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Porn by any other name: women's consumption of public sex performances in Amsterdam

Erin Sanders-McDonagh*

Department of Criminology and Sociology, Middlesex University, London, UK

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This paper draws on ethnographic research conducted in Amsterdam, exploring the ways in which women tourists engage with public sex performances, drawing comparisons between these types of shows and other types of pornographic materials. Empirical data collected in Amsterdam, focusing on women's visual consumption of public sex performances at a well-known tourist sexual theatres that features live sex (including vaginal penetrative sex and oral sexual encounters for/by men/women, as well as masturbation and other highly sexualized acts), suggests that sex shows are positioned as legitimate sexual entertainment for men, women, and couples, and that a wide range of tourist women from different backgrounds visit these shows in substantial numbers. By attempting to unpick the ways in which women visually consume public sex performances, and thinking about this in relation to broader discussions around pornography and the literature around women's consumption practices, this paper will argue that many of the current understandings of pornography consumption as an androcentric activity fail to recognize women as active sexual, visual agents. Women's engagement with sex shows in Amsterdam complicates the various ways in which visual consumption of pornography might occur, and opens up questions about the social and gendered practices of watching sex.

Keywords: Female gaze; public sex performance; Amsterdam

Introduction

Much of the traditional debates have focused on pornography's sexual and visual content, suggesting that women are objectified in pornographic representations (Dworkin 1979), problematizing the consumption of porn and assuming that pornography is created by men for men (Gunter 2012). There is an emerging literature, however, that seeks to explore the ways in which women consume and understand pornographic materials (Loach 1992; Senn 1993; Shaw 1999; Eck 2003; Ciclitira 2004; Attwood 2005; Smith 2007), which seem to suggest that women's responses to porn are complex, and cannot be easily categorized.

This paper intends to further these emerging discussions by focusing on an under-researched area – public sex performance. Little has been written on public sex performance (Manderson 1992; Delany 1999; Sanders 2010), and much less on women's engagements with these types of venues.

The inclusion of women in sexualized spaces, and at venues that feature overtly and highly eroticized entertainment, sits somewhat incongruently with how sex tourist

* Email: e.sanders@mdx.ac.uk

landscapes are imagined. This article will provide an analysis of women's engagement with a 'real-life' couples sex show in Amsterdam, at the Theatre Casa Rosso. The aim of the article is not to understand women's reactions to these shows – to know whether they find the performances sexy or erotic – although this is an important question. Rather, I have two related aims: firstly, to provide a more nuanced understanding of pornography by suggesting that porn in this context is geographically situated. I am not looking at the how or the what of porn, but rather the where. This is an important element that is often left out of discussions on pornography. Secondly, I argue that the specific cultural context of Amsterdam allows women access to a space that does not normally encourage their spectatorship, and that they are able to enact – or perhaps appropriate – a gaze that is normally understood as definitively masculine. This article will provide a contextualized account of sex shows, which I argue exist in form and content in similar ways to pornographic movies and images, and suggest that there is a geographic and cultural specificity to this form which allows women in particular to engage with sexual performance.

This article is based on an ethnographic investigation of the red-light district in Amsterdam. It is part of a wider research agenda that also explores public sex performance and sexualized space in Thailand (Sanders 2010; Sanders-McDonagh, forthcoming). The article is based on observations in the red-light district in both the Netherlands and Thailand, as well as ethnographic interviews with key informants and tourists in situ, in-depth qualitative interviews with tourists in these spaces (with a particular emphasis in female tourists), and interviews with those associated with the tourist industry in these locales (bar/club owners, bar tenders, bouncers, local sex-work organizations, hotel/hostel managers, and tour guides). Recently, this project has extended to include women's engagements with burlesque in the United Kingdom as well.

The article does not take a moralistic view on the type of sex on show, or on sexual entertainment on offer in Amsterdam more widely (see a/topia [forthcoming] on the dangers of moralizing sex work). Neither do I take a moralistic view of women (nor indeed men) who decide to visually consume this type of entertainment. Rather, I am concerned with how consumption processes facilitate this engagement, and what makes possible women's entry into spaces that are generally, and specifically, understood as hegemonically masculine. Understanding the significance of the live sex show requires a situated reading – it is impossible to understand these shows abstractly, because they sit so firmly and materially within a geographic space, within a touristic context. This grounding allows for a more engaged analysis of the consumption of visual pleasures that adds to the contextual and specifically located meaning of pornography.

