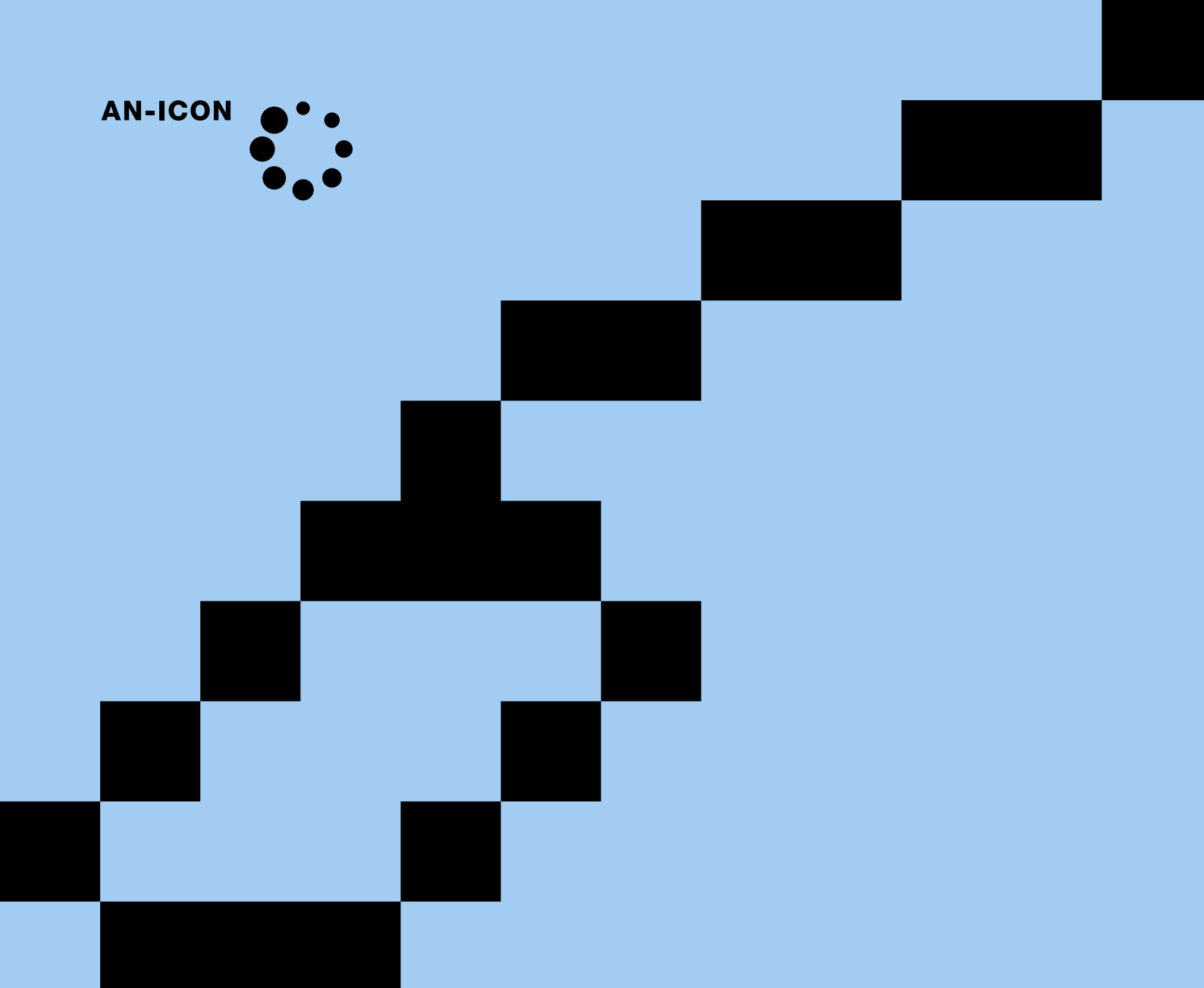
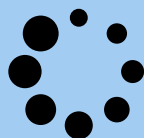


