



# Porn – artifice – performance – and the problem of authenticity

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## FORUM

# Porn – artifice – performance – and the problem of authenticity

The artificial divide that separates pornography from other commercial creative work reduces porn to product rather than critical cultural production. The medium's perceived artificiality is deemed to invalidate any claim to creative value. Indeed, some countries legally define pornography as artistically or socially worthless. Porn is viewed as existing outside culture as a hyper-real, exaggerated performance with the sole intention of exploiting our 'base' sexual desires for even baser profit.

This landscape is shifting. With easier access to equipment and growing communities on social media, new voices are emerging. Production is no longer reserved only for those with significant capital. An increasing diversity in creators and performers brings decentralization from mainstream control and a wave of new perspectives exploring pornography's potential as a medium for ideas. First to emerge from this new wave are non-male, activist directors with a mission to subvert what they see as the gender exclusionary, caricatured depictions of sex and bodies that dominate the canon of pornography. Queer and feminist porn movements showcase marginalized sexualities as a political act.

Execution of the ideals of 'ethical' and 'feminist' anywhere, let alone in porn, belong to a conversation that stretches beyond this one; their essential subjectivity means they do not and cannot have fixed definitions, but some creators identifying themselves as making ethical, feminist porn have centred on an idea of authenticity. Madison Young writes that 'Within the feminist porn movement we have clung to the term "authentic" as a consistent ethical ingredient in what makes feminist porn, well, feminist' (2015, 187), but is requiring authenticity as a marker of acceptability essentially futile and in doing so can the potential for porn as a creative medium and porn performance as craft be limited?

The vast bulk of commercial pornographic media is still created primarily to serve the only imagined guaranteed, paying, porn consumer: 'the casual cis guy' (Trouble 2014). His commercial wishes are presumed to include uncomfortable elaborate positions, big boobs/big dicks, guaranteed explosive female orgasms for minimal effort, and for the sex to end with some male ejaculate going somewhere. So this comprises the basic formula for the majority of standard straight porn produced, a construction and a caricature of male-centric sex.<sup>1</sup> There is much to criticize about this generic model, including the popular cry that pornography is standing in for young people's sexual education. If this is the case, it seems more of a comment on the very limited avenues in our culture for learning and open discussion about sex. However, if pornography is being used to fill a gap, then subverting its formula is crucial. But is demanding 'authenticity' the best solution?

Cindy Gallop's 'Make Love Not Porn' project uses the tagline 'Porn world vs. Real world'<sup>2</sup> to articulate the disparity between what is depicted on film and what might reasonably be expected from partners in 'real life' sex lives. It is a valuable message and its simplification may be necessary to communicate its intentions with immediacy. Yet it demonstrates a wider misconception that 'real' sex is not and cannot be performative. Sex, on camera or not, is a negotiation of pleasure, pleasing yourself and the other person or persons involved.

It is diplomacy, where a balance of these aims is often found by meeting in the middle rather than at the extremes. We willingly engage in actions that are not necessarily the most pleasurable, comfortable or desirable for us personally in order to feel good about being an orchestrator in the enjoyment of others. Sex is adapting, not only about letting go yourself but also helping others to do so. Performance is an essential element of this exchange.

Conventional labour also often intersects with performance, particularly as identified by Alan Bryman in the service industries. He notes an increasing necessity for workers to engage in scripted emotional display: 'Probably nothing epitomises or exemplifies emotional labour more than the smile' (Bryman 2004, 105). A management of 'authentic' feelings to create a convincing performance for the pleasure of the customer is seen as a requirement of good service. Porn performers embody and expand this, fulfilling these roles not only for their scene partners but also for the hypothetical viewer simultaneously. Everyone involved in production is working together to create something that best satisfies the imagined audience. Porn, like all media and labour, exists under capitalism so this satisfaction is especially important when pay-cheques and livelihoods are reliant on sales.

