

ECONOMIES, POLITICS, DISCURSIVITIES OF CONTEMPORARY PORNOGRAPHIC AUDIOVISUAL

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One of the sections of the VIII MAGIS - International Film Studies Spring School (Gorizia, March 19-25, 2010) will deal with the relationships between cinema and pornography in the contemporary audiovisual landscape. The following Call for Papers was drawn up in view of this sections.

According to Michel Foucault, starting from the 17th and 18th centuries, «there has been a real discursive explosion about sex»². Within the context of the use of repressive devices, the rising bourgeois society³ has in fact encouraged the *production* of discourses about sexualities, trying to gather its truth and to establish «the history of their conditions of possibility»⁴. In such a way, not only some forms of *knowledges* have been constituted but also *orders of discourse* and *technologies* about sex. This has favoured the birth of real *truths* about sex and about its practices, delimiting pleasures, circumscribing identities and creating perversions and pathologies.

So, modern society – born in the 19th century – has invented pornography, inciting and at the same time repressing the sexual pleasure. In particular, our society has produced a whole set of «devices of sexual saturation»⁵ in accordance with certain process – the mechanization, the urbanization, the invention of free time and “public opinion” – from which it has been crossed. Cinema and, by extension, the audiovisual media not have only given their fair share of contribution, but they have also worked like a “box of resonance” for discourses that have been shaped by their respective operational sphere of reference.

With the appearance of cinema, a new form of pornography has been introduced inside forms of knowledge and sexual pleasure. In fact, as Linda Williams has noticed, starting from the first cinematic representation of sex (*stag film*), there has been not only a rapid «multiplication of depictions of graphic sexual acts», but also a «conventionalized deployment of these acts within narratives»⁶. So cinematic devices become the *means* through which it is possible to articulate the *cultural paradigm* “pornography” – already saturated of pleasures, knowledges and prohibitions –, with the purpose to attribute it further meanings, prohibitions and purposes.

Starting from the last decade, thanks above all to the “massification” of the Net⁷, we have encountered two phenomenons. On the one hand, the state of pornography, its effects and its conditions of fruition has been recently reconsidered, thereby abandoning the very idea that pornography, as a cultural category⁸, may belong to a precise net of texts, to an elite of consumption and productive systems⁹. It has been understood, in fact, that the pornography is not only a «contested and problematic segment of the media and cultural industries»¹⁰; rather it «leaks across disciplinary boundaries and blurs conventional distinctions between private/public, subjective/social, work/play, school/leisure, sexual/intellectual realms of experiences»¹¹.

As a result of this way of thinking, the spectrum of the formalities through which pornographic discourse can be studied has notably widened:

- Pornography is connected with a vast sheaf of processes; its meaning lies not only in its immanent cultural and industrial productions, but also in its *symbolic dimensions* due to the taste categorization, cultural distinction and social regulation.
- The new interest about sexual matters promoted in Gay, Lesbian and Queer Studies has produced «a rethinking of the possible significances of pornographic production and consumption»¹².
- It has been developing a theoretical reflection about the statute of subjectivity and about its crisis, about the possibility of a re-processing of the humanist paradigm¹³. In this context, reflections about human flesh and about the overcoming of the “human” and “organic”, through body modifications, have become a prominent issue in contemporary art and aesthetics¹⁴ and they have fatally involved the pornographic representation¹⁵.
- As an effect of the rapid sequence of today’s technological developments and the consequent proliferation of the pornographic discourse in popular cultural forms of production (from Hollywood cinema to the television advertisement) sexual aesthetic, semiotics and social hierarchies seem to have rearticulated themselves according to a new conjuncture¹⁶.