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→ Virtual Sex: Pornography,  
Immersion, and Erotic Environments

Edited by Ihsan Asman, Giovanna  
Maina, and Roberto P. Malaspina

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# Feminist gazes in virtual reality: the POV aesthetics of pornography



PAOLA ZILIOLI, University of Milan “La Statale” – <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0925-404X>

## Abstract

This paper proposes a feminist analysis of VR pornography focusing on POV as its most recurrent stylistic model. To grasp the aesthetic complexity of POV porn, the analysis shows the diffraction of this subgenre from traditional audiovisual 2D technology through virtual reality, claiming that media discontinuity can be matched by some continuity of theoretical issues within a feminist framework. The first part of the analysis argues for the inadequacy of feminist readings crossed by reverberations of the Mulveyan theory of the male gaze, thus clearing the field for a different feminist canon able to shift theory beyond the binary opposition of an active subject facing passive objects of vision. The second part examines content and formal features of POV porn by focusing on the affective encounters between the organic and inorganic bodies of users, images and technologies within a neo-materialist framework. Finally, the paper highlights some relevant issues related to the effects of POV in VR porn that could constitute productive theoretical avenues for a feminist understanding of the aesthetic dynamics ongoing between human subjectivities, environmental images and VR material devices.

## Keywords

[Virtual reality](#)

[Pornography](#)

[POV](#)

[Male gaze](#)

[Feminist aesthetics](#)

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## Introduction

The guiding question of this paper can be formulated as follows: how does the media materiality of VR pornography give shape to the embodied experience of the user from a feminist perspective? The question under discussion is addressed by referring to the diffraction of the aesthetic features of the point-of-view (POV) subgenre from traditional audiovisual pornography through VR technology. This choice is motivated by two factors. Firstly, the POV aesthetic dominates VR porn to such an extent that it could be argued that it has become the dominant subgenre of 2D pornography and saturated the content offerings of VR pornography. Secondly, the fixed POV format and the absence of queer bodies in currently available VR porn could be, and indeed has been, interpreted as a symptom of, and intensification of, the paradigmatic “controlling male gaze” (Evans 2020, 5).

The analysis is grounded in a feminist philosophical framework that wanders from media and cultural studies to gender studies. As it has been noted (Taormino et al. 2013; Attwood and Smith 2014), the heuristic adequacy and value of feminist theory for the investigation of pornography is rooted in the seminal work of feminist film scholar Linda Williams’ *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the “Frenzy of the Visible”* (1989). After the “sex wars” of the 1970s and 1980s, debates on porn have gradually moved away from the reductionist dichotomies of anti-pornography and pro-pornography positions, which implicitly conflated different premises on the nature of sex with normative conclusions on pornography (Mikkola 2022). At the time of the publication of the second edition of *Hard Core* in 1999, academic discussions on pornography were already forming the body of scholarship of an emergent disciplinary field (Attwood and Smith 2014), laying the groundwork for the so called “second generation” of Porn Studies (Williams 2004). This subsequent body of scholarship considers pornography to be a “complex cultural form” (Biasin et al. 2011, 11, my translation) that must be contextualised and examined

from multiple perspectives. Academic work on pornography has been urged to engage with a broad constellation of questions on the historical and contemporary ways in which sex and technology shape each other (Haraway 1991), thus producing different embodied experiences of the self. In this paper, the focus is on the analysis of subjectivity in the pornographic field through the gender axis.<sup>1</sup>