Therefore, 'inauthenticity' could be claimed when the pleasure of the camera and the imagined consumer is placed above the pleasure of those in front of it. There are certainly limited depictions of sex on film that are closer to documentation than construction for a camera. They deserve a more significant place in the canon of pornography but – especially as the traditional idea of the type and taste of a person who pays for pornography is increasingly subverted – they should not define what is considered ethical or respectable production.

If porn can be a viable art form, a potential vehicle for political, social and cultural ideas, is any art ever truly 'authentic'; that is, made without any consideration for its audience? Sex on film is dishonest like anything on film is dishonest. Even without post-production, the camera frames, manipulates and corrects. Images have no authenticity. The viewer only sees through the eyes of the camera operator, with no alternative perspective or context. Their vision becomes the given truth. Holding a camera forces its operator to edit; to reveal one thing is to inherently to hide something else, to pick one focal point and ignore another. Being on camera changes the way someone will act when in front of it. It becomes performance, however subconscious. The camera will always represent an audience and being aware of an audience changes our behaviour. When this occurs away from a porn set by a non-pornographic actor, we call it craft and celebrate their ability to create a character. When it occurs in pornography, it is dismissed as exploitative fallacy.

Sex workers and actors connect and overlap through a long history. They both create fictions. From grippingly realistic to completely fantastical, most sit somewhere in the in-between. An actor outside porn is not required to authentically experience love or hate or anger, they have to convince the audience that their character does. A porn actor should not have to have an authentic orgasm, they work to convince the viewer that their character in that scenario does. Their craft is to convey the idea of pleasure in a scenario for arousal and entertainment and expression, sex as a way to communicate with an audience. Authentic pleasure every time is only truly possible for those with the luxury of only taking jobs and working with partners that excite them, an attractive but essentially unrealistic ideal for most workers. We grow up with the idea that mainstream actors are separate entities from their on-screen performances, but porn and sex are held to a different and more complex standard. Part of the reason for this double standard is the traditional idea that certain forms of labour (often that which is primarily attributed to women – emotions, sex, motherhood, etc.) should only ever be given freely in order to be considered worthy. To monetize or perform them is to diminish their value, rendering their motivations inauthentic. It is an incredibly effective way to keep

women and sex in a perpetually devaluated state because the only thing that determines their worth is their actual lack of value in capitalist system.

An orgasm is as much an emotional response as it is physical, comparable with crying on cue. There is an inherent separation between an internal, private emotional response and the performing of scripted emotions to an audience. But both tears and orgasms are incredible tools for storytelling and communication, able to invoke a visceral, empathetic reaction in a viewer. Would performing tears on stage or screen be considered unethical in the same way that performing pleasure is?

Unreality in porn exists on a spectrum. At one extreme there is exaggeration; monster hentai, cartoon porn parodies and 20-person gang bangs. But there are also the quieter sub-versions: that your teacher does want to fuck you; that you can make a woman orgasm on first penetration; that all sex ends when a penis ejaculates. These, and others like them, are common fantasies or unlikely realities reinforced by the majority of more readily available pornographic content. Suspending disbelief to become immersed in an unrealistic or idealistic fantasy is an important element of all creative expression. The difference is that in mainstream media there are easily accessible discursive tools to be able to correctly contextualize the fantasy through repeated exposure. An unrealistic car chase in an action movie is understood as both unsafe and fictional, even as it is exhilarating to watch on screen because we are surrounded by examples of good driving practice in everyday life. But since sex and pornography remain mostly removed from open discussion and education, experienced almost exclusively in private (not to mention in shame), discussions about the value and purpose of sexual fantasy are rarely broached. As a result, there is a tendency to restrict access to content that has the potential to be misinterpreted, which directly limits the breath and diversity of sex we can see on screen. Better then to work to widen the spectrum of media produced so that no one type of content or one voice has a monopoly on a definition of sexual expression. The issue is not the authenticity of the performance itself, but the (lack of) context.

