's got to be recognised, it comes down to your pleasure it is individual ...women are really diverse ..different things will turn different women on, and the women beside you might go 'oh-boring' or ..'I find that offensive' ..I mean it has to be o.k. and accepted.'

### **Conclusion**

Although this group accepted the dominant encoding of the texts by agreeing that they would not take pleasure in either hard-core or women-identified porn/erotica, it was mainly the construction of sexuality in the texts, not the degree of explicitness that was at issue. Their analysis of what constituted 'pornography' was largely based on a perception of 'harm' and sexual objectification of women. Although there were some instances of negotiation where the women on-screen were perceived as enjoying themselves, both hard-core and women-identified pornography were thought to basically misrepresent women's sexuality and pleasure, thus excluding their possible identification and pleasure. Alternative 'erotica' that would accurately represent women and portray women taking pleasure the way they wanted to was a possibility embraced by the group.



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## Chapter 7

### NEGOTIATED DECODINGS

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#### University Educated Group - a Negotiated Reading

As they mostly felt hard-core pornography to excluded women's pleasure, but believed 'made-for-women' erotica was conceivable and offered the possibility pleasure, the university educated group can be considered to have a 'negotiated' response to pornography. Participants agreed with the basic premise that male-identified pornography privileged male over female sexuality, thereby excluding women's pleasure, however, they negotiated points of identification and pleasure according to their own background and experience.

#### Definitions of a Pornographic Text

Expressing what they thought constituted pornography from diverse positions, this group disagreed on fundamental considerations such as whether main-stream examples of soft-core erotica could be considered pornography or not.

Kelly began by stating that *Baywatch* defiantly couldn't be considered pornography, as it 'was a fantasy', ('more comedy than anything'), Repetitive camera shots of women's bodies in *Baywatch* was perceived as 'just wearing a bathing suit', nothing 'actually sexual', to Kelly, who said pornography was 'fucking'. Kelly makes the distinction between 'erotica' and 'pornography' in terms of personal enjoyment; 'erotica is something like you enjoy and pornography is something like what we watched' (hard-core). Pornography for her was an economic contract, where the 'actors are paid' and where the 'bottom line' in deciding if a text is pornographic or not lies in whether the economic reward of acting is sufficient recompense for what they have to do for the money (be 'exploited'): if they enjoy it then it's not 'porn', .. 'pornography is where you are paid to fuck and take your clothes off and that's exploitation where you're doin it for the money and not for the enjoyment of the act'. Upon my suggestion that it becomes a different thing when the actors enjoy it, she replied, 'yeah! ..I mean they could be enjoying that, but the bottom line is that they're doin' it for the money', suggesting that 'acting' sex precludes enjoyment for the actors.

Kelly was opposed to the notion that 'erotica' and mainstream programming where the actors exhibit pleasure and enjoyment could be considered pornography: '..Pamela Anderson is having a

great time, she loves it, you can't say that she is being exploited!'. Conversely, Leticia approached *Baywatch* as exploitative and therefore pornographic because she 'doesn't like what they're doing', and that even if Pamela Anderson does love performing in the programme, there 'is still an exploitation there'. For Leticia, exploitation hinges on the predominance of women in the text 'there's heaps of women around and there's only one or two men'. Lack of variation between the actresses in both the hard-core and soft-core align both as pornography. For Leticia also, the conditions of production in David Hasslehoff's creative (and economic) control of the programme, marks the texts as pornography: 'he 'dominate(s) what those women do'.

Carol offers yet another position on the debate. Although she believed *Baywatch* made women out to be 'absolutely dizzy' and was offensive owing to its similarity to 'workshop' pin-ups, she didn't equate these characteristics with pornography, but with sexism: *Baywatch* was 'just acting'. Again, what established an image as pornography for her was based on personal experience, this time in the workplace:

Carol: "The only time that I've related porn is in porn magazines which make me a bit confused because I've been in workplaces where guys have these magazines with tits and things like that and I've felt humiliated by going over to the workshop and them looking at these magazines and then looking up and seeing me - a couple of tits y'know - and that really offended me!"

Carol still draws a distinction between mainstream 'soft-core' such as *Baywatch* and pornography, although she admits that the distinction confuses her. She saw pornography essentially as 'seeing' 'penetration' - 'penises coming in and out'. The ambiguousness of whether the sex in *Basic Instinct* is real or not excludes it as porn.

### **Cultural Expectations**

The university educated group expressed different reactions to how they felt society expected them to feel about pornography. Leticia, raised a Catholic, claimed that she was expected to 'abhor pornography' and this in turn makes her see it as 'naughty but nice'. Leticia expected that while her peers would be open-minded and accepting about her watching pornography, she thought that women her mother's age group wouldn't want her to watch it.

Kelly experienced a similar reaction with regards to older women: 'Older women would expect me to condemn it or I'm a whore?' The strength of the expected reaction, that watching pornography may ostracise her as a 'whore', is testament to the secrecy and fear that that many women reported. It is interesting to note that although Kelly expected the strongest negative reaction to

her watching pornography, she also claimed that as she was raised in a non-religious home, sex was treated as 'perfectly natural':

'My generation more than any other thinks that there's nothing wrong with pornography and that it should be an equal thing, and that we've got a say too ..and if you think pornography is bad then don't watch it - it's no longer necessarily for men's pleasure and degrading women - I think, well I'm hoping that we're getting a bit past that'

Carol, likewise, reports that the 'whole thing behind' (pornography) is the 'secrecy and that fear that goes with it.'

### **Issues of Identification and Representation**

Participants in this group had never seen hard-core pornography before. There were significant differences between participants in their approach to different forms of pornography. While one woman identified most with 'Deep Throat', and found 'Baywatch' the most unrepresentative and offensive, another woman felt she most identified with the Candida Royalle clip even though she found it restrictive in its construction of a 'women's' fantasy.

### **Issues of Identification and Representation in Pornography Made-for-Men**

Most of the hard-core forms of pornography were rejected on the basis that it failed to create an illusion conducive to pleasure in the text, thus inhibiting identification.

A common theme expressed in all groups was a perception of anal sex being painful, and for that reason, any identification with the text where anal sex was featured was interpreted negatively. Kelly's response is a case in point, although she claimed pornography was generally positive, she strongly identified anal sex with pain, and thus identified pain with the text:

Kelly: 'I got offended by the anal sex, I just can't conceive of how that could not be painful and when they're just going and going and going and going I was thinking that poor girl she's being tortured here and she's being paid for it and she's putting up with it because he's not coming yet - y'know why isn't he coming? - that's upsetting!'

Kelly also associated pain with the way sex scenes were extended in hard-core. Once again negotiating her response according to her own experience regarding sex, negatively identified with these scenes:

'The first one (Carol Lynn) I felt so sorry for her on the sofa and the second one as well - it looked to me that she was enjoying herself but I couldn't see that - I can't think that she's enjoying herself because it's just too ikky' ... 'in a way that's how impersonal a rape would be - there was obviously no connection between the people who were doing it, no affection at all'

Although the text presents both the extended nature of the sex and anal sex to be pleasurable, both Kelly and Leticia negotiated the textual construction of pleasure with their own experience therefore they rejected identification with texts where these elements were present.

Kelly commented that identification with the 'made-for-men' pornography was inhibited by the unrealistic and unrepresentative women on-screen:

Kelly: 'I just couldn't get into that much make-up that just turned me off straight away - nobody I know looks like that' ... 'that German one (Carol Lynn) that was just a farce that wasn't even - it wasn't upsetting it was just nothing, strange, not erotic at all'

Carol: '... *Baywatch*, I think it's just the 90's - y'know false tits stuff.- *Baywatch* is the most offensive of the lot and it doesn't show anything'

To different degrees all of the group members acceded that elements of different male-identified pornography depicted representations of sex that they identified with and enjoyed:

Kelly: 'Lesbian sex was fun to watch - the girls were having fun!, not trying to be weird, just sexual!...

Leticia: 'Woman/woman scenes seem gentle and loving ..there is no thrusting or overt sexual prowess so it is non-threatening..' .. 'the one with the woman on the table (Carol Lynn), found that quite stimulating at the start, but felt it went on for way too long..'