And off we go ...

'The Walking Tour', she tells me, 'is available in Spanish and English. We offer up to four tours a night, two in each language – depending on the season'. In my tour group there are 27 people – 18 women and nine men. Our tour guide, an American expat woman in her 30s, begins the tour by asking each of us where we are from. There are tourists here from the USA, England, Scotland, Canada, Pakistan, Sweden, and Belgium. No one here, besides me, is alone; everyone has come with someone else – a friend, a partner, or a group of friends.¹

We start off.

Our tour of the red-light district in the Wallen district of Amsterdam passes a number of key sites: a gay club where ‘anything goes’, a condomerie, rows of red-lit windows, and the first shop to sell porn in Amsterdam. We reach Oudezijds Achterburgwal, one of the main thoroughfares for the red-light district, and the road where the live sex shows are situated.

Our tour guide points out three venues – the Bananen Bar, the Moulin Rouge, and the Casa Rosso. These venues, she suggests, all offer sexual entertainment that is a ‘must see’ for tourists in Amsterdam. All of these venues offer live sex shows; all of them are entertaining in their own way, but, she adds, you get what you pay for. The price variation for the shows differs substantially, with entrance to the Bananen Bar at €15 per person, the Moulin Rouge at €25, and the Casa Rosso at €50. The performers at the Casa Rosso are better looking, she tells us, the shows have better choreography, and the setting is nicer – it’s not as ‘sleazy’ as the other two. Our tour guide has been hundreds of times – often with her tour groups. At the end of the tour she extends an offer to accompany anyone who wants to see a show to the Casa Rosso. I wait to see who might step forward. In the end a woman from Canada asks if she can come along, and two Australian women in their early 20s also come forward. I join the group, and we walk down the Oudezijds Achterburgwal to the Casa Rosso. Our tour guide, it seems, gets free entry for bringing us along. She is escorted to a special section upstairs, on her own, while the rest of us sit together in a row at the back of an elegant late nineteenth-century theatre, complete with red velvet chairs and a red velvet curtain.

On the stage in front of us, there is an act in media res. On a revolving dais, a bronzed, toned couple are having very active oral sex. The woman, fellating the man who is kneeling in front of her, is topless. Her thong is visible, although this will be removed in the next choreographed sequence when he performs cunnilingus. After this, the couple begin rigorous and energetic penetrative sex, perfectly timed with the rhythmic techno music playing loudly in the background. As the performance ends and the curtains close, an announcer tells us that all the couples which perform at the Casa Rosso are ‘real-life’ couples.

This is the first of six acts that we will watch – all with different performers engaging in different types of sexualized scenarios – before the same rotation of acts with the same performers begins again. It is an endless cycle of sexual entertainment. There is no time limit on how long you can stay. Most customers, the bouncers tell me later, stay for one full cycle. Some leave after five minutes, a small handful will stay for hours. The theatre is full of tourists from all over the world. Large groups of Chinese and Indian tourists, on an organized outing, are present in the theatre when we arrive. The theatre holds just over 170 people at any one time on the main level downstairs, and it was close to maximum capacity when we arrived, with 15 or so spare seats at the back of the theatre. There were fairly even numbers of men and women – although an exact count in this dimly-lit space was virtually impossible. Interestingly, there are tourists of all ages here – some clearly college students in their early 20s, and one group of elderly tourists leave with assistance of their canes.

As a large group of tourists from the front of the theatre leave, the Canadian woman decides she wants a closer look and moves forward. The Australian women follow suit, moving to the second row, and I come along too. From this angle everything is more focused, more Technicolor. We sit together, the four of us, watching couple

after couple having sex – commenting on penis size, wondering about boob jobs, and appreciating the detailed choreography and the energy required to perform such enthusiastic bouncing – before we decide enough is enough, leaving the theatre, saying goodbye, and going our separate ways.

