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Rethinking the pornography debate in Greece: a country-specific reading of an 'old' argument

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Given the widely circulated anxieties about the consumption of pornography and its presumed effects on adults and youngsters, as well as the intensification of moral, social and feminist campaigns to counter its spread, especially through online technologies, this article wishes to offer a country-specific contextualization of the pornography debate in Greece. Taking into account the pro-effects reading of the culture of pornography that permeates the Greek context, and a media agenda that mainly concentrates public discussion on children who are 'at risk' from the consumption of porn, we wish to argue that it is the legacy of the Greek erotic cinema of the mid-seventies and the particular way the feminist movement developed in the country which account for the public debate on pornography in Greece.

Whether we enjoy consuming it or not, we all have an opinion about pornography, while the ease and immediacy of access to pornographic content that is afforded by internet technologies has fuelled a new round of polarized and heated arguments regarding its cultural, psychological and moral implications.¹ Indeed, online pornography constitutes one of the fiercely debated public issues. Pornography is widely considered to be one of the 'major' threats that children and teenagers across the globe routinely face, and from which we, as responsible parents and members of society, should feel morally obliged to protect them (Levine 2002).

There is an overabundance of research that accounts for either the (usually negative) impact of pornographic content on children and teenagers (Greenfield 2004), or for its cultivation of sexist and misogynistic stereotypes (Tyden and Rogala 2004; Manning 2006). It appears, then, that contemporary public debate about pornography is largely framed by a notion of the psychological effects that follow the consumption of pornography, using an 'addiction' discourse and hypothesizing about the adoption of violent behaviour (Flood 2009; Peter and Valkenburg 2008; Young 2008). Such a social construction of pornography as addictive, viral and pervasive is certainly not new, for it goes back to nineteenth-century conceptualizations of 'appropriate' content and sexuality with heavy class undercurrents and is devoid of any political readings of pornography.² Yet this kind of conceptualizations become intensified with the 'onslaught' of online technologies which (are seen to) provide 'unfettered' access to pornographic content to just about anyone with an internet connection. In so doing, however, they constitute scaled up anxieties of the kind encountered in the nineteenth century, when mass

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literacy and technological developments facilitated the access and consumption of an array of texts, artifacts and representations – which up until then were predominantly available to the upper classes – to a mass audience, including ‘vulnerable’ groups such as women, children and the working class (Hunt 1996; Kendrick 1996; Tsaliki 2015).

The preoccupation with violent behaviour is fairly common within the radical feminist agenda, where pornography is equated with objectification (MacKinnon 1993; Nussbaum 1999) and with communicating unrealistic body images and standards of sexual performance (Albright 2008). In Greece, the study of pornography in the country remains underdeveloped and is dominated by a hegemonic pro-effects approach regarding the impact of sexually explicit content on children’s and adolescents’ wellbeing (Frangos, Frangos, and Sotiropoulos 2011; Tsitsika et al. 2009).

Meanwhile, contrary research has shown that social, policy and academic concerns regarding the ‘devastating’ impact of pornographic content on youngsters are seriously overstated and serve to reify a media alarmist and sensationalist culture (Buckingham and Bragg 2004; Buckingham and Chronaki 2014; Buckingham and Jensen 2012; Rovolis and Tsaliki 2012) and are largely fed by North American conceptions and political divisions (which take a more conservative view to legal action and social policy, Paasonen, Nikunen, and Saarenmaa 2007). However, the hegemony of the pro-effects conceptual paradigm means that, with regard to children, we find ourselves in the middle of

a discussion about whether we should restrict or control children’s access to media [...] Framing the debate in these terms focuses attention on a narrow range of phenomena and largely forecloses what can possibly be said about them. Yet, the ways in which this agenda is set in the wider public domain inevitably exert a significant influence on the formation of policy and, by extension, on the funding of further research. Academics in the United Kingdom -and I suspect elsewhere- are increasingly urged to consider the question of *impact*. (Buckingham 2013, 52)

In a content analysis conducted within the EU Kids Online II project, Haddon and Stald (2009) found that media coverage focuses public attention disproportionately on internet risks: in Greece, pornography accounted for over half of the risks covered in the press. In our own content analysis regarding the portrayal of online pornography and children in the Greek press (Tsaliki and Chronaki 2008), we found that quite often newspapers in Greece confuse pornography which *features* children with pornography which is *consumed* by them. When the former is at issue, it is mostly linked to sexual harassment or trafficking, reinforcing the belief that the culture of pornography – and sexuality – is essentially ‘off limits’ for children. This media agenda serves to concentrate public discussion either on children who are ‘at risk’ from the consumption of porn or those who are acting outside accepted sexual norms and values.