### **In the eye of the beholder: theorizing the gaze from a feminist perspective**

The expression “point-of-view”, abbreviated as POV, pertains to the semantic domain of focalization. The concept was elaborated in literary theory (Genette 1986) to describe the perspective from which a narrative is depicted. In the context of literary analysis, the concept of internal focalization is predicated on a series of stylistic procedures that facilitate a rapprochement between the reader and the subject matter of the text. This process renders the feelings, perceptions and thoughts of the “I” of the text intimately accessible. In transferring the concept to the pornographic field, internal focalization can be recognized in POV porn. The relevant lines of analysis in this context include the perspective frame of the scene and the relationship between the user and the image. In relation to the perspective, focalization is chiefly accomplished through the utilisation of camera work, wherein the visual perspective of the camera aligns with the subjective gaze of the male performer and the user’s field of vision. In relation to the relationship between the user and the image, POV porn displays allow the viewer a first-person in-depth visual access to the bodies of the performers, who are positioned at the centre of the action as a “visual feast” (Paasonen 2011, 173).

The strong capacity of POV porn to viscerally

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1 From the perspective of intersectional feminism (Crenshaw 1989), it is a theoretical simplification that fails to consider other identity articulations present in pornographic imagery and materials, such as those related to race, age, and class. Nevertheless, I believe this reduction is a productive one for the limited scope and purpose of my argumentation, as in most cases to date, VR porn is about the binary interaction of a white, straight male performer with one or more white, straight female performers (Rubin 2018). For black feminist critiques of feminist film theory, see Gaines (1986); hooks (1996).

engage the user, along with its gender connotations and its economic centrality in mainstream heteroporn, have made this stylistic model the target of antipornography and pro-censorship contemporary debates (Maina and Zecca 2016), which include renewed conceptions of pornography as a form of violence against women (Purcell 2012). It is not surprising that feminist common knowledge of pornography may find representational conventions active in POV porn to be degrading. A gender asymmetry is evident in the visual and carnal display of the performers: while the female bodies are present in full-length, alternatively accessible through a panoramic and close-up view, the male body coincides with the body of the camera and its presence on-scene is thus reduced to the penis and few other anatomical cutouts. Despite the presence of varied choreographies, this asymmetry can be regarded as a constant within the domain of mainstream audiovisual heteroporn. An examination of this macro-genre reveals an inclination towards the male viewer as the ideal subject of vision. In the domain of audiovisual culture, the condemnation of these stereotypical imbalances in the forms of looking has given rise to a strand of feminist analysis that draws upon Laura Mulvey's essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975). Indeed, during the 80s and 90s Mulvey's seminal theses on the male gaze "exerted such a strong impact on the direction of feminist film theory that many subsequent works constitute a direct response to it" (Chaudhuri 2006, 39). It was soon noted that the fundamental issue with Mulvey's essay is that it presupposes and reinforces a universal and monolithic male subjectivity, as well as the absence of any female agency. This is achieved by excluding women's filmmaking and the very existence of non-male forms of spectatorship from the analysis. Despite presenting itself as a feminist critique, male gaze theory adopts and perpetuates the androcentric assumptions of Freudian sexed gaze categories (Freud 1905, 1915-1917), which are positioned at the core of cinematic scopophilia. Within psychoanalytic feminist film theory, scholars such as Kaja Silverman (1980) have offered more nuanced and complex perspectives,

questioning these binaries and the underlying assumption that male pleasure always revolves around masterful power. Through her study of masculinity, Silverman has challenged the concept of a single, universal “Man” by acknowledging the existence of marginal and unconventional forms of masculinity. Furthermore, she has distinguished between the gaze and what she terms “the look” (Silverman 1992). Drawing on Lacanian theory, she argues that the gaze cannot be identified with any single observer: no subject’s look is ever all-powerful or transcendent, not least because the spectator is always simultaneously part of the spectacle. Unlike the ideal notion of the (male) gaze, “the look” always comes from a situated subject.