Both Carol and Kelly enjoyed the sexual representations in *Deep Throat*, identifying with elements of fantasy and playfulness in the text. Perhaps this was owing to the originality and seemingly uncontrived nature of the text; and the fact that the women appeared to enjoy themselves:

Kelly: 'I thought the hard-core one of the 70's was quite radical really because it was just like y'know ..it was just like women's porno - y'know the women had two guys on her ..what more could you ask for' .... (the) 'classic '70's style was amusing'

Carol: (after agreeing that she never 'really watches it') ..I like a bit of life and action as well- that hard-core one, it was funny ..I just thought that that was classic coming from the '70's - all that camerawork was just really interesting y'know ..nothing that I really got a kick off, but it was o.k y'know'

It was common for the women in this group, as in all the groups, to identify most positively with the texts where the women actors appeared to be enjoying themselves. For Kelly, this fact

appears two sided: pleasure in identification with women who appear to enjoy themselves and rejecting texts where the women looked bored or unhappy: '..some (of the actresses) I felt sad for - looked like victims...others were more into it so no guilt watching - no pity.'

Leticia raised the point that the 'realness' of the text related closely to her identification with and pleasure in the texts. The Carol Lynn clip was described as being 'too European - not real'. She postulated that identification with pornographic imagery would be more conceivable in a New Zealand setting with New Zealand actors: 'It is too removed from my own lifestyle - if it was more like N.Z. people and scenes it would mean more to me. The people are generally too stereotypical - porno stars - bronzed, blonde, fit'. The reality of the text, and the possibility of 'realness' was dependant on identification with 'real' local characters and scenes.

Evidence of pleasure in women on-screen was closely linked to identification with images of sexual action by all participants. Carol attributed the lack of female orgasm and pleasure in actresses to the fact that 'women's anatomy doesn't show pleasure - and doesn't have an erection'. However, Kelly claimed that 'the women on the table had a pumped clitoris' therefore identifying with the scene. When conceiving of what an 'ideal pornography/erotica would be like, Kelly responded: 'no cum shots'..'female orgasm'.

The group strongly related their personal sexual experience and history to the construction of sexual representations on screen. The comparison was integral to interpreting hard-core being positive or negative for them.

### **Issues of Identification and Representation in Pornography Made-for-Women**

'Made-for-women' pornography was generally perceived by the group to construct sex in a more positive way than in hard-core, offering points of identification and pleasure for a women audience.

Although Kelly asserted that she most identified with 'made-for-women' erotica, Leticia felt that Candida Royale's *Three Sisters* was 'quite possible, apart from the fact that the acting was shit' thus she identified with the scenario, but didn't identify the text as pleasurable. Leticia felt the 'close-ups' present in 'made-for-men' pornography were unrealistic, whereas the construction of *Three Sisters* was more realistic (and representative) in that sense: 'the camera wasn't - it was a still shot and they didn't really get into that close-up stuff did they?' Even as she stated her

identification with *Three Daughters*, Leticia asserted the offensiveness of the male assuming a patronising attitude toward the woman:

'I get offended, I get annoyed y'know in that piano teacher one when he was being authoritative 'this is not how you play' ...is that 'sposed to be a woman's fantasy? - to be yelled at and told you're wrong - been a "naughty girl" ..... 'the male power/domination pisses me off ... the piano teacher - he dominated her - I would've thought that was made for men.'

Candida Royalle asserts that she produces 'erotica for women' that reflects what women fantasise about, however to Leticia, this fails to represent her conception of 'women's' fantasies, and appears more representative of male fantasy.

It is interesting to note that Kelly read the same scenario in a completely contrary way: '...the one on the rug ..that was really cool because he was getting into it and then he said 'Oh - what are you doing, you're very bad!' like he was trying to recover from his feelings or something - y'know - he was *in* there!' The piano teacher's attitude toward the woman was interpreted as him being 'out' of control, having relinquished control in the throws of pleasure. Kelly asserted that 'build-up' and a predication of 'frustration' built into the narrative most fuelled her identification with a narrative and thus the possibility of sexual fantasy: 'I'm a real romantic so I really get off on implied romance and girlie stuff'. Leticia offered an interpretation of this fact, that it was 'a lot of what we were bought up with though isn't it' and also claimed that the difference in hard-core is that 'it doesn't muck around' with courtship or context. A context where the narrative explains and justifies sexual activity was also seen as crucial to erotic identification by Kelly.

*Sacred Sex II* was to Kelly the most representative of 'what women want' out of the clips shown:

'I think the closest thing to what women want is that tantric sex one - the others were just ..where they were talking about how wonderful and how much in love they were and that y'know that's where it's at!' ..... 'I could relate to the couple'.

Carol felt that *Sacred Sex II* failed to represent what she wants : 'who needs that sort of education when you can learn between two people?'; believing also that the intense intimacy of the lovemaking on screen shouldn't be shared 'with people who are going to get a kick from that'. Leticia also felt that although *Sacred Sex II* was different (the people 'weren't perfect') she 'felt more guilty watching that tantric sex one because (she) felt like it was intruding.'



### **Pleasure and Resistance**

Resistance to convergence (resistance to the implicit expectation in the text that women's sexuality is subordinate to men's) arises from negotiating meaning and pleasure in the texts according to participant background and knowledge.

Context was regarded as integral to identification and therefore pleasure. The disassociative nature of hard-core, where sex is anonymous and void of context beyond a setting where the sex takes place, lead Kelly to associate much male-identified pornography as being like she would imagine a 'rape to be' with no connection or obvious affection between the actors, but rather an 'animalistic' representation of the baser elements of sex: 'that whole thing I was just thinking of dogs rutting.'

Kelly: 'For me seeing the dick go in and out of the fanny - that's just not very exciting at all - y'know that (*Three Daughters*) was more beautiful - a lot more pleasant and you can get off on what their faces are doing and what their hands are doing instead of just genitalia'.

In contrast, Candida Royalle was seen to portray a bond between the partners 'you knew that he was her piano teacher and that they liked each other ...and that made it different because you were following the story', thus it was easier for her to 'pretend that they were an actual couple even if they weren't a couple in real life.' Hard-core pornography lacked the critical distance that Kelly felt more comfortable: 'in the other ones it was very difficult to believe that these people were (a 'real' couple).' The contrast Kelly makes between the 'made-for-women' pornography being accessible as fantasy owing to its 'realness' and the rejection of hard-core sex as 'too-real' is ironic, but points to Kelly's feeling that fantasy is created in distance from the text.

'Romantic' programmes, predicated on frustration and sexual non-fulfilment afford Kelly critical distance where her imagination ('you'd start imagining what they *should* be doing') allows her to fantasise about sex: '..non-fulfilment is quite exciting - I quite like not having sex actually!' By contrasting qualities she associated with women's pleasure, (build-up, contextual sex, soft-focus and close-ups of faces and hands) with hard-core, (as being associated with 'rape' and 'dogs rutting'), Kelly aligned her sexuality with social expectations of what women enjoy in terms of sexual imagery. In accepting that 'made-for-women' pornography reflects her enjoyment of 'the erotic', she accepts that the erotica of *Three Daughters* is reflective of her sexuality.

Carol responded to Kelly's comment regarding the sex in hard-core being like 'dogs rutting' as being accurate, by claiming '..that's what goes on - that's what happens when you're making love!' Hard-core was therefore seen by her as more reflective of what is 'real' in sex.

*Deep Throat*, Carol claimed, fuelled her fantasies:

'I thought that hard core one (of the '70's) was quite radical really because it was just like - y'know "this mate of mine she hasn't tried absolutely everything" so they really gave her a go - that was just like women's porno y'know the woman had two guys on her y'know - what more could you ask for - three men or something like that? - it was that whole fantasy thing too - if she can't have an orgasm well lets try two or lets try all of these positions.'

In talking about *Deep Throat*, Carol relates her comments to the narrative, contextualising the sex with a story. Her comment that this was 'women's porno' where she felt the woman to be enjoying herself, focused the film as an accessible fantasy for women, particularly as it came complete - with male harem!

Both Leticia and Kelly described the male actors as 'ugly', 'unattractive' 'gross' and 'fat', not to mention the fact that they 'never smiled or looked happy'(Leticia). Leticia described the women as looking 'severe and unfriendly' and wondered if they were bored by sex in their private lives. For hard-core to be perceived as pleasurable, actors needed to look like they were enjoying themselves. Kelly was the only participant to align her personal enjoyment of the text with evident male pleasure: 'anybody can fake an uh uh uh uh uh for five minutes but to see pleasure on a *man's* face now that would be cool...I would like to see her pleasing him without y'know just sucking cock, and y'know she's not enjoying it and he doesn't even seem to care'. Kelly also felt that if the women looked 'into it', she was able to feel free of guilt in watching.

Hard-core's generic proliferation of 'cum-shots' was interpreted negatively as distasteful and unrepresentative, and a portrayal of 'female orgasm' (Kelly) was called for. All group participants agreed that generic focus in hard-core on the phallus and 'cum-shots' was a limited representation of male pleasure, lacking both genuineness and substance in reality. Kelly felt that *Three Daughters* was more based on evidence of pleasure, as the expression on the piano teacher's face reflected to her, that 'he was getting into it'.