On the other hand, we are nowadays witnessing to the “disappearance” of the cinema. Repeatedly, during the last decade, the most advanced theory of cinema has affirmed that cinema has *dissolved*; or better, as Francesco Casetti has recently considered, that the cinema «is re-articulated in several fields, too different from each other to be kept together», «ready to be re-absorbed into broader and more encompassing domains»¹⁷. This whole consideration subtends a great deal group of matters and a complex list of problems, which realizes a series of interesting pluralities interesting cinema itself:

- Cinema is now spread across different *media platforms* (from the Net to the satellite television), abandoning so its traditional places of presentation.
- Cinema lives inside a rather conspicuous series of supports (from that analogical to digital one), leaving its primordial film nature.
- Finally, cinema has found ways of *production, manipulation* and *consume* extremely different and diversified (from industrial manufacture to fans’ production), articulating social, economic and cultural functions not necessarily homogeneous.

The present call for papers invites considerations on the relation between pornography (considered as a *cultural paradigm*) and cinema (considered as an *audiovisual form* which is undergoing fast changes) in *conjunctural* terms. In other words, it seems interesting to understand the relationship, within contemporary society, between “pornography” and “cinema”, interpreted as an overall *articulated whole* in constant search of a transitional balance of forces¹⁸.

In this sense the different proposals concerning the following lines would be particularly welcome:

A. On a specifically *cultural* level, given the quick growth of the communication channels and the equally fast development of the new technologies:

1. What is the physiognomy of the *cultural paradigm* “pornography” in today’s media system? What is the impact of telematic infrastructures in the reconfiguration of pornography’s

modes of production, circulation and use? Which changes has digital and video technology produced in relation to the “significant” structures (narrative, discursive, enunciative ones) of contemporary audiovisual pornography?

2. What are the features of contemporary pornography devices? Is it possible to recognize some dominant representative polarities? How can one estimate the “documentary” tension (and the contextual refusal of fiction) expressed by wide sectors of contemporary pornography production? What is the relation between newer audiovisual pornography modes and on-line amateur pornography?
3. Which models of audiovisual pornography representation have formalized the *human body*? Which stylistic schemes – iconographic constant factors, similarities or differences – can we single out between the representations of human body in cinema pornography and in artistic productions, considered in a broad sense (from videoart to videogames)? How has pornography production affected artistic theories and poetics, and the aesthetic reflection, especially those concerning human body?
4. Which role does cinema still play in the proliferation of pornography’s message? Does it still make sense to speak of the ways of consumption within pornography in conformity with the consolidated canons of the institution of cinema? In what ways has pornography joined the *mainstream* cinema or the *Art Cinema*? What kind of infiltration has followed, and in conformity to which phenomenology? What is the sense to be attributed to the irruption of sex in contemporary audiovisual productions?
5. Which are the continuities and discontinuities between experimental or underground “historical” audiovisual production and “independent” telematic pornography (for example *indienudes.com*)? And which interlacements or superimpositions can be recognized between the imaginary of “alternative” contemporary pornography (for example *suicidegirls.com*) and those of contemporary artistic, musical, videographic sub-cultures?

B. On a *political-social* level, given the multiplication of legislative measures in a conservative direction, and given the rigid outlook adopted by religious and doctrinal authorities:

1. How has the repressive system organized itself vis-a-vis pornography, especially visual pornography? Which national apparatuses, cultural forces and social institutions have made a move to oppose its proliferation? What are, on national level, the policies of the single nation-states towards pornography?
2. Which are the *social discourses* that are gaining currency with regard to pornography? And what is the role played by these discourses in the physiognomy of porn “fan cultures”? Do some “resistance policies” using pornography’s “cultural series” aimed at pursuing their own goals of social transformation exist?
3. What is the social role played by pornography in contemporary imaginary as a result of the molecular circulation produced in the Net? And what is, from a symptomatic point of view, the link between the propagation of today’s pornography and the construction of desire (and social norm)?
4. Which role do gender identities cover with reference to the more recent policies of the promotion of sex through the cultural channels of pornography? And how are ethnic and racial minorities used within contemporary pornography?
5. How does a pornstar spring up? And what kind of social physiognomy does she/he have at her/his disposal? What are the socio-discursive investments underlying the process of creation of the pornographic actor/divo? Is it possible to draw up a typology?