The Mulveyan assumption that visual pleasure is an exercise of power and a representation of male prerogative, actively directed towards a passive female body, is often maintained when translated from narrative cinema to pornography (Solomon-Godeau 1991). In the field of porn studies, Williams’s work (1989, 1991, 1995) provided a means of refining Mulvey’s theory, similar to that suggested by Silverman, albeit within a distinct conceptual framework. According to Williams (1995), the reason of the omission of any female agency

may have to do with the dominance of a model of a disembodied and distanced “male gaze” that phallically masters the objects represented, rather than a plurality of differently disciplined spectator-observers seduced in different ways by a range of ero-to-pornographic images. (Williams 1995, 22)

Williams’s interpretation of the nineteenth-century rupture with the camera obscura model of vision (Crary 1990) laid the foundations for situated knowledge<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> According to Williams (1995), Crary’s theses overlook the observers’ carnal qualities, treating them as if they were abstract and neutral entities without variations in their sexual and gendered embodiments. Feminist epistemology has long emphasized the necessity of accounting for partial perspectives in the production of theory, rather than obscuring personal viewpoints with alleged universal methods and objects (Haraway 1991). On the challenging relationship between feminist political stances towards displays of power in pornography and situated carnal experiences of vulnerability towards its materials (both in the form of pleasure and distaste), see Paasonen (2007, 2011).

of the fading of a representational observer into a new kind of corporealized one. The camera obscura model is predicated on the dichotomous separation of subject and object, a concept that resonates with the theoretical division of sight and touch in the notion of voyeurism. Behind this psychoanalytic category is the Freudian idea of sexual perversion as an effect of replacing the “normal” sexual goal (the discharge of tension in reproductive matings) with a foreign objectual destination (Freud 1905). Freud’s (1927) theory posits that inanimate objects can possess visual substance, thereby rendering an image a possible substitute for the “proper” sexual object. Since pleasure within the authentic sexual experience would involve tactile perception and since pornography allegedly substitutes touch with sight, the genre easily becomes a great machine of perversion.

The theoretical underpinnings of this analysis stem from the “representationalist” or “referentialist paradigm” (Pinotti 2020, 599) of Western image theory, for which the image is mimetic. Within this framework, images are conceptualised as icons that refer to real objects. They are ontologically inferior appearances of real pre-existing entities. This paradigm has spanned the centuries from its classical formulations and still underlies representationalist critiques of pornography. However, as Williams noted (1995), in the fruition of hardcore materials the body of the viewer is caught in an intense arousal of the flesh where touch is a carnal experience that is not aimed at the “absent referent” of the represented object but rather at the tangible bodies and machineries of the pornographic experience. Viewing experiences can be reconceptualised as embodied encounters, with the synaesthetic interaction between the human sensorium and images and apparatuses of vision at the core of phenomenological analyses (Sobchack 2004; Paasonen 2011; Keilty 2016).

The reference to representation could only be maintained at a sociopolitical level and in a specific sense. It is possible to consider certain pornographic genres, such as POV porn, as performative bodily practices (Ma-

son-Grant 2004) that reinforce and disseminate heteronormative representations. This is because, by highlighting and repeating certain sexual acts, these stylistic formats normalise and popularise them. However, I agree with Paasonen (2011) that literally reading pornographic materials as representations, mirrors or symbols of hierarchies and ideologies of power simplifies the variety of embodied experiences one can have outside categorical terms and pre-existing axes of interpretation. Furthermore, neither set of representations has any inherent meaning, and studies of representations overlook the visceral reactions to pornographic encounters. Any analysis that seeks to account for users' embodied engagement with porn must go beyond meaning attribution and interpretation:

meanings are attached to body parts and sexual acts, yet this is only one level of activity and interaction taking place, and its forms and results are by no means fixed. [...] The ways of experiencing pornography do not merely result from "acts of signification" or from decoding a set of meanings encoded in the images in their processes of production. (Paasonen 2011, 270)