Privileging male sexuality in hard-core was highlighted as inhibiting pleasure for this group. Both Kelly and Leticia agreed that the narrative in hard-core focused on male pleasure:

Leticia: 'the men just did not move ..it was weird and the women were doing all the action they were running around..

Kelly: ..'and the women sucking off the guys like that - I can't imagine any woman getting really excited about that - guys would because it's like number one male fantasy..'

Although Kelly's comment seems to contradict her earlier statement that she would like to see the men showing genuine pleasure and enjoyment in hard-core, the centrality of male sexuality in hard-core texts denies evidence of other pleasures that don't centre on male orgasm.

Leticia felt that she didn't find hard-core as derogatory to women as she expected: 'one didn't dominate the other'. She also reported that hard-core didn't show men to be as powerful as she anticipated. She read the Royale clip, however, as exhibiting: 'male power, (and) domination ..I would've thought that that was made for men!'

Although Leticia claimed that prior to the group she 'never really watched' any porn, and felt that the clips that were shown 'didn't really do it' for her, she claimed that 'as long as she knew participants were there of their own free will' she would now be interested in watching porn alone or with a partner, and expressed interest in 'an orgy scene' where 'normal people in a group suddenly discover that they want to arouse each other.' In accessing her thoughts about sexuality, even in talking about the examples of porn that the group watched, Leticia appeared to negotiate her own personal 'agency' regarding what she felt to be erotic and addressed her sexual fantasies.

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## **Women's Motorcycle Association - a Negotiated Reading**

Women in this group had a classically liberal response to the use and distribution of pornographic images - that they should be freely available to anyone who wants to use them privately, but that they should be restricted publicly to 'erotic' images. In the context of this group, the process of negotiation predominantly takes the form of acknowledging that while access to erotic images is important and can be pleasurable, the construction of the images, particularly in hard-core, are often unrepresentative in terms of their own sexuality.

### **Definitions of a Pornographic Text**

The women's motorcycle group agreed that 'erotica' was about what was concealed. Anne described pornography as 'close-ups of sex organs and stuff like that' ..'it's what it doesn't show me'. Claire claimed that she didn't think either 'Baywatch' or 'Basic Instinct' were porn. All agreed that porn was 'explicit' sex that showed 'genitals'.

### **Cultural Expectations**

Considering social expectations from the point-of-view of the biking subculture, Cayley claimed that pornography is 'just part of it'. They frequently watch pornography at other people's houses and she claims that she 'doesn't get' a 'shock reaction' from watching pornography.

As she works in a conservative (male dominated) organisation, Anne reported that she 'certainly wouldn't tell people that she watched porn'. She thinks that society lumps pornography and erotica together and sees it as 'taboo/dirty'. Anne states that although talking about porn is taboo in public, she feels that it is o.k. in private. This influences her to 'be careful who I would talk to about porn and what views I would declare publicly', particularly at work, where it may 'damage my reputation in the organisation'.

All of the women in this group agreed that they did not feel guilty about watching porn.

### **Issues of Identification and Representation**

There was a mixed response in the group as to how the images in both 'made-for-women' and 'made-for-men' pornography was received.

### **Issues of Identification and Representation in Pornography Made-for-Men**

The members of this group identified more strongly with pornography 'made-for-women', and rejected many of the constructions of sex in hard-core - interpreted as largely unrepresentative of female desire.

The group members, particularly Anne, clearly distinguished between 'erotica' and pornography. Erotica was seen as far more positive and representative of situations that reflected 'real' life. Erotica was also thought to be contextual, with a 'story', seduction, and build-up of sexual tension. Anne explained that while she could see the situation in the *Three Daughters* clip as conceivable, the 'other ones were not there for me y'know'...'there's no way I could ever see myself or could, or ever want to in the other ones'. Erotica was clearly linked to identification, pornography with a decisive removal of important aspects for Anne, specifically 'romance' 'mystery' and 'emotion'.

Although others in the group claimed that they found none of the images in hard-core offensive, Anne was specific about 'anal sex' which she was adamantly opposed to.

Hard-core images of porn were also rejected on the basis of its privileging of masculine pleasure, 'I never saw a women orgasm!'(Anne) Anne also felt that the staging of the shots, the 'close-ups' of 'female genitalia' and the 'thrusting penis' influenced her lack of identification with hard-core.

Stereotypical images of women in pornography also contributed to a lack of identification. Cayley commented: 'the blonde hair and the heels and the bright red lips (disgusted facial expression) - the *tackiness* is definitely a turn-off.'

Interestingly, Cayley said that hard-core was a feature of the 'bikey' culture; an accepted and taken for granted element of the culture in which she was involved:

Cayley: 'The culture that I'm a part of - the biking culture - it's just a part of it - at different people's houses - it's not a big deal - both men and women watch it - for a coupla years now, I don't get that shock reaction.'

### **Issues of Identification and Representation in Pornography Made-for-Women**

'Made-for-women' pornography was far more positively received by this group. Anne claimed that the difference between male-identified and women-identified texts was clear: 'there's foreplay and there's both partners contributing, and I think the difference is that one's more realistic and she enjoys it'. Anne's comments obviously compare not only the difference between the texts, but also an appreciation of the effort at equality and privileging of female sexuality. Likewise Cayley who (liked) 'the attempt at equality'. When asked if the Candida Royalle clip addressed their fantasies, both Cayley and Anne agreed:(Anne) 'I could identify with that'.

Identification that appeared to represent female sexuality was closely related to context - a believable setting and a likely story line. The Carol Lynn clip which featured a women tied to a camellia bush where the sex takes place anonymously with partners who have no connection to one another was seen as 'gratification for male only using nearest available female', whereas the Royalle clip was seen as realistic 'I could imagine myself in the situation' by Anne. Anne believed that women in general want more 'romance ..mystery... and ..emotion'.

Cayley replied in kind, commenting that 'I could definitely see that happening' with regards to the Royalle clip, whereas she said the 'made-for-men' pornography '(was) not there for me y'know'.

Although Fran accepted that 'there are some women out there (who) might like that', she 'couldn't bear' any of the pornography shown and didn't enter into the discussion except in a very limited way. When asked if she thought it was enjoyable, she agreed, but 'wouldn't get it out'.

### **Pleasure and Resistance**

A negotiated response accounts for ways in which the preferred meaning of women watching pornography is negotiated in terms of personal pleasures found in pornography made for both men and women. This group negotiated pleasure around identification with the context of pleasure and identification with the women in the texts. Although on the whole rejecting hard-core, the group reported significant areas of negotiated pleasure within male-identified pornography.

A feature of this group was their repeated assertion of freedom of choice where pornography was concerned. Pornography was seen as a personal freedom that should be freely available. Anne reiterates: 'For the world in general I would say that it's personal choice - if it's not stuck on your t.v. at all then the way things are is fine..'

Both Cayley and Anne felt that there were positive aspects to pornography. Cayley suggested that pornography offered her 'ideas', and Anne believed that porn was positive in that it provided 'spice' and 'supplement' to lovemaking when people have been in a 'relationship for a long time'.

Couching her responses in terms of culture, Anne expresses her concern that hard-core fails to represent women's sexuality, instead offering a false representation of what women want. She also highlights what she sees as the social repercussions of privileging male sexual gratification in hard-core, arguing that men may read these images as a 'right' to receiving sexual gratification in personal relationships. Anne believed that hard-core reflected men's sexuality - that it was about 'tits and arse': 'I think that's something that I have to accept about men - that they are more visual.' Anne claimed that male-oriented porn focussing on 'male gratification' could lead men to 'false expectations about what women want from sex and a relationship' (which) 'could ..cause some men to view sex and a relationship in the same light and require it to be male-dominated'.

In terms of what aspects of porn she found erotic, Anne replied 'building tension before any sexual act' and 'multiple male partners'. The only clip that featured 'multiple male partners' was *Deep Throat*- hard-core distinctively male-identified. In the realm of fantasy many of these



'ruptures' occurred; where women who ostensibly disagreed (even found 'offensive') with the construction of sexual images, (particularly in hard-core) nevertheless finding these images erotic.

Actresses in the texts who appeared to be enjoying themselves provided the strongest figures of identification in this group - with the 'erotica' of Candida Royalle perceived as being the most pleasurable for the women in the text: (Anne) 'it's more realistic,' .. 'she enjoys it'. Anne commented that she thought it was interesting that men found pornography so enthralling, considering the fact that they must feel insecure watching men 'with such big penises'. When I replied that the men (in the texts) 'supposedly satisfy her', she reiterated her belief that hard-core provided only male sexual pleasure in the text: 'really? - I don't think they do! - out of all of those, only he came - you didn't see her orgasm.'