Reading sex as pornography at the Casa Rosso

There are a variety of ways to analyze the sexualized space of the Casa Rosso. There is an emerging body of work that explores the way in which women look at (male and female) sexualized bodies in ‘strip club’ venues (Liepe-Levinson 2004; Frank 2007; Wosick-Correa and Joseph 2008; Pilcher 2009, 2011, 2013), and these texts provide important insights into the ways in which visual desire is negotiated within particular social and sexual spaces. However, these readings of strip clubs, whether discussing male or female performers, make it clear that the female gaze is complicated by a number of factors. Liepe-Levinson argues that male and female dancers, work to elicit the gaze of customers, and actively return it. She argues that in strip shows:

female and male dancers initiate and guide the spectators’ performance of sexual looking. As a result, patrons do not merely gaze at the bodies of strippers. They are also obligated to return the dancers ‘look in the eye’ – to offer them a particular type of visual attention. (2004, 119)

However, in Pilcher’s (2011) work on women’s experiences of male strip clubs, she argues that female patrons of these clubs are unable to ‘look’ at male dancers’ bodies in the same way as men might gaze upon female dancers. Indeed, she argues that in this setting women’s experiences of interacting with male strip club workers ‘tended to reinforce traditional heterosexist scripts for female sexual behaviour, for instance enabling women to position themselves as objects of the male gaze’ (2011, 233). The Casa Rosso differs from most strip clubs in that the object of the gaze is a heterosexual couple, who have no interaction with the audience at all except in that they are placed specifically to be watched. The couples only look and engage with one another – there is no recognition that there is an audience there at all, and there is no visual interaction with the audience at all during the performance. As such, while recognizing the importance of literature that explores women’s negotiations with strip club venues, this article will explore the ways in which this specific show can be understood as an extension of pornography, and the implications this has for how women’s interactions in the Casa Rosso might be read.

Moving beyond mere etymology, defining pornography is a difficult endeavour. Different cultural and academic commentators have provided a range of different definitions, and anyone who studies or researches pornography will be familiar (ad nauseum) with feminist debates on pornography: the anti-pornography perspective, embraced by feminists such as Andrew Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon that defines pornography as the ‘depiction of whores’ (Dworkin 1979; MacKinnon 1987, 1993), and suggests that all pornography (and erotica) degrades women by reducing them to mere body parts; or an emergent feminist approach seen in a field that Williams (1999) would define as ‘pornography studies’, which argues that there is nothing inherently problematic about the visual or textual representation of sex, but acknowledges the role of patriarchy in maintaining existing sexual inequalities, and

highlights some (but not all) forms of sexual representations as problematic. Defining pornography in the contexts of these debates becomes problematic, mostly because we have to contend with, ultimately, whether any depiction or representation of sex can be anything other than exploitative for women – assuming, of course, that men are the main consumers of porn and porn is created with the male viewer in mind. Indeed, anti-pornography feminist rhetoric suggests implicitly that pornography is created by men, for men, and always at the expense of women.

This article, to a certain extent, will elide these debates – the very presence of women in a space that provides such highly sexualized content suggests that women are indeed interested, on some level, in looking at sex in this context. As such, instead of focusing on the who/what of pornography (who/what is being shown?; what does it mean?), I am going to focus on the ways in which women look (are able to look, are invited to look, can appropriate a look), and use the gaze as a way to push forward discussions on the gendered politics of watching sex/sexual representations.

Until recently, there was little research to suggest that women may be active users of pornographic material (Attwood 2005); however, a number of studies have emerged in the past two decades to suggest that women do watch porn, and are interested in consuming erotic materials (Loach 1992; Sen 1993; Shaw 1999; Eck 2003; Ciclitira 2004; Attwood 2005; Smith 2007; McKee, Albury, and Lumby 2008). Two qualitative studies are particularly useful here for understanding the ways in which women look, particularly in relation to pornography and sexual representation. Ciclitira (2004) carried out research which suggests that women do watch porn, but have complicated understandings of how they feel about this process – with some participants expressing concerns about the feminist politics of watching pornographic material. Her interviews with 34 women suggest that anti-pornography feminist understandings of pornography as ‘anti-feminist’ or anti-woman complicate women’s views of sexual representations, and Ciclitira suggests that ‘the politicization of porn as negative can also exacerbate women’s guilt, shame and confusion about their own sexuality’ (2004, 296). Eck’s (2003) study also explores the politics of looking – her research examines the responses of male and female participants to different nude images of both the opposite sex and the same sex. Both men and women in the study were able to look at images of women, and assess these images easily, assuming ‘a culturally conferred right to evaluate the female nude’ (2003, 697). Images of men were more complicated in terms of participants’ reactions, with men not seemingly able to construct a response to seeing the male nude. Women, on the other hand, were confounded by the images of the male nude, and were repulsed, indifferent, or intrigued. Eck maintains that women in this sample were not capable of achieving an active, desiring gaze. She argues that her female participants ‘produced response is of a “feminine” sexuality-hesitant, shy, disinterested’ (2003, 707). The findings from both Ciclitira and Eck suggest that we cannot understand women’s consumption of pornography within situating it with a particular political and social framing – in these studies we can see that women call upon culturally available scripts to navigate and make sense of the visual consumption of sexual images, and these become important for how they locate their own sexual pleasures within a visual/sexual matrix.