Furthermore, a quick Greek Google search on ‘pornography in Greece’³ yields, almost exclusively, an endless list of newspaper articles and blog posts concerning the apprehension of networks of child pornography, whether domestic or international. It illustrates that that public debate in Greece still conflates ‘pornography’ (explicit sexual content which may, or may not, be accessed by children and teenagers) with *child* pornography (the depiction of children in sexually explicit and usually socially and legally unacceptable contexts).

This public preoccupation with the need to protect children from the evils of pornography can be partly ascribed to the gradual acceptance in Greece of those socially constructed conceptualizations of the ‘sexual child’ that were current in the Anglophone

world during the nineteenth century and significantly shaped how we make sense of the pornographic culture and its assumed effects today (Egan and Hawkes 2010).⁴ In this respect, Greek conceptions of the ‘pornography controversy’ have been moulded by an Anglosaxon (mainly US-originating, morally conservative, effects-dominated) perspective (Paasonen, Nikunen, and Saarenmaa 2007).

Taking into account the strong call to consider a wide range of cultural and social contextual factors that influence the public discussion about pornography and its audiences (Nikunen, Paasonen, and Saarenmaa 2007; Tsaliki, Chronaki, and Ollafson 2014), here, we attempt to make sense of this discussion in Greece, and we offer an explanation of why it has turned out the way it has. We argue that the main reason for the linkage between pornography and children in the public imagination in Greece is that the debate on pornography in the country has not been shaped by the feminist controversies that have saturated other cultural contexts in the West, and has thus taken a different course. To illustrate, at first we offer a concise trajectory of Greek feminism that spans from the 1920s, the period when the Greek Communist Party (then the Socialist Labour Party) and the League for the Rights of Greek Women were both founded, up to date. This is then followed by a thorough look into the legacy of the Greek erotic cinema of the mid-seventies, which, we argue, has been also instrumental in the shaping of the culture of pornography in present-day Greece.

A short history of Greek feminism

From its inception, the communist movement in Greece did not espouse feminism, for it perceived it as a political adversary with separate characteristics and political aims. While both regarded women as equal to men, the feminists demanded the immediate fulfilment of fundamental demands (the rights to vote and work), while the communists were willing to postpone to the revolutionary future any solution to the problems of women’s oppression within the family and under capitalism. And while the League wished to conduct politics outside the party system, the Communist Party systematically denounced the feminists for luring working women into ‘parliamentary delusions’, thus clouding their judgment and distracting them from the objective of class struggle. For the communists, gender oppression was a corollary of class oppression. Fairly soon, the Communist Party adopted a more critical stance towards the bourgeois feminism of the League and subjected the feminists to moralistic reprimands (Psarra 2007, 208). In fact, by the end of the 1920s, feminism in Greece was equated with its ‘bourgeois’ constituency, and the political activity of women was deemed acceptable only as long as it occurred within the Communist party. At the same time, by depicting feminism as ‘bourgeois’, the communists relegated the feminist movement to the realm of social conservatism, making sure that any institutional feminist demands (mainly relating to the right to vote) were either suppressed or ridiculed. During the inter-war years, the communists sought to reinforce the negative stereotype of the feminist as the ‘new woman’, someone ridiculous and dangerous on account of her dubious morals and insatiable sexuality. In contrast to this stereotype, the Communist Party offered its own construction of ‘legitimate’ femininity – the woman worker who would find deliverance from the ills of capitalism through class struggle and always through her role as wife, mother and sister of the (male) fighter. By this means, communist women were forced to identify with a rigid gender hierarchy and value system which provided political participation for them only through their familial obligations. By 1936, before the dictatorship of Ioannis Metaxas, communist women had to collaborate with the feminists in

order to set up a wider anti-fascist women's front, a move that echoed similar alliances against fascism in Western Europe. In Greece, this convergence led to the subordination of feminist demands to the major left-wing political forces of the time and rendered women a major force in the leftist Resistance against German occupation (210). Not only that but within the Resistance, the political commitment of the women was construed as a feminine familial obligation, associating motherly care with the survival of the nation. During the Greek civil war (1946–1949), mass sexual violence was used to coerce women on the left, while communist women were depicted as 'the mothers of the nation'. Within this context, feminism came to be seen as old-fashioned and those women who were active in gender politics did not identify themselves as feminists (212).