While it is important to recognise the active heterosexual matrix (Butler 1990) in the gaze economy of POV pornography, the uncritical adoption of the theoretical principles underlying the Mulveyan male gaze paralyzes analysis by treating focalisation as an abstract activity and disregarding the embodied nature of the relationship between bodies, images, and technologies. If viewers are constructed as passive subjects of dangerous masculine identifications, and if the shaping effects of mediating technologies are excluded from analysis, then pornography becomes a homogeneous function of ideology – in this case, "phallogocentric misogyny" (Williams 1995, 5). However, encounters with pornography are always affective, contextual and unstable (Paasonen 2007). Thus, what is needed are non-ideological accounts of the carnal interactions at play in pornographic experiences. Analysis should account for the power of pornographic materials to

affect their users and interpreters<sup>3</sup> without assuming viewer mastery over the image and medium.

### **Bring me closer: POV of a neo-materialist feminist aesthetics**

To avoid the problematic assumptions of representational and Mulveyan models of enquiry, feminist aesthetics can adopt a neo-materialist approach to porn, breaking with the dualistic foundation of the disembodied gaze. The ontological basis of Western scientific binary thinking (Braidotti 2021), along with its associated dichotomies (e.g. body and mind, nature and technology, subject and object, sex and gender, male and female, sight and touch), has been widely questioned in feminist theory since Haraway's work (1991) and through queer theory (Butler 1990; Halberstam 2005). This has undermined the essentialist assumptions underlying heteronormative conceptualisations of sex, gender, and sexuality. Within this canon of thought, a neo-materialist approach is needed to rethink the relationship between sexuality, matter and discourse. This renewed understanding of sexuality as a material-discursive phenomenon is based on the ontological and phenomenological framework of "agential realism", a philosophical perspective proposed by Barad (1996; 2003; 2007) that distances itself from representationalism in order to account for the materialisation of bodies. Within this neo-materialist perspective, subjectivity is defined as a relational and affective entity whose body is a hybrid of flesh and technology connected with other human and nonhuman agents and forces (Haraway 1991). Central to this elaboration of subjectivity is the Spinozian concept of affect (Spinoza [1677] 2006) as a field of agentive forces that emerges in the interaction between bodies beyond their signifying order relations (Gregg and Seigworth 2009). The notion of affect has been proposed as a hermeneutical tool

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<sup>3</sup> For the need to acknowledge and account for the specificity and vulnerability of one's situated point of view as a researcher with respect to pornographic materials, see Paasonen (2007, 2011, 2014).

in the study of porn through the concept of *carnal resonance* (Paasonen 2011), which seeks “to account for what the more negative entry points” of feminist theorization has failed “to cover: reverberations, affective intensities, and moments of being moved by dissonance as much as by ‘sympathetic vibrations’” (Paasonen 2011, 18).

In this paper, I am bringing into play the heuristic value of neo-materialist studies on pornography through a set of specific materials which challenges some feminist approaches for their heteronormative implicit. I am focusing on POV porn as a core dimension of gonzo pornography and for its continued dominance in the current production of VR porn (Evans 2020). Gonzo pornography appeared in the late 1980s and over the next decade became “one of the main lines of production of mainstream pornography, gaining a pre-eminence in the adult video market that lasts until today” (Biasin and Zecca 2016). According to pornography scholars Maina and Zecca (2016), one of its preeminent stylistic features is the use of the observational-participant POV, that can be understood through the notion of “first person shot” as developed by Ruggero Eugeni (2015). The POV exhibits “an embodied, dynamic, and relational gaze; an intimate synergy between this very body-gaze and a recording device” (Eugeni 2015, 53, my translation). This intimate synergy circulates between the bodies of users, machines and images. Through the active role of the camera (Tibbals 2014), the genre installs “the spectator within the represented space, virtually positioning him or her in the place of an actor reduced to a mere ‘disembodied penis’” (Zecca 2011, 72, my translation). The user can access high levels of engagement within the scene by virtue of the performer’s anonymity and elusiveness. Moreover, when looking through the field of view, the user is usually simultaneously being looked at by the female performer inside the iconic world. This mutual focalization enhances the user’s engagement and virtual performative interaction within the scene (Maina and Zecca 2016; Malaspina 2024). This movement towards the “inside” of the scene is a key aspect of POV porn’s success and has been inter-