Perhaps the most intriguing possibility of pornography providing pleasure was Cayley claiming that she and her husband 'get out ones with a guy with two penises and hermaphrodites and we just get a laugh...(even though) it doesn't really turn us on'. Overstated generic features, where the 'excesses' of the pornographic genre provides a 'camp' form of entertainment to Cayley. This was an unexpected pleasure of pornography. Pornography's 'camp' appeal was covertly stated in many of the groups - where the women admitted to finding different generic features absurd (particularly many of the seemingly absurd constructions of women 'pleasure') and therefore laughable.

## **Conclusion**

Participants agreed with the basic premise that male-identified pornography privileged male over female sexuality, thereby excluding women's pleasure. Importantly though, aspects of male-identified hard-core and 'made-for-women' erotica were negotiated as pleasurable. There was a tendency in both groups to identify most strongly with 'made-for-women' pornography, which was seen to more accurately reflect women's sexuality. Although many of the women agreed that images in hard-core were erotic, the construction of the form, particularly in its failure to address women as an audience and provide an adequate representation of what women found erotic was seen to inhibit pleasure by both audiences. It is significant that neither of the groups rejected erotic imagery, rather believed that there was room to expand on pornography's narrow confinement of sexuality within highly coded generic practices to include, and represent, women's sexuality.

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## Chapter 8

### AN OPPOSITIONAL DECODING

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#### Professional Women - an Oppositional Reading

An oppositional reading of pornography is one where pornography is interpreted in a contrary way to the dominant ideological position. Privileging of male over female sexuality where women's pleasure is precluded (the dominant encoding of hard-core pornography) is rejected as women in the professional group read hard-core as pleasurable. This group had all seen pornography before, with two out of three group members regularly watching pornography with their partners. Although the texts were thought to often misrepresent female sexuality, hard-core pornography was interpreted as more pleasurable than erotica 'made-for-women/couples'.

#### Definitions of A Pornographic Text

The professional women agreed that there was a distinction between pornography and erotica, and that pornography included 'penetration'; another described it as 'bang-bang'. Whereas *Basic Instinct* was described as erotica, *Baywatch* wasn't, although all the women agreed that it was both gratuitous and voyeuristic. Ruby described the distinction thus:

'Pornography is in the camerawork and in editing, and there is more movement in erotic films with the camera doing a lot more work ..in erotic movies you don't see cock or clit or dick..at all .. *Basic Instinct* I would call erotic, and not pornographic.'

All of the group members agreed that there was a distinction between pornography and erotica, as Grace commented:

'I believe pornography shows quite explicitly all body parts used for penetration and concentrates on the act of penetration quite exclusively' (whereas) .. 'erotica to me is more embedded in a story line, there is a definite tension between two ..people that builds up before it gets 'released' rather than the chance fuck in porn flicks.'

Tony: '(pornography is) the viewing of genitalia and/or the sex act'.. 'whereas erotica is tastefully produced ..'

All agreed that the 'erotic' could be defined in terms of what was concealed.

## Cultural Expectations

There was a strong expectation that women in general condemn women who watched pornography. This led the group to expect that others would think women would be interested in pornography only to condemn it. All of the women in the professional group agreed that they didn't feel guilty about watching pornography, even though they all felt society expected them to shun, and feel revolted by it. All group members didn't feel that they could share with others their experience of pornography openly:

Tony: 'We're expected not to watch it, get it out or consider it, very few people actually talk to me about it ...it's not something that you do, is it?'

Ruby: 'I wouldn't tell anyone or your credibility is ruined ..if you like pornography then you're a "bad woman".'

Tony: 'It's like you're agreeing with porn being male dominated and women are breasts, stereotypical.'

Tony perceived that others would think she agrees with all aspects of pornography's production if she admitted to watching pornography. Ruby, a 41 year old teacher said that this (the group) was the first time that she has ever spoken about watching pornography: '..you just don't do it, and you certainly don't say!'

Grace related this secrecy regarding pornography to being: 'very careful mentioning sexuality as a woman, as men regard it as a come-on'.

Grace: 'Sometimes I wouldn't mind, but ..most of the time I don't want to initiate ..you cannot have a sexually teasing talk with men - they do contain yourself as a sexually assertive person, completely exciting the person that you're talking to or disgusting them ..I know men are sort of openly joking, but I think that men find it frightening, and women fall into this category of being a (Ruby: 'good girl!') yeah! That's the feeling that I have..'

Tony responded by stating that 'most guys are intimidated by it' (a woman who watches pornography).

Ruby: 'I think society expects me to be horrified and repulsed by pornography; i.e. Anything explicitly sexual. If I am influenced it is in being reluctant to talk about it openly, and I feel that my choices (personal and sexual) are restricted. I think that other women expect me to shun pornography entirely - to protest about it mainly; I don't talk about it to anyone except those woman who by virtue of long friendships do not see it as deviant, disgusting or weird.'

Grace: 'Most women I know I have not breached this topic with. My feeling is that it is probably safer this way, rather than be looked upon as a 'loose' women.'

The women in this group felt the social climate surrounding pornography was stifling and restrictive. It was a shared belief that men contained women who were sexually assertive in discussing topics such as porn, regarding any conversation around it as a come-on, or feeling intimidated and escaping the perceived 'threat' of the sexually assertive woman.

### **Issues of Identification and Representation**

In terms of identification, the professional group tended toward identifying most strongly with images of women that presented women in the text as powerful and sexually dominant. They also tended to reject the 'couples' pornography as being too clichéd, confining representations of women within textual constructions that assume appeal to a women audience through images of sex that emphasise faces and 'emotions' during sex. One woman claimed the examples of hard-core used were 'too soft!' All participants in the group have had wide experience of watching pornography, perhaps this is why they appeared very specific about which parts addressed their fantasies, thus their interpretations were discerning and self-aware in terms of what each individual found erotic.

### **Issues of Identification and Representation in Pornography Made-for-Men**

Of the three women int he group, both Ruby and Tony admitted that they watched pornography regularly, and Grace claimed that she would 'quite comfortably' watch erotica/pornography with her partner. All of the women in the group exhibited a high degree of self-awareness in discerning that which they found both erotic and unrepresentative in hard-core.

Each of the group members gave different responses to the question regarding which elements they found offensive. Ruby related elements of hard-core pornography that she found offensive closely to her 'own sexual history', particularly 'any suggestion of physical force'. Specific to the clips chosen, 'the cum shot on the woman's face or shoving his prick in her face' was considered offensive by her. Tony didn't find the hard-core shown offensive at all, claiming that 'you know what you're in for', and 'the women choose to do it'.

All of the women agreed that *Baywatch* 'is just for men', yet Grace claimed that she thought hard-core was as 'much for women' as men. Although each of the women watched hard-core they were forward in expounding what they found to be absurd in terms of representing women's sexuality:

Ruby: 'I don't think that any of what I've seen this afternoon I would regard as ..I don't know about female ..of my (I can't speak for everybody) sexuality.' ... 'I find the women really plastic ..stereotype and moan moan ..yeah the dialogue ..even rolling 'round on the driveway! ..I mean that would be more exciting! ..even if they didn't have blonde hair and big boobs - and I mean the shoes on!(sarcastically) - I find that really really - I never fuck with my bloody high-heels on! ..even the black vinyl stuff ..they all feel masculine'

Grace: '..the wham-bam fuck scenes I find ..mechanical, and the positions were idiotic, the guys weren't even hard - it was all so pathetic!'

As in other groups, the issue of 'safe sex' was raised in this group as well: 'safe sex is left out!' (Ruby) Practising safe sex was a significant aspect in terms of the degree of freedom the women felt in the process of fantasy creation. Similarly, other elements were picked out as stunting fantasy, such as the actors looking bored, bad music and production details, anal sex, general lack of 'realism' (in the staple contrived unspontaneous sexual manoeuvres) and a privileging of masculine fantasies:

Ruby: '..fucking up the arse - you don't wanna see that ..and you get a good writer ..and the music ..some decent music, not porno music..'

Tony: 'I always turn the sound down - the music, god it drives me up the wall!'

Ruby: '(production details are) very important ..because you get distracted by all the shit ..bad technique, bad lighting, bad music, bad acting'

Tony: ' It needs to look as realistic as possible'.. (like to see) actors who can actually act! As if they enjoy it!'

Ruby: '..even when it's set up like a women's fantasy coming from a women...it's still a guys dream planted in a women's body!'

Identifying with representations of sexuality in hard-core doesn't exclude Ruby from building her own fantasies and reactions around the images that are available: 'these expressions of female sexuality and what I want as a female are two different things' ..(yet) 'there is no (female) point-of-view ..in reality ..it's just in the head'. Ruby's assertion assumes that hard-core images are appropriated and redefined by her according to what she would like to see - ideals created in her own fantasies.