Years later, the collapse of the military dictatorship (1965–1974) heralded a period of democratization in Greece, in which the Left experienced a political renaissance, something that has ever since impacted profoundly upon the development of the country. Within this recent re-empowerment of the Left, a mass women's movement has emerged which has brought the 'woman question' into the mainstream of liberal democratic discourse. At the same time, the prerequisites for entry into the European Union (at that time the EEC) meant that Greece was obliged to assimilate the equality discourse of the West to its constitution and polity (Poulos 2009).

The feminist movement played an important part in raising public awareness and leveraging a number of legislative changes into existence. As a result, gender parity was recognized and identified by the political parties as a legitimate objective and integrated into their policies (Kyriazis 1998). This was a concomitant of Greek membership of the European Community, which required that all member states should comply with its directives concerning equal opportunities for men and women. Hence during the 1980s, a wave of progressive institutional changes in Greece altered the *de jure* status of its women. From the elimination of the dowry system, the abolition of the concept of the '(male) head of the household' and the strengthening of the status of single mothers through to legislation designed to protect maternity and introduce paternity leave, the right to demand an abortion during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy and the identification of incest, rape and sexual harassment as criminal offences, these legislative changes institutionalized gender equality (*ibid.*).

During this period, and for most of the 1980s, the women's movement was divided over the issue of 'autonomy'. Younger advocates espoused autonomy – independence from the conventional political parties – along the lines of Anglo-American feminism. However, the more influential, older generation aligned women's liberation with the Left, and saw women's organizations mainly as appendages to the parties of the Left: indeed, they were regarded as additional reservoirs of voters rather than grassroots sources of a social change which would entail the elimination of patriarchy (Kyriakidou 2010).

Among the mainstream associations, the Union of Greek Women (EGE) was by far the largest and most influential and linked with the socialist PASOK; the Federation of Greek Women (OGE) was linked with the Communist party; and the Democratic Women's Movement (KDG) with the smaller Eurocommunist party. Each of them recruited members almost exclusively from their respective political parties, and enjoyed high visibility and resources *because* of their party-political association. As a result, they were seen by many to constitute the official face of Greek feminism. This second-wave mainstream feminism was concerned with family law and marriage reform, emphasized notions of cooperation and solidarity, and maintained connections with the

state and the mass circulation newspapers which ensured continual coverage of women's issues. The communist OGE alone continued to focus on class exploitation and rejected feminism both as a term and an ideology, maintaining a traditional communist puritanism towards sex and sexuality, and resisting all notions of feminist autonomy (Poulos 2009, chap. 6).

At the same time, the autonomous feminist groups that started to appear in the major urban centres during the mid-1970s met with considerable distrust from the parliamentary Left, which considered them as a mere imitator of 'Western' (i.e. American and capitalist) practices, and with a veiled attempt to de-socialize the women's movement (Kyriakidou 2010). For their part, the autonomous feminists challenged the mainstream feminist view that equality politics, and the institutional changes it brought forward, would impact significantly on the power relationships between men and women. In fact, the radical feminists saw in the continual addresses to Greek women as mothers, wives, housewives, farmers and wage-earners an implied acceptance of the antiquated and unjust formulations of women's status as citizens. The autonomous feminist catchphrase of the 1980s was 'individual freedom', especially from the hegemonic theories of oppression that privileged class. Not only that, but the autonomous feminists considered left-wing thought as inherently androcentric and thus loath to interrogate the relationship between gender and power. By emphasizing individual experience and identifying the institution of the Greek family as a central locus of women's oppression, the autonomous feminist project in Greece liaised with those international feminist campaigns of the period that emphasized the personal as political. Out of this linkage came the rejection of the essential complementarity of men and women, propagated by the large, mainstream women's organizations (Poulos 2009, chap. 6).

Although the autonomous feminist organizations tried to address male–female interpersonal relations within the family and the workplace and gender representations within the media, as well as issues of sexuality and pornography, they were not well received.⁵ This was reflected in the minimal and derisive coverage of the issues they raised: their exponents were portrayed as extremists, and then ridiculed (Kyriazis 1998).

The second-wave feminist movement dried up towards the end of the 1980s only to resurface in the late 1990s, this time as part of a broader anti-globalization movement and the development of international social forums in Greece. These new feminist groups also belonged to the Left, yet by 2001 were associated with the so called Coalition of the Radical Left and Progress (Syriza). Syriza feminists once again confronted indifference within the party ranks, since their male counterparts often prioritized class struggle against neoliberal globalization over structural social inequalities such as gender asymmetries. Even within Syriza, the women members did not fail to highlight pervasively male-dominated social structures and the neglect of gender hierarchies as well as the marginalization of women's issues (Kyriakidou 2010).

