

Investigating the Intertwined Aesthetics, Ethics and Politics of Queer Feminist Desires in Pornographic Media

Alessandra Mondin / Ph.D. Thesis Project¹

University of Sunderland

In the early 1980s feminist porn emerged with the intention of differentiating itself from mainstream pornography and its representations of gender and sexuality. A key feature of such differentiation has been the focus on representing female pleasure and through the definition of women's sexuality from a woman's point of view. Especially from the early 2000s the productions of feminist porn have been more and more diverse, shaping the field through the challenge of 'dominant representations of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, ability, age, body type, and other identity markers.'² The varied output of the recent years have provided with an array of material that could be labelled 'queer feminist porn'.

My project focuses specifically on this porn niche since its aims are to trouble, question, and complicate the hegemonic (hetero- and homo-) normative representations of identities, pleasures and desires present in society and mainstream pornography. The project explores how these texts go beyond the female/woman production-point of view-desire-viewership narratives found in some earlier examples of feminist porn. In addition, the research attempts to gauge how this audiovisual material might also queer the production, distribution, and reception of porn and assess how new forms of pornographies aspire to transform this cultural practice.

The research uses mixed-methods and an interdisciplinary approach in order to give a more exhaustive account of queer feminist pornographies, their production and consumption. In the first instance, the research proceeds with textual and media analyses of various pornographic audiovisual texts produced by feminists or with feminist intent, assessing them in terms of content and representation, media coverage, critique, production, distribution, funding and reception. These texts seem to trouble the boundaries between identity categories; art, erotica and porn; amateur, pro-am and professional realms; indie/alt and main-

¹ Ph.D. dissertation supervised by Professor Clarissa Smith. For information: alessandra.mondin@research.sunderland.ac.uk and www.feministdesires.com.

² *The Feminist Porn Book. The Politics of Producing Pleasure*, ed. by Tristan Taormino and others (New York: The Feminist Press, 2013), p. 9.

stream; the public and the private realms of new pornographic homemade digital productions and the aesthetic boundaries of art house productions; art and activism; and the borders of the national and the transnational. In addition, keeping in mind the recent developments of queer methodologies,³ the texts open for analysis could also be some that have not been created with a feminist or a queer framework in mind, but that have been 'queered' by the audience's readings.⁴ Some of the texts analysed have also circulated, gained attention through and been acknowledged by feminist porn events, like the Canadian *Good For Her Feminist Porn Awards* (2006–present) and the Berliner *PorYes* (2009–present), whose manifestos and awards reshape discourses on pornography and set the criteria for feminist porn. Moreover, since feminist porn makers wish to intervene in the field of porn and the representation of women and queer sexualities, the project seeks to investigate if and how this type of pornographic material helps to give more visibility to what it means to be queer, and provide a sense of community and identity. Some of my example texts were state funded, whereas others have partnership deals with mainstream porn companies and others are funded independently. Thus, another aspect of the research is to appraise what role funding plays in the production of feminist pornography and what outcomes might it have in terms of representation and reception. Since its birth feminist porn could be seen as a reaction to the mainstream, it would be useful to consider where individual productions are now positioned in relation to mainstream pornography and in relation to feminist pornography. Furthermore, the different aesthetics of queer feminist pornographies and their visual genealogies and repertoires are examined to see how representations of women and queer's sexualities are shaped in the texts.

At the heart of the investigation also stands what 'ethical', 'feminist' or 'queer' porn mean for those who produce under those labels and for those who choose to consume, and how queer feminist pornography stands in terms of ethics, aesthetic and politics. To address these questions, semi-structured interviews will be held with producers, directors, performers, and other key players. Moreover, a web-based questionnaire (www.feministdesires.com) intends to assess the experience of viewers of queer feminist pornographies. The responses will be examined to trace patterns and understandings of the politics, ethics and importance of pornography produced with an explicitly feminist politics. In addition, the participants of the questionnaire are invited to engage in follow-up semi-structured interviews. This exploration aims to explore discourses and practices around feminist desires.

My research applies phenomenology to the area of porn studies through the analyses of the lived experiences of their viewers with their interpretation and

³ *Queer Methods and Methodologies. Intersecting Queer Theories and Social Science Research*, ed. by Kath Browne and Catherine J. Nash (Ashgate: Farnham and Burlington, 2010).

⁴ Janet Ward, 'Queer Feminist Pigs: A Spectator's Manifesta', in *The Feminist Porn Book. The Politics of Producing Pleasure*, ed. by Taormino and others, pp. 130–39.

use of the texts. The importance of having an aesthetic that is connected with embodiment is crucial to convey the political and ethical aims of this feminist enterprise, because, as Sobchack argues, a sense of embodiment is fundamental in order to invoke a sense of ethics.⁵ The research investigates how queer feminist pornographic audiovisuals are able to engage with different lived experiences and embodiments through their aesthetics, but also how they create a feminist ethics regarding porn and representation, which appeals to authenticity and inclusivity while, at the same time, expanding the boundaries of representations of lived experience. Sobchack argues that spectatorship works by rebounding off the sensual experience represented on screen and returning to the spectator's own body.⁶ Hence, it is also the aesthetic itself that helps to convey the political aims of avowedly feminist pornography. From this perspective, it becomes crucial to analyse audiences' experiences of queer feminist porn. In doing so, Ahmed's queer phenomenology is pivotal particularly because it engages with the matter of sexual orientation through the question: 'What difference does it make "what" or "who" we are orientated toward in the very direction of our desire?'⁷ Following Ahmed, the focus is on how the body is orientated in space and time, how bodies are shaped through what and how they desire, how queer feminist porn and its politics, ethics and aesthetics dislocate and relocate lived experiences, and how politics of disorientation can put pleasure and desire within reach.

Ultimately, the research's main goal is to put in conversation these methods to assess what is queer feminist porn, what kind of relationship this audiovisual material has with feminist desires, how it interprets and constructs those desires, and how the aesthetics, ethics and politics of feminist desires are performed and are interconnected.

⁵ Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ Sarah Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 1.