



Pornography: structures, agency and performance

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collaborate with businesses to promote stigma, or the social and psychological implications of this stigma on a larger or long-term scale.

What does it mean that yesterday I heard a construction worker guy say 'adult film performer' in a Wendy's? Or that last month I heard a famous gay man say 'hooker' in front of his grad students in a classroom while standing before a picture of his own dick? Or that I can't get a scene that has fisting in it printed on a dvd or sold on a website? Or that every mainstream publication in the country covered Stoya's brave calling out of alleged rapist James Deen and the community's support for the recovery of Christie Mack? Or that today, the entire performer industry and all of our trade organizations showed up in my hometown to protect the industry's right to keep its testing and barrier use protocols in place. One true, unspoken benefit of all of this fighting surely must be that some white collar, somewhere, is multi-tasking: writing a report on the sales of bareback scenes vs. the cost of moving to Nevada, encouraging models to sign up to be affiliates, and coming up with the words and images that represent us on boxes and screens across the planet.

We who must earn a living work within the limits of the system, relying on alternative processors and affiliate programmes and pseudonyms, need white collars, but we also need to have opportunities to wear them if we want to. We need academics, activists, and those in the business – and the opportunities to be those people ourselves as well – in order to confront the bigger issues, and help effect large-scale shifts in financial sectors and public policy that will promote porn literacy, eradicate stigma, and hold those who perpetuate it accountable.

These final random thoughts urge me to end this review by saying:

Yes! And?

References

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Pornography: structures, agency and performance, by Rebecca Sullivan and Alan McKee, Cambridge, Polity, 2015, 200 pp., \$20.00 (pbk), ISBN 978-0-745-65194-1

There are very few sociological issues which are more contentious and hyperbolic than those involving pornography. Issues related to sexually explicit media trigger tremendous social concerns, which have effects on healthcare, laws, government and media in general. Although a great deal is written about pornography, the majority of such writings are based on anecdote and hyperbole. While the bulk of these writings present negative views and concerns about pornography, there are also 'pro-porn' materials which ignore or gloss over what may be legitimate and reasonable concerns or evidence of negative effects. The uninformed reader is easily

overwhelmed by this morass of information, with little to no ability to sort through the material and identify what is objectively valuable and what might be biased.

Rebecca Sullivan and Alan McKee should win the Indiana Jones Award for sexual researchers, in deference to their sheer tenacity and courage at stepping into a polarized, polemic and hyperbolic field. Their book *Pornography*, a part of Polity Press' Key Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies series, delves into this cauldron of conflicting research findings, helping the reader to attempt to make sense of what is really and truly known about pornography. Their work is an invaluable contribution to the field, summing up what is known, and attempting to point out where research and exploration should go, in order to make informed, effective decisions about pornography.

Sullivan and McKee wade into the research and writings on pornography, and consider some of the most critical questions about pornography. What is it? Who makes it? How do people access pornography? What effects does pornography have on people, and especially what relationship exists between pornography and sexual violence? What does pornography and its availability truly mean, about society and our sexuality? How are issues of policy, governance, politics and social reform shaped and shaping pornography? Finally, who are the people whose voices are heard about pornography, and are there people who are not being heard but should be?

The work is filled with an extraordinary depth of references and research material. *Pornography* walks a careful line, considering all sides of the issues, and rarely discounting any opinion or perspective without a fair review of the underpinnings and evidence. Perhaps the most important, and ultimately useful, stance that the authors take is to frame pornography as a form of media and cultural expression, and to argue that pornography should be considered within that framework. By characterizing pornography as a distinct but integrated cultural and media form, the authors draw our attention to many of the limitations in the current academic and research literature about pornography. Much writing treats pornography *a priori* as unique, and as a result does not compare assumptions, findings, beliefs or concerns about pornography with those applied to other forms of media or cultural expression, whether they be art, sports, television, film, literature or other entertainment.

By framing the consideration of pornography in this manner, the authors lead us to the consideration of very important, unanswered questions. Why is pornography popular? Is pornography – a form of fast, loud and vulgar entertainment for adults who like such entertainment – different from movies such as *The Fast and the Furious* (2001) only in the fact that it focuses on sexual behaviours rather than cars? By conceptualizing pornography as a form of media, Sullivan and McKee suggest that research on pornography's effects on sexual development must first examine the question 'What is healthy sexual development?'. This is a powerful question, which the authors use to point out the role that conservatives have played in attacks on pornography, judging sexual behaviours based on biased and subjective definitions of 'normal'.

Finally, one of the last and most powerful points raised by this book is the authors' exhortation that the voices of those in pornography must be considered as a critical part of the dialogue and understanding of pornography. Sullivan and McKee do not gloss over the very real stories of negative experiences by those who have performed in pornography. But the voices of those involved in pornography, particularly in queer and feminist pornography, are voices telling stories about what pornography is, what it is not and, most importantly, what it could be: 'Our claim isn't that pornography is "good", but that we must strive to make it better. To do that, we need to listen to those whose lives are most at stake' (p. 177).

For any reader interested in a careful, fair and thorough analysis of what pornography is, does and could be, as well as what it is not, what it does not do and what it might or might not do, *Pornography* is an invaluable collection of research and material. Sadly, I fear that its very lack of bias means that those who have already prejudged pornography, and those who would most benefit from this exploration, are least likely to read it. However, as society deals more and more with the policy, economic, social, legal, moral and healthcare implications of pornography, this work's objective, fair and careful consideration offers critically needed material to help guide these decisions in less ideologically-polarized directions, directions which include all voices, not just the loudest and most committed.

Reference

Moritz, L. (producer), and R. Cohen (director). 2001. *The Fast and the Furious* (Motion Picture). USA: Relativity Media.

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