Both Eck (2003) and Ciclitira (2004), as well as other work on women and pornography (Smith 2007), open up questions around the politics of looking that question

the extent to which women's ability to look is structured by the social and political relations in a given (patriarchal) culture. Many of the attempts to analyze pornography as a genre have so far focused on a semiotic reading of materially-located visual media— films and images. While many sexualized materials may be read as problematic, there are a range of images/texts/films that complicate straightforward understandings of the male gaze/male as viewer of porn. Moore (1988) argues that simply exploring the content of porn semiotically does not allow for a full understanding of pornography as a social practice – she maintains that the context of different representations implicitly impact how the image/text/film is read. Similarly, Feona Attwood (2005) argues that the significance of sexually suggestive or pornographic material depends on its place – the way we understand pornography cannot be reduced to a simple analysis of the images/material being displayed; rather, the 'wider cultural practices of looking and seeing' (Attwood 2005, 14) need to be further investigated: 'It is the contexts of consumption which emerge here as the real areas of interest for the ways they produce conditions of access and frameworks for interpretation' (2005, 15). Women's engagement with pornographic materials and images is complicated – a range of responses to different materials emerges. What is clear is that sexual scripts for women intersect with political understandings of pornography to influence the ways women might interpret and analyze pornographic materials.

A female gaze?

In the introduction to their edited collection *The Female Gaze*, Lorriane Gamman and Margaret Marshment suggest that in most forms of popular culture 'men are shown to be in control of the gaze, women are controlled by it. Men act, women are acted upon. This is patriarchy' (1988, 1). The collection seeks to explore and understand if and how a female gaze exists, and the implications that this might have for complicating ideologies about gender, sex, race, and class in relation to power, capitalism, and, of course, patriarchy. Questions about the ways in which women look, about the extent to which they can enact their own gaze, have troubled many scholars (Mulvey 1975; Irigaray 1981; L. Kaplan 1991; E. Kaplan 1997; Pajaczkowska 2000). Questions around the female gaze in pornography have been particularly problematic – indeed, much of the literature on visual consumption of sex has focused on pornographic films and has used a psychoanalytic lens to understand women's visual consumption of sex (often to render a female gaze as practically impossible).

The particular space of Amsterdam complicates ideas around the practice and politics of looking. I have argued elsewhere (Sanders 2010) that the processes of tourism are inherently visual – tourism is essentially and fundamentally about looking. In Amsterdam, the organized tours of the red-light district work to facilitate a touristic gaze, and focus it on the sexual, on the erotic. Over the past two years I have been on a number of guided tours through the red-light district, and spoken to a wide range of tour guides who lead different types of tours through these spaces. Every tour guide points out the live sex shows, and invites the tour to look, to visually consume the red windows and the women working as sex workers. Every tour guide points to the Casa Rosso as the main venue for tourists, and all of them suggest that it is something tourists should see. Invariably on the tours, questions come up: what happens in the show; what is it like; what will be seen inside? By and large tour guides point to

these places as legitimate venues, situated within the legalized context of Amsterdam, where sex and sexual entertainment is not only allowed, but is the norm and culturally accepted. Normalizing both the sex industry and the sexual entertainment found in this spatio-cultural area of Amsterdam is a fundamental element of what tour guides do. For many of them, their job is to take shy or curious tourists through this space, and make it 'ok' for them to go and explore themselves. They become cultural brokers – answering tourist questions about the nature of the Netherlands, the socio-legal and historical foundations of the city (specifically in relation to prostitution and its development), and the specificity of the sex industry here. The difficulty for tour guides is keeping a balance between presenting this space as normal but, conversely, at the same time also titillating.