Tony likewise indicated that 'equality' in pornography is dependant on what the viewer does to the image: '..it comes from the viewer as to whether it's (equal) ..depends on what you want to do

with it'. These responses attest to both Tony and Ruby actively reinterpreting the available images in their own rhetoric - a self-motivated agency.

As a group, the professional women engaged in more philosophical, social interpretations regarding the function and purpose of hard-core, contextualising the images of sexuality within their personal experience. To illustrate, Grace explains her contact with pornography as being imbibed in cultural prohibition:

Grace: 'The last experience that I had was when I was in Germany - I would visit movie theatres, it was really naughty - it's all imbedded in this "kinky" contact and then you'd dash off to bed.'

Ruby forwarded that the source of the enduring appeal of essentially clichéd images of sexuality to men found repetitively in pornography revolved around a need to keep sex simple, and escape the complexities of real sexual relationships which, she believed, they relied on women for:

Grace: 'I wonder if men are that simplistic - tits and arse?'

Ruby: 'yeah I think men are that bloody simplistic ..they can't handle it when women show initiative ..sex is too complex isn't it ..yeah well you have to keep it simple!'

Tony: 'this is "I hate men" isn't it?'

Ruby: 'well no it's not, I think it's actually quite sad that a lot of the men that I've been out with ..even Boris - he's a fucken sexual novice for someone who's been around like he has - in terms of emotion or technique or sensitivity or arousal - he's learned more off me than anyone - men look to women for that re-education I think - and they look to you sexually to put them in touch with themselves - they're looking to you to show them how to be sexual!'

The construction of sexuality within hard-core pornograpahy clips were negotiated according to personal experience. Although there were many images that were interpreted negatively and seen to be unrepresentative of 'women's' sexuality; the women in this group were highly self-aware in their appropriation of images of sexuality that they found both erotic and ridiculous. The interaction this group reported with hard-core texts reveal that they were neither completely free to create their own meanings from the text, nor fully constrained by the textual constructions themselves.

### **Issues of Identification and Representation in pornography Made-for-Women**

Grace tentatively responded positively to erotica produced to appeal to women, the other women responded scathingly to it, seeing it as both boring and fantastically unrepresentative. The *Sacred Sex* 'made-for-couples' clip had a mixed reaction from this group.



Whereas Grace thought Candida Royalle's *Three Daughters* was 'really sweet ..something that you'd show your daughter', she also claimed that although she liked the idea of the story line, 'it was pretty idiotically executed'. Ruby responded to the same text by arguing that it was 'boring' with 'crappy acting'. Both Ruby and Tony saw little distinction between the construction of the 'made-for-men' pornography and Candida Royalle's 'women's' erotica in terms of whose fantasies they were addressing:

Ruby: 'even if it's set up like it's a women's fantasy coming from a women ..it's still a guys dream planted in a women's body'.

Tony: 'I felt it didn't (Candida Royalle) appeal to women - at the end of the day it was the women was still portrayed as being subservient and the male dominant''

On the individual question sheet (see appendix B), Ruby rated the Royalle clip poorly, reasoning that the 'weedy men' 'production details' and the 'story-line' were all inferior. Conversely, Ruby rated the 'made-for-men' clips highly, as they had 'better production details overall.

*Sacred Sex* was rated poorly by Ruby, who argued that it was an attempt at making sex 'religious', relying on 'sexuality being posited as a religion.' Ruby also stated that she felt *Sacred Sex* was both 'dated' and 'unrealistic'. Tony related well to the *Sacred Sex* representation of 'erotica'. Her comment 'I'm going to try that now .. I'm going to do the whole thing ..to see what he feels - what she feels' indicates a high level of identification with the text. Grace reported mixed feelings:

'I thought it was rather sweet and new age. It neglected completely that you can have real exciting "quickies"...but I liked the whole softness of the setting.'

Although *Three Daughters* claimed to represent 'women's desires', the clip was viewed by the group as failing at this objective, particularly as the text failed to portray the women as actively taking initiative in the scene:

Tony: 'I think that Candida's attempt to re-equalise doesn't work at all!

Ruby: 'I think that it didn't work because all she did was move the voyeur into a subjective position, but it's the same voyeur - by moving the voyeur into a female body watching a couple fucking that somehow makes the couple cool - she got fucked as well!'

Tony: 'and if she got caught she would've been in the shit!'

There was a general feeling that the woman in the text was still contained - by the threat of being 'caught' in the narrative, and in the orchestration of the scene - she is still 'fucked' and fails to take initiative.

### **Pleasure and Resistance**

An oppositional reading of pornography is one where the women read male-identified pornography as pleasurable for them, even as they recognise that the textual codes privilege male sexual pleasure in hard-core pornography. Participants in this group were highly self-aware of what they found erotic, perhaps owing to an implicit belief that pornography and sexually explicit imagery in general is an aspect of their sexuality and not simply a male domain.

There was extensive discussion of depictions of sex in terms of power and equality, as negotiated between what the texts expressed and personal experience and opinion:

Grace: 'I dunno if it (sex) has to be equal - there has to be give and take - over a long term.

I'm not offended by women in positions of less power than men - it evens out - but what I know of pornography that's not usually the case - it doesn't even out'

Tony: '..but she always enjoys it!'

Ruby: 'The assumption is that women enjoy it - they go round and round and I think my god, if that were me I'd be fucken unhappy about that and then I start to think well maybe that's not ..and then I start to worry or wonder whether it's going to continue or not - and sometimes I'll stop watching a film ..when I reach that point by myself.'

Perceived enjoyment in terms of the extent to which the actress looks to be enjoying the sex is closely related to the degree of identification and pleasure. If identification with the scenario ('if that were me') is compared to with personal sexual experience, (in this case the realisation that sex extended as long as it is in hard-core texts is painful), the result can often be repulsion, and ultimate rejection of the text.

Negotiating pleasure involved a process of reading the texts as sexual fantasy:

Ruby: '*Sex II* wasn't bad - those two women together was quite sexually exciting!' 'In that female to female one, I was reacting to the women wearing the dildo - in a female to female relationship I lean more towards a masculine role than a female one.'...

Ruby wasn't the only participant who reported enjoying women/women scenes:

Grace: 'I liked the woman on woman clip (on sofa). It was real exciting to see these two get it on. It looked as if they truly enjoyed getting having sex with each other - it was energetic, nice bodies and enough kinkiness to turn me on'

Tony also claimed that she found the lesbian sex erotic. Perhaps this scene in *Sex II*, depicting women as both acting enthusiastic and energetic and taking control in the sexual encounters

(which were commonly reported ingredients necessary to invoking fantasy and pleasure from viewing) explain the popularity of the scene. The lesbian scene in *Sex II* was the most positively viewed scene in all of the examples shown to the group, in complete contradiction to the women in the feminist group who read the text as violent and unrepresentative of lesbian desire.

Women in texts who expressed initiative and sexual power over others represented more accurately what the women would like to see in terms of sexually explicit material. Powerful images of women's sexuality revolved around discussion of mainstream texts that engaged in forms of female sexual power/powerlessness.

Ruby: '*Basic Instinct* is about manipulation and control so that has some resonance for me ..that part is the only thing that I would have any identification with in terms of relating to my sexuality..' '*Basic Instinct* is about being able to express sexual power over a man..' '.I like the explicit sexual power Sharon Stone's character exhibits - I like the (unusual) referenced bisexuality'

Grace: 'The scene in *Basic Instinct* with the dancing and the build-up with a sexually aggressive woman, assertive too - I couldn't identify with that - well I wish I would've!'

Both the male-identified and women-identified texts were viewed as failing to engage with the complexities of sex and sexual power. As Grace claimed, pornography turned her on 'for a very short while' whereas 'erotica' that explores the nature of sexual power more explicitly, such as '*Basic Instinct*' 'turns (her) on for quite a while.'

Depicting 'equality' in pornographic texts was discussed as part of the wider and more complex dynamic of power within personal experience:

Ruby: 'What is equality?...there's always someone getting fucked so there's always going to be a power imbalance - how equal can it be when someone's gonna end up underneath' (What about woman on top?)