preted as indicative of the Western truth-seeking quest for self-knowledge rooted in the sexual realm (Foucault 1976). The longing to be immersed in the physicality of sexuality, which is typical of pornography as a genre, has been associated with the “principle of maximum visibility” (Williams 1989). This desire to experience the “truth” of sex is realised in POV porn through the camera closely following the sexual action, ranging from full shots to genital zooming and surgically exploring the performers’ bodies and fluids. This extreme proximity of the camera to the performers’ bodies is said to produce tactile images that encourage a more embodied and multisensory relationship between the viewer, the medium, and the image (Marks 2000, 172). In Williams’ words, “sight engages carnal density and tactility, as well as gender and sexuality” (Williams 1995, 15). Following this line of thought, the affordances of the VR medium elicit an immersive “sense of the user’s presence in the virtual environment [...] and of the virtual objects in the real environment” (Pinotti 2020, 594). This is a kind of convergent attraction between the user’s body and the bodies in the images, which could be understood as an asymptotic attempt to definitively capture the confessions of the flesh.

Since the logic of POV shots is to allow a depth-in dive into the details of the bodies through continuous close-ups and zooming in, and “since the female body is the visual focus of heteroporn, this fragmentation and stylization might be seen as exemplary of fetishistic scopophilia” (Paasonen 2011, 174). Through the process of fetishising body parts such as the genitals, breasts and lips, women become objects (Mulvey 1975). Unsurprisingly, pornography has historically been considered a powerful tool for the mass objectification of women (MacKinnon 1987; Dworkin 1989; Mason-Grant 2004; Dines et al. 2010). However, this idea is based on the concept of a voyeuristic, controlling gaze, the heuristic flaws of which have already been highlighted. The presence effect of virtual immersive environments requires an understanding of vision processes whereby, once again, the Mulveyan idea of a mastery, detached, controlling gaze is inadequate: VR

images “offer themselves as actual entities to be perceived ‘in person’ rather than ‘images-of’ to be grasped in terms of their representational referentiality” (Pinotti 2020, 600). Furthermore, it could be argued that the bodies of all performers, not just women, are subject to objectification to varying degrees, as the graphic quality of porn and its pictorial realism tend to depict all bodies as “assemblages of anonymous, interpenetrating flesh in motion” (Paasonen 2011, 175).

### **Let me in: continuity and discontinuity of POV in VR porn**

As I briefly recalled, the POV subgenre has historically occupied a large proportion of traditional audiovisual pornographic contents, and it has migrated into VR pornography while maintaining its quantitative predominance (Evans 2023). However, this media migration has not been neutral: the translation of porn images into VR technology allows for interactive and immersive experiences, the consequences of which need to be addressed. At first glance, VR porn could be seen as an amplification of the most problematic aspects of POV porn (Evans 2020). Yet we have seen that this conceptualization of vision relies on dualistic assumptions about human aesthetic experience that fail to account for the corporeal quality of encounters with pornography. Furthermore, it could be argued that this approach lies at the heart of the historical misconceptions and negative perceptions of pornography that have led to its theoretical exclusion from traditional aesthetic theory. There are multiple historical reasons for this exclusion, but they were certainly supported by the categories of paradigmatic Western art (Williams 1998; Saito 2007; Paasonen 2011; Attwood 2018). According to Saito (2007), “paradigmatic” refers to the standard form of the aesthetic relationship between a stable object, which is defined by a spatial or temporal frame and is distinct from its surroundings, and a viewer who perceives it through sight and possibly hearing, while maintaining a detached attitude. It is significant