C. On an *economic* level, given the startling current devaluation of work and the corresponding celebration of the free market:

1. According to which operational models does the current porn industry organize itself? For instance, which role does the author or production brands play in the product's saleability?
2. Which role does the production sector of porn industry play within the wide market of sex? How has its mode of production been defined with respect to the other sectors of the market?
3. On which level does the "artisan", "domestic" and "local" economic structure linked to production of pornography survive or proliferate within the global financial system? For example, how have new technologies created or, in a Foucaultian sense, stimulated the "amateur dissemination"?
4. According to which strategies have traditional branches of global or local economy invested in pornography industry?

A practice of *interdisciplinary* research is encouraged, a research that could reflect upon the economies, the policies and the textualities of contemporary pornographic audiovisual, making use of testing categories taken from different point of views (historiography, cultural studies, semiotic, gender studies, queer studies, economy etc.).

Deadline for paper proposals: 30 October 2009

Please send your proposals to:

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- 2 Michel Foucault, *La volontà di sapere. Storia della sessualità*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2004, p. 19 (our translation).
- 3 See Donald M. Lowe, *History of Bourgeois Perception*, University of Chicago, Chicago 1982.
- 4 Michel Foucault, *Le parole e le cose. Una archeologia delle scienze umane*, Rizzoli, Milano 2001, p. 12 (our translation).
- 5 Michel Foucault, *La volontà di sapere. Storia della sessualità*, cit., p. 45 (our translation).
- 6 Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"*, University of California, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 1999, p. 151.
- 7 See Piet Bakker, Saara Taalas, "The Irresistible Rise of Porn: The Untold Story of a Global Industry", in *Observatorio (OBS*) Journal*, vol. 1, 2007, pp. 99-118.
- 8 See Linda Williams (ed.), *Porn Studies*, Duke University, Durham-London, 2004.
- 9 See Feona Attwood, "Sexed Up: Theorizing the Sexualization of Culture", in *Sexualities*, vol. 9, no. 1, February 2006, pp. 77-94.
- 10 See Jean Burgess, "Editorial: Porn and the Mediasphere", in *M/C: Journal of Media and Culture*, vol. 7, no. 4, October 2004, http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0410/00_editorial.php, April 6, 2005.
- 11 Susan Driver, "Pornographic Pedagogies? The Risk of Teaching 'Dirrty' Popular Culture", in *M/C: Journal of Media and Culture*, vol. 7, no. 4, October 2004, http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0410/03_teaching.php, April 6, 2005.
- 12 Feona Attwood, "Reading Porn: The Paradigm Shift in Pornography Research", in *Sexualities*, vol. 5, no. 1, February 2002, p. 93.

- 13 See N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, University of Chicago, Chicago 1999; Roberto Marchesini, *Post-human: verso nuovi modelli di esistenza*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2002.
- 14 See Teresa Macri, *Il corpo postorganico: sconfinamenti della performance*, Costa & Nolan, Genova 1996; Mario Perniola, *Il sex appeal dell'inorganico*, Einaudi, Torino 1994.
- 15 See Emanuela Ciuffoli, *XXX. Corpo, porno, Web*, Costa & Nolan, Genova 2006.
- 16 See Brian McNair, *Striptease Culture: Sex, Media and Democratisation of Desire*, Routledge, London-New York 2002.
- 17 Francesco Casetti, "Theory, Post-theory, Neo-theory: Changes in Discourses, Changes in Objects", in *CiNéMAS*, vol. 17, no. 2-3, Spring 2007, p. 36.
- 18 See Lawrence Grossberg, "Does Cultural Studies Have Futures? Should It? (Or What's the Matter with New York). Cultural Studies, Contexts and Conjectures", in *Cultural Studies*, vol. 20, no. 1, January 2006, pp. 1-32.