Tony: 'To me - it's just another position

Ruby: 'It feels equal when you feel the power is actually yours - you're in control - you can tie him up, you can control it, wind him down - I like being on top because it feel like I've got control of the whole thing - that's why I like tying guys up'

The group reported many, diverse pleasures found in watching pornography:

Tony: 'it's a starter' .. 'seeing what they get up to - the different styles, positions.' ... 'it heightens the senses, makes me feel free and curious, willing to experiment and try new things'

Ruby: (I watch pornography) 'so that I can let go - and concentrate (on sex)'

Ruby: '..you learn which ones (your lovers) got out of the shops and what kind of responses to make ..and what men find erotic - they're for sexual stimulation'

Ruby: 'I learn from pornography; it permits me to develop a barometer for my own sexual desires/sexuality. By watching videos I can see my fantasies are 'normal'; I can test out whether they would still appeal after watching elements of them on film - I have also learned to laugh at sexual behaviour'... 'it's reassuring.. a way of informing.'

Grace: '(pornography is positive in that) 'it can work for woman too' ... 'it can help me get turned on real quickly'.

Pleasure was expressed by the women in both having control over choosing what is viewed, and the circumstances of the viewing context in their personal lives. All of the women were very explicit in stating that they never watched any pornography in circumstances of coercion or displeasure. As Grace forwarded in relation to watching pornography without mixed feelings: 'I watch it for myself or with a partner and it's our/my private pleasure.' Similarly, Tony said 'I watch it when *I* want to, so I know what to expect - no mixed feelings'.

Although pornography offered many pleasures for this group, they relished the opportunity to offer feedback regarding how pornography could be improved to better reflect and represent their sexual fantasies. Ruby commented on overall production detail, claiming that although the 'made-for-men' pornography had better production details, it was still found wanting a 'good writer' and 'decent music' because 'you get distracted by all the shit - bad technique, bad lighting, bad music, bad acting'. Ruby was particularly caustic about the generic conventions, commenting that she would like to see: 'more genuineness, less conventions like plastic women and stereotyped camera-work; more female/female sexual behaviour; more overall touching/physical contact; less staged sets and costumes'. Conventions such as the enduring wearing of 'stilettos' by women in porn texts, long fingernails, 'cum shots' and 'poor acting' where the participants look bored, detracted from the possible enjoyment that Ruby envisaged with the scrapping of these features.

Seeing actors, and in particular women enjoying themselves was especially important to pleasure. Ruby claimed that the two women in *Sex II* looked as if 'they actually enjoyed themselves'. As

did many of the women in other groups, Tony reported that she enjoyed the Carol Lynn scene 'where she's on the table, she's enjoying that!' Perhaps this woman was an unusually adept actress or perhaps the construction of the scene was read as a more accessible fantasy than in the other clips.

All of the women in this group were very specific about what they did and didn't like about pornography and erotica. In negotiating images that the women would like to see expressed in pornography, and in talking about aspects of hard-core that they found erotic, the participants in this group exhibited a high degree of discernment and clearly expressed views regarding sexually explicit imagery. There was a willingness to symbolically conceive of fantasies, as well as willingness to talk about what aspects of hard-core that both inhibited and advanced personal fantasy:

Grace: '..when I have sex with Harry, I sometimes try to imagine what it would be like to be a man - when I watch pornography, I think that I tend to identify more with the women but in my imagination I certainly would like to be, for once in my life, a guy. (Ruby: 'I'd like to be the man mm')

Tony: 'Didn't like the old balding guys - guys need to be good-looking, but to be quite honest I mostly look at the women... 'fat, balding men, soft penises (and) too much body hair' (were a distinct turn-off!)

Grace: '(the men in hard-core were ) generally awesomely awful! Off with their heads!'

## Conclusion

Areas of resistance to the construction of women's pleasures and sexualities in pornography offer insights into how women who watch and enjoy pornography do so, in the context of realising that it's constructions don't attempt to privilege their pleasure or accommodate their fantasies. Even an oppositional reading of pornography is negotiated by this group to a large extent. The texts themselves aren't received as wholly representative of the group's sexual fantasies and desires as women, nor are they rejected as unrepresentative. There is a process of continuous negotiation in how the women interpret pornographic images, a struggle that is part of the wider social and cultural climate that situates women who watch pornography as 'outside' traditional notions of women's behaviour. These women who do watch and take pleasure in hard-core face considerable censure by others. Ruby's situation was a case in point: this group was the first place where she felt able to talk freely about pornography, among friends that she had trusted and known for years.

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## Chapter 9

### CONCLUSION

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This concluding chapter deals with discussion of my findings: what implications does this research suggest and what impact might it have on existing relations within both the field of feminist theory regarding pornography and the construction of images of sexuality in our culture?

In Chapter 2, I established the fact that although there are different positions on the pornography debate generated from within feminist and from popular positions within society, the dominant position within feminist debate on pornography has been that of the anti-pornography, pro-censorship campaigners. As a 'dominant ideology thesis', anti-pornography feminists have argued that pornography can only be read as the 'sexual subordination of women'. Although this position has been challenged on many fronts, the most notable challenge has generated from anti-censorship (anti-anti-pornography) feminists who argue for various reasons that a climate of fear, and withdrawal from debate on sexuality is created by a censorship driven campaign. Anti-censorship feminists have lamented the lack of research into ways that women do consume pornography, despite the very nature of pornography that precludes women's pleasure in the texts. My research exists as a challenge to the anti-pornography position, a position that transparently posits pornography as meaning 'sexual subordination of women'. Although pornographic texts overwhelmingly privilege male over female sexuality, dominant textual codes do not necessitate a single reading of pornography, but are worked on by an actively interpreting audience.

Chapter 3 established my method of enquiry as the encoding/decoding model proposed by Stuart Hall (1973) which forwards communication as a process where meaning is circulated between producers, modes of communication and audiences, and which suggests that audiences either prefer the dominant meaning encoded within texts by the producers, negotiate meaning according to localised knowledge or oppose the dominant meaning. Chapter 3 also establishes my research as fitting into and extending the cultural studies paradigm. Although subordinated texts (often programmes/films associated with women audiences such as soap-operas) and audiences have been the traditional fields of inquiry within cultural studies of audiences, my research parallels



studies such as Morley's (1981) research into ways that people with subordinated identities read the current affairs programme 'Nationwide' using the encoding/decoding model of analysis. The wider methodological issues of gender as a prime signifier of meaning, as well as ideological considerations, and the role of textual analysis are covered alongside considerations pertaining to my research. Specifically, the themes by which my discussion of focus groups findings are organised as well as chosen texts, are justified.

As my research was based in audience theory, I employed focus-groups as my specific method of audience research. Allowing for dynamic interaction between the texts and audience groups, focus groups were the most practical and relevant method of gathering data on ways that women watch pornography. Practical aspects of focus group inquiry and my research process are explained in Chapter 4.

Pornography's development exists in a particular social and cultural context, both reflecting cultural/historical developments in social discourse concerning sexual representations, and contributing to the creation and reproduction of those social norms. Analysing the changing function and representation of pornography within capitalism and the ways that pornography operates ideologically to reproduce meaning regarding sexual representations, involved tracing the historical development of pornography from its roots in 'stag' movies and alternative cinema and also semiotically analysing the chosen texts, representative of 'made-for-men' and 'made-for-women' pornography.

Pornography doesn't simply function as sexual subordination of women even though the dominant textual encoding of hard-core reveals it to privilege male over female sexuality, precluding women's pleasure. Group discussion was based on the themes of my research agenda including definitions of pornography, cultural expectations regarding women watching pornography, representation and identification with the texts, and possibilities of pleasure and resistance. Audience responses were organised according to whether the group agreed with, negotiated or opposed the dominant encoding of pornography as a privileging of male over female sexuality that excluded women's pleasure.

Having summarised the key considerations in developing my research design, I will now discuss the implications of my research, particularly in relation to what conclusions can be drawn from my discussion themes as well as the implications of this research for feminist discourse relating to pornography. I will also discuss the limitations and recommendations of my research.

As I argue in Chapter 5, the semiotic encoding of pornography suggests that the dominant organisation of pornography is taken from an organisation of sexuality that is based on gender difference. I have taken the dominant encoding of pornography therefore, as 'a privileging of male over female sexuality that precludes women's pleasure'. From this basis the different focus groups were organised according to whether they agreed with the dominant encoding of pornography as precluding women's pleasure (preferred reading), negotiated aspects of pornography as pleasurable for them (negotiated reading), or opposed the dominant encoding that pornography precluded women's pleasure (oppositional reading).

According to the preferred group, all the texts shown, including 'women-identified' examples of 'erotica', exclude women's pleasure. Participants in the 'preferred' category claim that they wouldn't watch pornography or erotica at all in the forms that were shown. Participants grouped as having a 'negotiated' response to pornography often negotiated 'made-for-women' 'erotica' as reflecting women's pleasure, but mostly rejected hard-core pornography. Hard-core was seen as unrepresentative and not offering opportunities for fantasy. The oppositional group, although fundamentally agreeing with many of the offensive aspects of hard-core forwarded by both the negotiated and preferred groups, nevertheless claimed the texts were as much for women as men, owing to the group's insistence that they as an audience could activate meaning from the text.