to note how the “environmentalization” of the image (Pinotti 2020), made possible by the head-mounted display (HMD) in contemporary immersive virtual reality environments, has taken the dissolution of the aesthetic function of the frame to the extreme. The frame’s design ensured the separation between the image-world and the real world (Simmel 1902). In the virtual environment “the iconic landscape incessantly and continuously unfolds in 360 degrees, regardless of the orientation of vision” (Pinotti 2020, 594). While it would be anachronistic to conceptualise the image as an environment in this sense with regard to 2D technology, it is legitimate to recognise a genealogical tendency in the pornographic genre towards the dissolution of the subject/object duality. In paradigmatic art, this duality is guaranteed by the distance between the subject’s frontal position and the insular location of the object (Simmel 1902). According to Williams (1989; 1991; 1995), it is precisely this “apparent lack of proper aesthetic distance, a sense of over-involvement in sensation and emotion” (Williams 1991, 5) that makes porn users feel their carnal, visceral involvement in the pornosphere, causing the genre to be considered low and obscene. In her analysis of POV photograms from a late-60s stag film, which she selects precisely because it is “one emblem of the erotics of heterosexual male spectator-observers” (Williams 1991, 34), she reveals that the vision at play is far from detached and objectifying. While the constant theme of the scene is the pleasure of an apparently disembodied phallus, the male penis onscreen is actually “too palpably caught up in the ‘carnal density’ of the film’s vision to be conflated with the symbolic phallus” (Williams 1991, 36). As with pornographic films in general, the images in this proto-POV format reveal the physical presence of both the viewer and the performer. Their visual experiences are not separated from the scene by the frontal, distanced position of the head, nor are they merely a matter of identification with a character based on sameness and recognition. Instead, the relationship between them is a form of “corporeal, fleshy relationality and resonance” (Paasonen 2011, 203). The male performer’s ap-

parent fixed and stationary position, on which the viewer's experiential posture would be based, does not undermine the process of embodiment, but rather exposes the profound vulnerability of the flesh through the visceral appeal of pornography and the interactive connection between organic and mechanical bodies. This capacity to elicit carnal engagement lies at the heart of pornography's definition as a body genre (Williams 1991), highlighting the conceptual inadequacy of traditional aesthetic theory and psychoanalysis's theoretical framework, which conceptualise vision as a form of masterful contemplation. The unframed nature of the image in virtual, immersive environments represents a further step towards the visceral absorption of the human sensorium in the iconic world, the boundary of which with the real world is eroded by the specific affordances of VR headsets. Even more so than with 2D pornography, concepts such as control, mastery and detachment are inadequate for understanding the entanglement of the sexual body with the pornographic image and the affective dynamics of VR technology. Beyond the technical limitations of current VR devices, the perceptual boundaries between users' bodies, images, and devices are dissolving. This internal fading of the assemblage of organic and inorganic bodies during pornographic experiences has significant implications for how we think about sexual subjectivity as a symbiotic relationship between the body and technology, where differences become indistinguishable. As Wang (2021) puts it:

If the signature feature of VR pornography is the POV shot which places the camera — as the physical apparatus that enables the gesture of seeing — at the centre of the action for maximum enjoyment, then we must consider how this placement, by simultaneously moving the camera and moving the body, reveals the very point of convergence between human and machine. (Wang 2021, 225)

In his analysis of pornographic spectatorship in VR, Wang destabilises the opposition between viewer and