Overall then, the trajectory of feminist politics in Greece has been shaped by the legacy of left-wing party politics, and while women benefited from the institutional changes brought forward by the momentum of left-wing resurgence, feminism failed to establish itself as a self-contained movement in Greece.

The Greek erotica of the 1970s

The Greek erotic cinema of the 1970s was directly linked with the mainstream ('commercial') cinema of the 1960s and 1970s and has been discussed as a vindication of sexuality in the country (Komninos 2011). Whether in comedies or melodramas, the

Greek mainstream cinema of the 1960s reproduced the dominant ideology by representing women as either virtuous victims or femmes fatales. Though socially emancipated, the latter were usually depicted as affluent, sexually active women with 'loose morals'. Greek 1970s erotica was also strongly influenced by another set of films which dominated the domestic industry in the 1960s: films about 'delinquent youth' and judicial dramas with complex law-and-order storylines, which stimulated moral panics and embodied a latent eroticism which practically paved the way for soft-porn production. Soft erotica took full advantage of the sexually charged narratives and representations of 1960s film production, and made them more explicit. Aside from sparse efforts in the mid-sixties, the domestic erotic industry flourished between 1971 and 1974, when there was an organized production-line of soft-porn movies with a particular format, style and content. From 1975 till the early 1980s, their narratives involve 'macho' rogues and their illegal exploits, thus providing the rationale for more sexually explicit scenes. However, these later films are not as carefully produced as their predecessors, and are characterized by poor acting, type-casting and low professional standards (Komninos 2011, 171).

The mass production of soft erotica exploited well-known Greek artists and directors who had worked either in comedies or melodramas⁶ within the mainstream film industry. Its films⁷ employ a linear narrative which is usually interspersed by flashbacks. Law-and-order storylines are common, for they allow the 'decadent' protagonists to become embroiled in complicated situations and provide opportunities for sexual adventure. As a result, these films offer a different perspective of gender and sexual relations from that of the mainstream, which was devoid of sexually explicit scenes.⁸ In Greek erotic cinema, there is more male and female nudity: both male and female protagonists have an active sex life and are polyamorous. All these films sold cheaply and thus readily found their way into the European and US markets (to France, Germany, Italy and the Greek diaspora in the States). Once the films had been exported, each distribution company would add extra sex scenes from other porn movies,⁹ thus producing a different, hardcore version of each film.¹⁰ Hence from 1975, Greek cinematic erotica follows a path similar to that of the Italian and US sexploitation movies. In the 1980s, it transcends frontiers and follows the old storylines of law-and-order and decadent youth with more of an investment in hardcore pornography (Komninos 2011, 173).¹¹

In most of the erotic films of the 1970s, there is a strong class dimension, since action focuses on sexual relationships between the Greek upper middle class and the working class. The sartorial tastes of the characters are also class related: successful upper class men wear suits, working class men wear jeans. Younger affluent men sport A-line trousers and tight shirts. While exuding sexuality, upper class women have the means and taste to invest in haute couture and its accessories: women of loose morals dress in an openly provocative manner. 'Respectable' women, on the other hand, convey a smart-yet-modest allure (179–185).

During the seventies, the Greek film industry found in erotica what was a viable way out of the crisis associated with the rise of television on the one hand and the global impact of Hollywood on the other (Mitropoulou 2006). For a number of Greek film directors and producers who still valued professional standards and good acting but were unable to find suitable film projects, seventies softcore became a 'logical' solution. At the same time, within a society still clinging to the past through various institutions (the dowry, arranged marriages, social condemnation of premarital sex), seventies erotica foreshadowed the introduction and acceptance of new sexual practices.