Most participants believed there was a clear distinction between pornography and erotica. Pornography was generally felt to include close-ups of genital sex, and erotica was seen to conceal whether the participants were in actuality having sex. Other aspects that define the categories included erotica being viewed as generally more contextual and narrative-based, ostensibly more mutual, concerned with including a relationship and some form of build up to sexual encounters. Conversely, pornography was thought to be more centrally concerned with 'proof' of male pleasure ('money-shots') and an absence of female pleasure, and repetitive proof that the sex was real and not faked thus the proliferation of genital sex shots and fetishisation of (particularly women's) sex organs.

Taken as a research goal, distinguishing between pornography and erotica is a circular argument. Although my research did succeed in defining what categorised a text as pornography or erotica according to the individual viewpoints of participants, this knowledge doesn't forge any further understanding regarding the nature and reproduction of images of sexuality as a cultural phenomenon. While discussing the distinction between 'pornography' and 'erotica', I repeated

the logic of existing feminist discourse that centres around harm based analysis. Yes, most participants do believe that there is a distinction, but this distinction still perpetuates the binary opposition between 'good' and 'bad' images of sexuality and doesn't further our understanding of the nature of the viewing process in terms of the ways that the construction of sexual imagery (in both pornography and erotica), impact on the everyday lives of women. In hindsight, a more fruitful approach to studying women's interactions with pornography would have been researching the particular ways that women who regularly watch pornography perceive social meaning produced in pornography in their own lives. How to conduct research to this effect raises a further set of difficult questions regarding methodological inquiry that are not easily answered.

As Andrew Ross (1989) argues, perhaps the perpetuated distinction suggests the nature of capitalist consumption itself. An image of sexuality in our culture inevitably bears the mark of the economy in which it is produced, thus potentially transgressive and progressive images of sexuality such as *Deep Throat*, lost their potency to subvert the deep contradictions in representations of sexuality within western culture, by recolonising sexual images in terms of a commodity economy.

Pornography appears to exist in a climate of fear and secrecy, and women who participate in watching pornography, even erotic images, expected censure from many different fronts: men, older women, colleagues. Many women reported that talking about pornography openly was a positive consciousness raising exercise, particularly as the group was confidential and therefore safe. All participants felt that women who admitted to watching pornography would be viewed by others as deviant and weird. Silence was viewed as the only option for women who did watch pornography. The feminist group had mixed responses to whether they would feel free to admitting that they watched pornography in front of other feminists. The women who asserted that she would feel safe talking about watching pornography at a feminist conference admitted that she would only if there was 'decent' material available.

Perhaps the climate of fear and secrecy that surrounds women watching pornography is part of the wider issue of women's silence regarding sexuality within our culture. The 'dominant ideology thesis' of the anti-pornography feminists has had the effect of encouraging withdrawal from debate regarding sexuality, therefore compounding this silence. As a consciousness raising exercise, women talking about their sexuality in a safe environment elicited positive responses from group members, some of whom claimed that this group was the only place that they had felt

safe to talk about sexual images as women. Pornographic fantasy as it exists in our culture is constructed to reflect a masculine sexual fantasy, even though women insist on their right to watch and engage with pornographic texts. As Kosh (1993) argues, emancipation that would liberate women's sexual fantasies paves the way to ending the phallogocentric primacy within the prevailing sexual order that is institutionalised by pornography.

My research widens the scope of feminist research to this end: emancipation *begins* by women exploring sexual representations through conceiving of what images are liberatory for them and what constructions of sexual images informs possibilities for fantasy. I view my research as a beginning point to further exploration of the more complex issues associated with viewing pornography raised in earlier chapters. I would recommend that further study into women watching pornography be more firmly focused in the area of cultural studies. Cultural studies provides the background whereby women's everyday interactions with pornography and its positive and negative influences on women's lives is situated. I have covered this issue only superficially, in asking the participants about their interactions with pornography in abstract positive and negative terms.

As discussed in Chapter 4, 'consciousness-raising' was integral to the research process as an attempt to break through ideological assumptions, and at the level of validating all women's experiences of watching and interacting with pornography in their lives (Stanley & Wise 1983). In talking about their experiences of pornography, group participants realised the forms of oppression with regards to cultural norms about women watching sexually explicit images, and the forms that available images of sexuality take. As a research aim, 'consciousness raising' provided an opportunity for women to realise the forms of ideological control that exist with regards to sexual imagery as an aspect of women's sexuality, and provided an opportunity to contribute to the wider social discourse regarding sexuality.

The environment in which pornography is watched bears considerable weight in responses to the texts, as the context of watching pornography alone or with a partner, in a single sex or mixed sex group, would yield results that would more accurately reflect the context and conditions whereby pornography is usually consumed. I would like to acknowledge that the environment in which pornography was viewed in my research is highly artificial. I feel sure conducting this research in a different viewing context would yield considerably different results, particularly as to the degree of freedom in responding to the texts in front of others. Many of the women stated this fact themselves, often claiming that the research was not the normal viewing context in which

they watched pornography, and hinting that their responses were inhibited by the presence of other women. I feel that my own presence also played an important role in what the participants felt free to express.

I would also recommend that any studies of this nature include questions pertaining to the wider contextual issues of feminism and the social roles of women. This research had only respondents of European descent, thus I have not dealt with the complexities of different ethnic groups in the present study. I believe different approaches to watching pornography/hard-core images of sexuality are very much culturally proscribed, and I believe that any future research into the topic may be enriched by the inclusion of different ethnic groups. I believe that there is also a need for a similar study undertaken with regard to the ways that men watch pornography as I feel certain that pornography is not interpreted as straightforwardly as much of the theoretical literature on the subject would suggest.

Both hard-core and women-identified texts were negotiated by the perceptual position of the focus-groups. Even as the oppositional group found similar aspects of male-identified hard-core offensive, they remained true to their original position that pornography was as much for women as men despite these aspects. Remarkable similarities between groups occurred in terms of what factors inhibited identifying with the texts, and feeling that the texts were unrepresentative of women's sexuality. Hard-core texts were felt to largely misrepresent women's sexuality in the construction of the texts themselves, particularly in aspects of the sex scenes depicted were felt to be painful (anal and extended sex), where the women on-screen appeared to not be enjoying themselves, the overwhelming camera focus on genital sex, and in the actors failing to represent women in their diversity. Also, the portrayal of unrealistic and stereotypical women on-screen, repetitive and boring camera angles, poor production values, and representations of women where the women were felt to not be enjoying themselves but there solely for the man's pleasure, as well as lack of female orgasm and mutual attraction between performers, were cited as inhibiting pleasure in pornography.

'Made-for-women' erotica was viewed by the preferred and oppositional groups as essentially the same as male-identified hard-core in its sexist and non-erotic treatment of sexual representation. Attempts to privilege women's sexuality were viewed as trite as the women on-screen were not active initiating sex, thus the underlying power dynamics were basically felt to be the same power structures as those that operate in hard-core. Most participants in the negotiated groups felt that attempts to represent women's pleasure were accurate, and thus they could identify with the



scenarios. The attempt at privileging women's pleasure within an erotic text was viewed as mostly positive by all groups.

Just as there were similarities in terms of what the women felt were unrepresentative and inhibiting identification across groups, there were also surprisingly similar responses to what participants felt made a text erotic and fuelled fantasy for them. The most significant points of commonality were those of women on-screen looking as if they were genuinely enjoying themselves, lesbian scenes.

It must be acknowledged also that there was also a significant amount of diversity in women talking about what they found erotic in a text. Responses ranged from 'a New Zealand setting', 'group sex orgies', 'sex on a driveway', including varied sexual practices that excluded purely genital sex to one woman citing '*Dr. Quinn Medicine Women*' as her ideal of an erotic and exciting text!

Negotiation was an important aspect of viewing as each participant negotiated the images on screen with their knowledge of genre characteristics that make up pornography; personal experience of sex; the level to which social and cultural taboos on women's sexuality inhibited participants feeling that it was their right to have access to openly sexual material; and the context in which the texts are viewed. There was a strong recognition of the need for 'erotica' that depicted women as sexually assertive and that confronted issues of power in sexuality from a women's perspective. Aspects that were considered to activate identification in textual representations of sex included: polished production values; sexual representations that were genuinely erotic and didn't involve women in unnatural/uncomfortable positions; women who are sexually assertive, initiating and actively seeking pleasure executing sexual encounters; as well as evident mutuality in affection and some form of relationship that involved a build-up of sexual tension rather than repetitive genital sex shots.