On a tour in June 2013, a Dutch tour guide ends her tour at the local kindergarten, located in the boundaries of the Wallen. Her aim with this stop is to emphasize that for Dutch people the red-light district is so normal, so taken for granted, that people would put their children in school alongside prostitutes in red windows – something that seems inconceivable in many other western countries, considering the moral panic that exists around 'appropriate' zoning for the sex industry, particularly in relation to protecting children from indecency (Hubbard and Sanders 2003; Hubbard 2012). Moments earlier, on the same tour, a tourist from South Africa asks to what extent trafficking is prevalent in this area: 'Do the hookers actually choose to work here?', he asked. Our tour guide, who until this point had been laughing and joking with a young couple from the United States about the problems that can arise for men who haggle with the sex workers in the window, suddenly turns sombre. She tells us that she had done extensive research on this (from what source she derives her knowledge, she does not say), and that at least 20% of women working here are trafficked or working against their will. The group murmurs and takes this in, concerned faces all around as we continue walking over a bridge towards a row of red-lit windows. At this point, our tour guide tells us that we are arriving at 'trannie row', where there are a number of transsexual sex workers in the window. 'You can look, but don't take pictures', she tells us. It seems that tourists who take pictures of sex workers often have their cameras thrown in the canal.

The dissonance of these interactions was overwhelming. The way that the sex industry is positioned concurrently and tautologically as completely normal but also highly exploitative, as visually consumable but not photographable, is difficult to understand. It is a polarized picture of the red-light district – one that becomes narratively illogical when subjected to any sort of scrutiny. However, analysis of guidebook materials for Amsterdam reveal a similar picture (Sanders-McDonagh, forthcoming), in the positioning of the red-light district as both normal and transgressive, and sex shows in particular as part of 'normal' touristic experiences.

Hart argues that spaces do not just have a physical, geographically located presence, but rather 'they are imbued with symbolic meaning, often at once contradictory, confusing and changing' (1995, 215). The production of the erotic here plays an important part in facilitating women's entry to the red-light district, and indeed women's ability to engage with and view sexualized, sex-working bodies is unusual in contexts outside Amsterdam. Indeed, even in countries/cities/spaces where sex work is sold in public arenas, this kind of visual encounter with sex workers is unusual. Going into the red-light district demands a visual interaction – at night it is impossible to walk through the Wallen (which is centrally located

metres from the main train station, and in the heart of the city), without noticing the bright red and pink lights, where sex workers pose in lingerie. These types of bodies and this type of display is not so prominently displayed, with a neon-glow flashing, alerting everyone to the sale of sex and the bodies of sex workers. Women who take this interaction a step further inside – to either a sex show or a peep show – cross a boundary of sorts. While there has been some acknowledgement that women in the United States or the United Kingdom visit strip clubs, their incursion into clearly demarcated masculine spaces has not been extensively documented.

Scripting theory may be a useful starting point for interpreting women's sexual behaviours and experiences in this cultural context. Laumann et al. (1994) suggest that within western societies various sexual scripts are available to men and to women, and these culturally and socially specific scripts guide what sexual behaviours are acceptable for men and women. These are invariably gendered, and mark out what can be considered 'appropriate' sexual activities for men and women. The authors suggest that scripting theory makes a number of assumptions: first, that patterns of sexual conduct are culturally specific and locally derived; second, that biology plays no role in shaping people's understandings of sex/sexuality; third, individuals understand what 'appropriate' sexual behaviours are, and that these are also culturally specific; and finally, people may not enact these scripts exactly – small changes and adaptations may be made. For individuals in any given society, 'sexual conduct involves a reflective individual interacting socially with others, guided in part by a meaningful system of individually interpreted cultural instructions' (Laumann et al. 1994, 7).

Sexual scripts here provide a theoretical framework that helps to deconstruct women's engagements with these zones. While pornography usage in some western contexts is often considered primarily the reserve of men – and as Ciclitira (2004) shows, even women who enjoy watching or consuming pornography express feeling conflicted about whether they can legitimately engage with pornographic material – the particular space of Amsterdam provides a different cultural context that presents sexual entertainment as 'normal' and open to women and men equally as visual consumers. There is little prurience expressed by tour guides, who for many tourists act as cultural brokers, and neither do mainstream guidebooks problematize these areas – on the contrary, both tour guides and guides books present these sexual zones as the norm in Amsterdam, and encourage tourists to 'have a look' at both the red-light areas and the more visually provocative sexual entertainment.