Relying too heavily on authenticity draws on the narrative that is used by groups that want to shut down creative sexual expression. Although some producers reject the idea that the responsibility to underline the fantasy falls on them, there has been a rise in the use of devices such as pre-shoot and post-shoot interviews and content disclaimers – the porn equivalent of ‘don’t try this at home’ – to try to demarcate the complex (un)reality of sexual performance.

The current balance between realism and fiction is weighted like this because in today’s porn-making climate, established producers only feel able to fund what they can guarantee will sell. Storytelling, especially aspirational storytelling, sells. The desire to watch something that removes the viewer from the functionality of everyday life, and therefore everyday sex, is and always has been a valued part of entertainment. The popularity of erotic fan fiction and storytelling (which often focuses on stories of vampires, wizards and anime characters) is a testament to the role of fantasy in our collective exploration of sexuality. As our lived experience, and therefore our sexual experience, is increasingly augmented by the digital world, we are no longer only bound by the constraints of the corporeal. The growth of gaming platforms such as Second Life and other specifically explicit online role-playing games allow a player’s sexual imagination to transcend the limits of their physicality and offline reality. The potential for anonymity when interacting online grants the freedom for a person to shape their own performative sexual narrative as they wish. The exaggerated, fantastical and performative does not define human sexuality, but it can be an important tool in exploring it.

For my porn project, *Four Chambers*,<sup>3</sup> shoots vary – sometimes they might include conceptual, fantastical elements, and sometimes there is a more everyday setting. What stays consistent is a stylized shooting and editing style which visually demarcates our films from the

traditional tropes of amateur or gonzo porn. We do not 'direct' the sex on set – there is no requirement for positions, acts or orgasms *per se* – which could by some standards allow our films to be considered 'authentic'. But in post-production we still shape, cut and curate the footage to appear like the most exciting and intense sex possible. Pauses for water, negotiation and fumbling are all left on the cutting-room floor. It is a skewed representation shaped to our individual vision. This is not how everyone wants to or should work, but for our project there is a value in fantasy. People who engage in sexual labour experience enough shame from outsiders without also playing respectability politics from within. There is room within pornography for different approaches, both those aiming at authenticity and those rejecting it.

Porn is not a monolith, it is a medium used to document and express ideas, and to tell stories. Sometimes it is as simple as 'these hot people have sex', sometimes it is about subverting accepted patriarchal constructs and creating space for self-actualization, sometimes it is about mutant aliens fucking in space, sometimes it could be all three. Does the pleasure on screen always have to be 'authentically' felt? Sometimes, yes. More often, maybe. Always, no.

The craft of producing and performing sex on film has only just begun to become available to a wider range of sexualities, bodies and experiences, too often ignored by the mainstream. This can open up greater opportunities for people to use sex and sexuality creatively, politically and culturally, with greater space for autonomy and self-determination. To eradicate artifice altogether is to give up the idea that ethical sex on film can be anything and say anything more than un-curated documentation. Instead of rejecting fantasy and performance, it can be expanded; more voices, more ideas, exploring the potential of sex on film in both a more realistic and more allegorical way. Making more exciting and varied work possible, rather than simply swapping the constraints of tradition and misogyny for the constraints of the assumed 'authentic'.

## Notes

1. This is, of course, a significant generalization; even the most mainstream studios and performers create some work that sits outside this model, but it is important to identify the inherent problems of making a majority of work that only serves the desires of a narrow group.
2. Accessed April 19, 2016. <http://makelovenotporn.com>
3. <https://vimeo.com/fourchambers>. The Four Chambers project started with the intention to explore the aesthetic and conceptual potential of pornography as a medium. Self-taught in editing and videography with an emphasis on collaborative do-it-yourself practices, Four Chambers exists alongside a new wave of creators making contemporary pornographic work from a new perspective. Using the community of social media and capacity of crowd-funding, Four Chambers is part of the growing decentralization from traditional adult industry practices.

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