Pleasure is based on the fulfilment of needs, as such women's pleasure in pornography represents an existing need, even as the conditions of production organise pornography according to a masculine organisation of sexuality (see Finn 1995). Perhaps pleasure for women in watching pornography derives from the inadequacies within the represented cultural realm, thus women's pleasure in pornography may well originate in inadequacies within representational realm per se.



While western consumer culture produces a proliferation of images of women as objects of (male) arousal, there also exists a dearth of eroticised images of men. Actively sexual women are seldom represented without being evil and/or killed off in our film and television media. As pornography represents women as actively sexual, it is potentially subversive, particularly to women who privilege their own knowledge regarding sexuality in their reading of the texts. Thus, even while pornography's dominant encoding is a privileging of male over female sexuality that precludes women's pleasure, women's readings of pornography (particularly in the 'oppositional' group) celebrate aspects of represented sexuality that usually exist in the realm of the non-representational, including the presence of women who enjoy sex without punishment, and the acknowledgement that (in 'made-for-women' erotica) women like to look at images of sexuality also. Pornography is potentially subversive in this sense, particularly as women who engage in talking about the inadequacies of existing pornography may well demand alternative images of sex on screen that aren't organised to privilege male sexuality. Available images of sexuality determine and form possible conceptualisations of knowledge regarding sexuality in our culture. Alternative images that cater for women's desires in all their diversity may contribute to the wider social discourse regarding the forms in which sexuality itself may take, and may hail new forms of sexual representation that are not founded on gender 'difference'.

Women participating in this research did not interpret pornographic/erotic images passively, but actively engaged in debate about the images that they saw. The oppositional group, who positioned themselves as able to take pleasure in pornography, were clear about their activity in watching pornography at home being completely on their terms. I believe that the women did not see themselves as victims of pornography even though pornography was often seen as perpetuating myths about women's sexuality. Rather, the women in my research enthusiastically spoke about an ideal erotica as dealing with issues of women's sexual power, investing women protagonists with a sexual agency that meant they would not shy from dominating or at least taking the initiative in sexual encounters.

As a 'dominant ideology thesis', anti-pornography feminist interpretation has defined the boundaries of pornography by claiming that pornography is transparent in that it can be read singularly as 'sexual subordination of women'. In this view women's sexuality is viewed as passive, gentle and inherently good and women who watch pornography are simply sidelined as 'dupes' of men. I found that although the texts themselves do subordinate women's sexuality, women can and do take active pleasure in pornography. Pornography was primarily found

offensive in its construction of sexuality rather than in the sexual explicitness of the images themselves.

In my research I have attempted to address an existing imbalance in studies of women and pornography by asking women to watch and respond to specific texts. Women's interpretations of pornography do not depend on the 'preferred meaning' in the text, nor do women allow themselves to be defined by pornographic or erotic texts. While I may applaud the ways that women have redefined the terms of the texts, indeed the terms that sexuality itself is ordered by in our culture, it does not follow that my research is a celebration of consumer pluralism. Consumer pluralism as such, celebrates the marketplace as a mediator of supplying exactly what what the public demands, however as I have found in the course of my research ~~is that~~ what is on offer in terms of pornographic/erotic imagery does not cater for women, nor does it represent women in a positive or empowering light. 'What is on' is still important as it informs our understanding of sexuality and the terms by which we define ourselves and others.

A renegotiation of sexuality in our media culture must begin by acknowledging that women want and need women-created and women-defined sexual images from independent sources. Potentially transgressive and challenging to existing structures of sexual organisation in sexual representation, alternative so-called 'women's-erotica' (Candida Royalle) hail from the pornography industry itself. Inevitably, Royalle's 'women's erotica' is recolonised in the production process, rendered 'powerless' in its efforts to create a different mode of address. Partly this is attributable to the fact that the industry is owned by men (Royalle's doesn't own the production company), but it also indicative of anti-pornography position itself which has successfully kept the focus within feminism on the harm-based dangers of sexuality and avoided engaging with real alternatives.

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## APPENDICES

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### Appendix A AGENDA

- \* What constitutes, or what ingredients make pornography? Baywatch porn? Basic Instinct? How do you distinguish between porn and erotica?
- \* Is the pornography that we have seen about what women want?, is it reflective of women's sexuality?
- \* In what ways is looking at pornography enjoyable for you?
- \* If you feel it is offensive, how does it offend you, and what parts specifically?
- \* What function does pornography serve to it's watchers? What is it about?
- \* How did you feel as a watcher?
- \* Did you feel guilty? Where does this guilt come from? Is it possible to watch pornography without feeling guilty, what would it take?
- \* Is it possible, do you think, to have equality in pornography? (the porn made for women was an attempt) Is it reverse sexism? Is it heterosexual sex itself that is unequal?
- \* Is the porn made for women any different? Is it a positive step toward mounting a challenge to male-dominated porn?
- \* How important are production values?
- \* How do you feel our culture expects women to feel about pornography?
- \* Are there any positive aspects that you can see about pornography?  
 - It shows women in a variety of sexual roles (lesbian, s&m dominant and submissive), and sexual fantasies?  
 - It is a world where sex is 'freed' from marriage, women can take their pleasure as they desire.
- \* In relation to pornography, what do you, as a women want?
- \* What makes good porn/erotica? What is your vision of a 'pornotopia'?



17. Is it possible for you to watch pornography without mixed feelings? Please explain your answer.
18. How do you feel about the actors in the pornographic movies the group saw?  
Female?
19. Male?
20. Does the pornography that the group watched, or that you have seen yourself make you confront you own fears and fantasies about sex? Please explain.
21. How important is context?
22. Do you rent movies you know you will find erotic, for that reason?
23. Would you watch erotica/pornography with your partner or alone/ not at all? Please explain your answer:
24. What would you like to see happen in pornography? What is, to you, an ideal pornography/erotica.

Thankyou for your time in answering this questionnaire!!!

## Appendix C

### INFORMATION SHEET

Researcher: Tracey Adamson  
c/- Media Studies  
Massey University

Supervisor: Alan Meek  
Media Studies Dept.  
Massey University  
Ph: 3569099 ext.: 8865

Hello,

My name is Tracey Adamson and I am undertaking 'focus group' research on how women watch pornography. This research will consider the many ways that we, as women, watch pornography, and includes the possibility that we may take pleasure from it. This study will include the focus group participants watching a selection of media material, and answering questions pertaining to that material. Included in the selection will be popular television and mainstream film extracts and various examples of hard-core pornography produced both by and for women and men.

I wish to conduct my research with focus groups of around 4-7 participants. Hopefully, each group will already know the other members and be able to speak freely about their experiences with the group.. To start, I will ask the group about their social/economic backgrounds, and will ask their initial response to pornography. We will then watch the selected texts, and I will ask the group questions pertaining to the material watched (this will be audio-taped). The group will discuss what happens to the audio tapes once the research is completed. It is the right of any individual in the group to request the tapes be destroyed, or turned off at any time. All taped material will be burned unless the group decides on an alternative plan of action.

#### INDIVIDUAL TIME COMMITMENT

1 afternoon      3-5 hours (approx.)

Other than the time involved, I am asking that each participant answers a questionnaire, and participates to the best of their ability, and in honesty. Following interviews I will be available to all participants for feedback regarding the research.

All participants will be assured anonymity by name changes. Participants taking part in the research must agree to refrain from disclosing anyone's name when talking about the group, to protect their anonymity.(see consent form) As per my 'Privacy Contract', I will ensure confidentiality of the information that participants supply me with. The information given will be confidential to the research and publications arising from it.

I wish to make it clear that you have the right to decline to take part in the research. You also have the right to leave the discussion at any point, and you have the right to request at any time that either the audio tape of the interview or video tape of the movie or television programme be stopped at any time. I want you to know that a lot of the material we will be covering will be sexually explicit, and if you feel unsafe in any way, it is your right to decline to take part in the research, or to leave at any point. You also have the right to withdraw from the research, and to ask questions at any time. Before each segment, I will brief you on what the segment is, so don't fear any surprises.

This research is not connected in any way to any papers you may be studying at Massey.  
Tracey Adamson.



## Appendix D

### CONSENT FORM

I have read the information sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further question at any time.

I agree to participate and I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time and to decline to answer any particular questions.

I understand that I will be viewing explicit material representations of sexual behaviour on screen

I agree to provide information to the researcher on the understanding that my name will be changed to protect my privacy (unless I specifically indicate otherwise). I understand that the information I provide will be used only for this research and publications arising from this research project.

I agree/ do not agree to this interview being audio taped.

I also understand that I have the right to ask for the audio tape of the interview or the video tape to be turned off at any time during the interview.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the information sheet.

Signed: .....

Name: .....

Date: .....

Current Age: .....

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