image by proposing that passivity is the constitutive structure of vision. Vision is no longer conceived as an autonomous, ego-driven activity. In the embodied relationship between the user and the VR medium, Wang argues that passivity materialises as a loss of control “over where to see, what to see, and who is seeing” (Wang 2021, 230). While I acknowledge the significance of his analysis, I disagree with his interpretation of 2D pornography as a “mode of eroticism sustained by narcissistic identification” (ibid.), which prompts him to view the transition from 2D to VR pornography as a radical discontinuity. Rather than passivity in psychoanalytic terms, I would argue that at stake in the relationship between the body and the machine in material encounters with porn is the vulnerability of being touched and moved by the images through the medium (Williams 1989; Paasonen 2007; 2011). Therefore, without diminishing the intensified experience of bodily engagement in VR porn compared to 2D technology, it is possible to trace a continuity in the genre’s affective economy. This continuity can be demonstrated by referring to the arousal gradient as a core element in the production and consumption of hardcore materials. As it is emphasized by the same “proposition underpinning the potential for VR pornography [...] the technology can be more arousing and intimate than traditional 2D pornography, which has already been found to have a considerable effect on arousal” (Evans 2023, 28), both for male and female users (Elsey et al. 2019; Milani et al. 2022). Empirical research has shown that VR pornography experiences, especially through POV shots, enhance sensations of pleasure and arousal, albeit still within a binary framework.

A feminist analysis of porn might still observe that in the current production of VR POV shots the heterosexual matrix operates and maintains itself by producing femininity and masculinity through the reiterative assignment of differential sexual roles and practices, the fragmentation of the body and the selection of genitals and other body parts as primary natural centres and signifiers of sexual difference (Butler 1990; Preciado 2019). One crucial

question thus concerns the possibility of queering sexual immersive environments. It could be argued that the potential for hacking VR porn with non-normative imagery of sexuality – including queer bodies and desires – has yet to be realised, as the production of non-mainstream amateur materials is limited by the cost and technical complexity of VR recording cameras (Evans 2023). However, to avoid repeating the flaw of a Mulveyan approach, it is important to consider the complexity of the relationship between production, circulation and consumption. As the history of the genre demonstrates, once porn is produced, it becomes available and is engaged with in a variety of creative ways beyond the producer’s control. Each encounter with it is situated and involves an affective engagement where media and images interface with the personal and embodied biography of the user, resulting in something “that spills over, that mobilizes the relation between the imagined bodies and viewing bodies in ways that are not entirely unpredictable, but which do not fall seamlessly into expected paths” (Kyrölä 2010, 188). Today, this highlights the need to refine analysis through the study of queer forms of embodied spectatorship. Indeed, it may emerge that the environmental image of VR porn can function as a *disorientation device* (Malaspina 2024), whereby the “proprioceptive coordinates linked to the gender self” (Malaspina 2024, 10) of the physical body are disrupted by the agentive force of the first-person shot (Slater et al. 2010). Empirical studies (Maister et al. 2014; Tacikowski et al. 2020; Zhang and Juvrud 2024) have begun to demonstrate the potential for navigating and negotiating gender identity within virtual environments. The perceptual disorientation of embodying different morphological features with strong body ownership of a virtual body, through first-person perspective and spatiotemporally congruent multisensory feedback (Slater et al. 2010), leads to cognitive and behavioural shifts after the experiment that may challenge and subvert traditional gender norms and identifications (Tacikowski et al. 2020). Future research could investigate the subversive potential of synchronization between HDM, teledildonic and full-

body tracking (FBT) technology in POV porn for disrupting the heteronormative alignment between a person's primary sexual signifiers, gender identity, and vectors of desire.

## Conclusions

This paper has explored VR pornography with the lens of feminist aesthetics arguing that pornographic spectatorship, when conceived within a representational paradigm of vision, easily falls into a heteronormative discourse characterised by the binary opposition between an active male subject and a passive female object. Taking a neo-materialist approach has proven to be a more effective way of conceptualising the experience of sexuality in VR porn as both viscerally material and performatively engaged in critical decoding activities. Further research could benefit from focusing on case studies and empirical data in order to acknowledge the collapse of the clear-cut separation between the somatechnical experience of pornography and the political meanings associated with its iconic features. Processes of subjectification and objectification, bodies and images, affects and significances, sight and touch, and matter and meaning are inextricably intertwined in users' perceptual experiences and should therefore be considered as such in feminist aesthetic debates.

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