Conclusions

Hence, what we have discussed so far shows that whereas in the Anglophone west feminist academics and scientists have been busy debating the effects of pornography on the lives of women, in Greece, feminism developed in a very different way, leaving almost no scope for discussions about sexuality and its representations. The feminists' attempts to alter attitudes towards the social position of Greek women may have worked at the macro-level (through legislation), yet failed at the micro-level (of interpersonal relationships). This suggests that the traditional values concerning male and female roles were well rooted in the national psyche. The widespread belief that a woman's role within the family is a matter not of subjection but pride further hindered the shaping of a feminist consciousness in Greece. The Greek case, then, is distinguished by the inability of autonomous feminism to acquire a critical mass over the years, and the failure of parliamentary feminism to redress the asymmetries of gender. In addition, the political economy of the 1970s Greek mediascape meant that mainstream cinema suffered at the hands of television, driving a substantial part of the domestic film industry (actors, directors, scriptwriters, composers, artists, producers), towards soft-porn productions in order to stay in business. These brought an air of cosmopolitan 'Europeanness' to Greece, which thanks to the development of mass tourism was already encountering new social trends and mores. All these films resonate with present-day Greek audiences, and have become a part of a now iconic Greek popular culture.¹² In effect, we believe that the framing of autonomous feminism – that is, the only feminist outlet that was interested in saying something about gender representations in the media – as 'too American', or 'too Western', in conjunction with the strong hold of seventies erotica in the Greek contemporary popular culture, contextualize the public debate around pornography in the country. In the case of online pornography, the proliferation of internet use and expertise amongst younger audiences in Greece over the years (see, for example, the Greek Observatory for the Information Society since 2005, <http://www.observatory.gr/>), has thus shifted public anxiety towards children's and teenagers' access to and consumption of it.

Disclosure statement

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Notes

1. As reflected in the policy initiative by British P.M. David Cameron to ban access to 'poisonous' online pornography, seen to 'corrode childhood' ('Family filters won't block "soft" porn'. *The Independent*, 26 July 2013).
2. For a more elaborate insight, see for example Clark (2008); Colligan (2005); DeJean (1996); Halttunen (1995); Hunt (1996); Kendrick (1996); Marcus [1966] (2009); Norberg (1996).
3. Accessed on 7/9/2014.
4. Whereas the eighteenth century was dominated by an Enlightenment optimism that children, with proper education and training by means of adult guidance, would come to tame the inner savage and monitor the balance between passion (the senses, the body) and reason (sensationism) (Egan and Hawkes 2010, chap. 1), the nineteenth century was identified with 'masturbation phobia'. This practice was deemed dangerous for the body and mind of the individual child and society at large (8). It was believed to lead to physical degeneration and mental derangement, and the medical profession was called in to treat those 'afflicted' in order to maintain the state of 'normality' (24).

5. Given their reliance on Western models of feminism, the autonomous feminists perceived women's role in the home as subordinate. This, however, misrepresents the family structure in Greece, where 'women's functions are invaluable to the maintenance of [the family's] integrity and social status, and [...] as a result, [they] confer on women a sense of prestige and accomplishment' (Kyriazis 1995, 274). Women within Greek domesticity were the organizers of the household and in charge of familial cohesiveness in their capacity as *nikokyres* ('mistresses of the home'). The term denotes much more than the term 'housewife': it carries a positive evaluation of women's performance of household duties from which derives a sense of self-esteem and pride (ibid.).
6. Protagonists Anna Fonsou, Eleni Anoussaki, Andreas Barkoulis, Betty Arvaniti, Kostas Karagiorgis, Fedon Georgitsis, Hristos Nomikos have often featured in Greek erotica; among the directors are Kostas Karagiannis, Omiros Efstratiadis, Ilias Milonakis, Petros Paraxakis, and Kostas Doukas.
7. Examples are *Η Ιδιωτική μου ζωή* (1971), *Πιο θερμή και από τον ήλιο* (1971), *Οι Ερωτομανείς* (1971), *Τα Παιδιά των λουλουδιών* (1973), *Κολασμένη του σεξ* (1974).
8. Ever since the 1950s, Greek mainstream cinema has played with the role of the 'sinful woman' and notions of guilt, remorse, honour and virtue within the context of an underground, criminal world. In the 1960s, eroticism became an integral part of youthful mores or associated with 'fallen women', without ever becoming too explicit (e.g. *Κατήφορος* 1961, *Τα Κόκκινα Φανάρια* 1963, *Στεφανία* 1966) (Athanassatou 2001).
9. Hence the Greek term 'tsonta' which refers to the extra add-in between different versions.
10. For example, the film *Πιο θερμή και από τον ήλιο* (1972) [Hotter than the sun] runs for 83 min in its original Greek version, whereas its English version runs for 120 (Komninos 2011, 197).
11. Examples are *Από πίσω με αγάπη και πιο μαλακά* (1983) (Gently, with love, from behind), *Ο νταβατζής της Ομόνοιας* (1984) (Omonia Square's Pimp).
12. Greek 'oldies' have been a staple feature on television weekly schedules for years. Its actors and producers are often invited on to lifestyle shows, reality TV and chat shows. Most of these films are featured at events such as 'The Greek Cult Film Festival', which has now been running for 12 years.

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