As such, the 'cultural instructions' provided for women here clearly signpost visual engagement as unproblematic – women enter into a liminal, eroticized space where the normal cultural markers of what might be 'appropriate' for women to look at become suspended. Female tourists are able to appropriate a different set of sexual expectations, and part of this seems to be the appropriation of a male gaze. This is intrinsically linked to where the shows are happening – not necessarily about exactly what is being shown. The specific geographic grounding of watching pornographic events in an Amsterdam that is constructed as an inclusive and sexually welcoming place for women allows female tourists to engage in the visual consumption of sex. This is not to say that women who consume these shows find them arousing or sexy – they may well do – but they are able to look in ways that are normally off limits to them. The very act of appropriating the gaze contravenes cultural norms around where and how women can look. Normative sexual scripts here are temporarily

upended, allowing women access to spaces and to sites/sights that are normally out of bounds.

The female gaze

Amsterdam blurs these gendered and sexed boundaries, and allows a glimpse of life inside, a view of the erotic spectacle normally reserved for men. It allows women to engage with cultural scripts not readily available to them – not only are they engaging with a red-light zone that is positioned as ‘typically Dutch’ and ‘normal’, but they are encouraged to enter into a public sexual space that might be more difficult for them to legitimately engage with outside this specific site. Watching sex, watching sex workers, and watching the erotic unfold is not something women are normally ‘allowed’ to do. Even when they do these things, these women are seen as an anomalous minority. Porn and visual engagement with sexed bodies are for men. But here, in Amsterdam, going to a sex show, or even walking past the rows of sex workers in the Wallen, allows women a view of a man’s world. They are able to appropriate a male gaze here – one that does not necessarily sexualize its object, but certainly objectifies it through the ocular intensity. The process of watching, the when, the where, the how, however, may be just as important as what is being watched. Scant detail has been paid to the ways in which people negotiate watching porn – about the shared experience of watching with a partner, or deciding to watch porn as a masturbatory aid in the privacy of a bedroom, or watching with a group of 100 people on a stage in Amsterdam. The content here, which could feasibly contain the same kinds of sexual cues (Simon and Gagnon 1991), would necessarily be negotiated differently. Indeed, watching porn with a group of friends in the Wallen is a fundamentally different process from watching porn to masturbate alone in a bedroom. The social nature of viewing changes the nature of the engagement – to think how people consume porn and what it might mean requires a more fundamental acknowledgement that the spatial location may change how porn is consumed, even if the content is mostly the same.

The policing and increased regulation of sexual space in the city has much to do with ‘protecting’ women who may be fearful of these night-time venues (Hubbard 2012), as well as with protecting children from the ‘obscenity’ of sexual venues (Hubbard and Sanders 2003). Recent discussions on sexual entertainment venues across England suggest that women are more aware of striptease clubs in their towns than men; however, Hubbard and Colosi (forthcoming) suggest that women’s concern with these types of venues is more about class, morality, and disgust than fear. Across much of the western world, zoning laws and licensing have been used in various guises to control and regulate erotic venues – from burlesque in New York in the 1930s (Friedman 2000), to the eradication of sexual venues from New York’s Times Square in the 1970s and 1980s (Delany 1999), to London’s sex trade in Soho last year (Topping 2013) – the regulation of sexual spaces has become increasingly used to help ‘clean up’ certain areas, and to create a geographic distinction between ‘family’ spaces and sexual spaces (Juffer 1998; Papayanis 2000). There is an assumption here that sexualized spaces are for men, and are expressly presented for licentious entertainment that women would be fearful of, and that children would be harmed by.

Juffer (1998) makes an important argument about the ways in which pornography and pornographic consumption are spatially located, particularly in relation to the

public–private divide. She cites examples of stag films – silent, one-reel films that were enjoyed privately by groups of men, the predecessor to modern hardcore porn – which significantly limited women’s access to pornography. The increasing closure of adult theatres, and the concurrent growth of lap-dancing venues and strip clubs, means that women’s access to pornography, certainly in the last 30 years, has been increasingly confined to private space. Access to public sex is increasingly unusual for women, and the novelty of being in a different cultural zone, one that seems to encourage and normalize the titillating, provides women with a unique and culturally-specific entrée into spaces that are normally presented as dangerous, lewd, or morally problematic.

Equally, there is another facet of looking and watching in the specific context of the Casa Rosso show that complicates the visual process here. The revolutionary film director Dziga Vertov wrote in 1923: ‘I am eye. A mechanical eye. I, the machine, show you a world the way only I can see it’ (in Berger 2008, 10). Whether we consider pornographic images or films, what is being shot, what is being shown and displayed, is mediated through the director, through the cinematographer. The audience is forced to watch what the director wants, to look where he looks (for it is mostly he) – the watcher is bound by the director’s vision. Williams (1999) argues that in much contemporary porn the focus of the camera works in a specular fashion, and highlights the ‘money shot’ as a key demonstration of the visibility of pleasure. She argues that the money shot ‘can be viewed as the most representative instance of phallic power and pleasure’ (1999, 95). Indeed, one of the main critiques anti-porn feminists have of pornography is the positioning of the camera, and the disembodiment of women’s bodies as a result of the phallic camera lens (De Lauretis 1984; McNair 2002; Schauer 2005).

In the red velvet chairs of the Casa Rosso theatre, however, there is no one to direct the gaze. The main acts feature heterosexual couples having penetrative sex, having mutual oral sex, men performing cunnilingus, women giving blow-jobs – the revolving dais means that the gaze is constantly shifting and changing – no position is prioritized, no lingering shots on women’s bodies play out here. This leaves the audience, both male and female viewers, free to focus their gaze where they see fit – while it may be that women enact similar viewing patterns here as they might when watching other types of sexual imagery (Berger 2008), it does not demand that they do. Women are not freed of social conventions that might direct their gaze in certain ways, but there is no erotic auteur to dismember or disembody – the politics of looking are complicated here.

Conclusions

Understanding women as desirous, agentic, gazing sexual subjects troubles much of the essentializing anti-pornography feminist discourse of women and sexual representation. This article attempts to open up questions around the politics of looking, exploring the importance of the female gaze in a highly sexualized space. It is important to be careful here, however, about what kinds of conclusions can be drawn. A female gaze does not necessarily suggest an egalitarian politics of looking – the gaze (male or female) has the potential to fetishize, to objectify – and as such this discussion on the meaning of looking and women’s visual practices must continue to be explored. The performances here reinscribe, to some extent, heterosexual hierarchies,²

although relatively little is known about the types of people in the audience. Some understanding of who is watching these shows, how these shows are interpreted, and what the audience do with these shows after they leave would provide interesting insights, and link into broader debates around pornographic consumption processes.

However, I maintain that future work on pornography should go beyond the semiotics of content, and recognize the contextual realities that might influence people's porn consumption. By moving away from a static understanding of the psychic elements of this visual engagement, to a situated and contextualized analysis, I argue that a more nuanced understanding of the visual pleasure that women may obtain from 'looking' at sex needs to be developed. Equally, it is important for emerging literature on sexualized spaces and on sex tourism practices to critically explore theoretical material that situates the pornographic gaze and its implications, and to situate these debates in relation to the politics of looking in strip clubs and other erotic venues.

Finally, understanding the importance of space and place, and zones of inclusion/exclusion, may be useful for understanding the ways in cultural gendered norms are created and enforced. Women are not invited or encouraged to visit overtly sexualized spaces, and cultural norms around spatial engagement with sexual space mean women typically do not visit or experience sexual entertainment,³ particularly lap-dancing and strip clubs. More sexualized entertainment in the form of live sex shows is rarely found in any western country outside Amsterdam. As such, it is important to point out that women's interactions with these sorts of spaces, and more specifically with these types of venue, are outside the cultural norms that govern women's movements in sexual spheres. Understanding the importance of the shift in cultural expectations may help provide more engaged insights into women's entry into these zones in Amsterdam, and beyond.

Notes

1. The fact that I was on my own in this setting was not unusual. In Thailand (at ping-pong shows in all four of the research sites: Bangkok, Pattaya, Chiang Mai, and Phuket) and in Amsterdam, tourists almost invariably visited these shows in groups. It was unusual to find any tourist, male or female, who went to a sex show or ping-pong show on their own. However, in Amsterdam the safety of the tour group meant that single people (men and women) often went on tours by themselves, and this opened up the possibility for them to explore the setting and the shows in a group dynamic.
2. It is useful to point out that there have been lesbian couples performing at the Casa Rosso in previous years, and there are gay-male venues in Amsterdam that provide some form of live sex – although the author was not allowed into these venues and so cannot provide comment on the nature of these venues.
3. Burlesque is a notable exception to this, particularly in London and elsewhere the United Kingdom where a substantial proportion of audiences at burlesque shows is comprised of female audience members.

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