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International Video Pornography on the Internet: Crossing Digital Borders and the Un/disciplined Gaze.

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ABSTRACT

How does engagement with internationally produced pornography function to underscore or to undermine the full human subjectivity of ethnic, racial, national Others? I argue that contemporary global sociopolitics and the changing structure of the distribution of video pornography online (specifically the emergence of free “sex tube” video hosting sites), create a moment with particular potential for resistance to the forces disciplining Western engagement with unmediated cultural products from outside the U.S.

Keywords

Pornography, internet, adult industry, sexuality, subjectivity, culture, human status, empathy, globalization, knowledge.

1.

Pornography, appearing as cultural category in conjunction with other hallmarks of modernity, has always been “international.” The relationship between the emergence of print technologies and pornography as a definable genre of cultural production is well-documented. The origins of the pornographic genre are bound up with the potential for transmissibility. Indeed, the history of porn is in many ways also a history of relationships between geographic locations and associations attached to those locations. The influence on English and French elite culture of the Italian erotic and satiric writer Pietro Aretino lasted well into the 1800s. The role of Paris as a hub and destination for the transmission and exchange of erotic and pornographic materials is another familiar example of porn’s internationalism. When Denmark became the first country to remove all restrictions on the production and distribution of motion picture pornography in 1967, Danish porn became a valued commodity in Europe and the U.S. And of course, the role of sexual representation in colonial projects of knowledge production, political and cultural domination, and self-definition during the eighteenth through the twentieth centuries have been well addressed by Anne Laura Stoler, Lisa Sigel, and others.

What then makes questions of internationalism in porn of particular interest at the present moment? The questions I want ultimately to ask are not merely about what internationalism means to porn, but also what porn means to internationalism. Following these historical analyses’ examination of the relationships between political power, knowledge production, and sexual practices and texts, I’m hoping here to posit or frame some

questions about contemporary negotiations of geographic and cultural selfhood and otherness.

In the past decade thinkers have been particularly occupied with questions and concerns related to globalization, terrorism, war, and torture. Judith Butler’s most recent work questions what we in the west are able to understand and respond to as “grievable” lives, arguing that Western wars and interventions abroad depend upon media framing of state violence. But clearly the media portrayal of war and violence perpetuated by the state is only one part of a larger set of mechanisms which create a barrier to the possibility of empathy or understanding across lines of ethnic, racial, and national difference.

American viewers are rarely exposed to unmediated cultural products from outside the U.S. Foreign films are few and carefully selected. “World music” is slickly packaged and deliberately marketed. Even the relatively wide-spread and deep engagement with Anime, Lucha Libre, and Bollywood that occurs in social subgroups in the U.S. seems always to be embedded within these social groups, and mediated through one’s participation therein.

How does engagement with internationally produced pornography function to underscore or to undermine the full human subjectivity of ethnic, racial, national Others? All manner of internationally produced digital media is available to the locally situated consumer by means of the web. Yet an implicitly anticipated widespread digitally driven cultural exchange has so far failed to manifest itself – Anime, Lucha Libre, and Bollywood fandom notwithstanding. Perhaps we should not be surprised that all curiosity about cultural Others is conditioned and channeled, and that access does not equal engagement. But how may pornography fit into or diverge from our disciplined looking towards the Other?

2.

Digital pornography has in recent years fueled a multi-billion dollar industry, with production and distribution occurring on a global scale. The most recent incarnation of pornography’s mainstream, replacing the magazines and VHS videos of the 1980s and early 90s, are digital video and still photos accessed through the internet. Still photos and video porn are produced in definable, located spaces, but the means by which porn is distributed is increasingly transnational. Matthew Zook’s “Report on the Location of the Internet Adult Industry” (2007) suggests that both the percentage of adult websites located in the U.S. and the U.S. share of general internet use is in decline.

A variety of developing forums and patterns in the exchange of digital video porn on the internet create a broader audience and a more global market for the production and consumption of porn. In an October 2009 CNN.com article, adult industry insiders attributed recent downturns in profits to the explosion of free material online, specifically tube sites. File sharing is one such means of exchange. However, the emergence in the last four years of 'sex tube' sites has also created a new context for more international content and a more diverse field of internet porn consumers, who are now brought into interaction with each other in new ways. 'Sex tube' sites follow the format pioneered by YouTube, the now familiar and ubiquitous video sharing website, allowing user accounts and uploads. My analysis (after a bit of background) will focus on tube sites, particularly www.Tube8.com which I have tracked most consistently while thinking about this topic.

The increasing entanglement and compatibility of personal computer technology and video media, and the increasing affordability of audio-video recording technology has changed the way porn is made, and by whom, and how porn is distributed, and to whom. In broad strokes, we may say that in 2000 the adult industry was relatively centralized, dominated by a few large production companies producing mostly feature-length films, with narrative structures, stars, and relatively large budgets. "Gonzo" which is not yet a stable term, generally refers to porn made with a comparatively small budget, on location rather than on a designated set or soundstage, and often without any developed narrative elements. Gonzo production and content are seen to increasingly be the dominant form of porn produced, certainly in terms of sheer quantity. By abandoning feature-length cohesion and narrative elements beyond the framing genre for the sex depicted, Gonzo productions also lend themselves readily to reproduction on the web.

In an oft-reproduced quote from Frank Rich's 2001 New York Times article "Naked Capitalists," an unnamed industry insider states "We realized that when there are 700 million porn rentals a year, it can't just be a million perverts renting 700 videos each." Upon examining the organization and patterns of availability of online porn, it becomes necessary to acknowledge the presence of millions more, consumers who never pay for porn. Prior to the advent of 'tube' sites after YouTube's debut in 2005, seekers of free porn often relied on links sites like Persian Kitty. Links sites worked compatibly with the interests of the porn industry, cataloging online porn resources and providing access to what might be termed 'promotional galleries' of free adult material. It is arguable that these sites built a broad audience which would later migrate to the new video hosting format. The question of whether video hosting sites will function as marketing for adult entertainment products or themselves become the main attraction is not resolved.

3.

The blossoming of a vast library of increasingly diverse and substantial pornographic products, freely accessible to most internet users around the world, fundamentally changes the relationships between consumers, the porn they consume, and each other. Tube8 is one of the few 'sex tubes' that sports a comments forum for each posting, and even a brief investigation of these forums reveals indirectly the diversity of the audience of consumers. Increasingly, it is apparent that the user-uploading

features of many 'tube' sites are also diversifying the show. Even as we begin to contend with the fact that U.S.-produced porn is being digitally exported on a global scale, we also must acknowledge that porn produced outside of the U.S. is increasingly available to the American porn consumer.

American-made porn has a set of very specific functions for the racially or ethnically marked body. Scholarship attending to the ways the black or Asian body functions in interracial porn produced in the U.S. can be found in Linda Williams' *Porn Studies* in articles by Williams, Nguyen, and Penley. (Scholars seem to have neglected analyses of "Ebony" porn, which features all African-American performers.) The structures of interracial genre porn are adhered to so scrupulously in U.S. porn that the completely different operations of racially/ethnically marked bodies in porn from outside the U.S. can be troubling for an American viewer, or revelatory, or both.

Upon reviewing the history of motion picture pornography from the days of stag films projected on the walls of smoky backrooms, through porn's cinematic "golden age" in mainstream theaters in the early 1970s, to the VHS-driven home video revolution, and into the dawning new era of porn on the internet, we might determine that the overarching trend has been of increasingly isolated viewing and increasingly diverse options for what can be viewed. Genre-oriented production, and compulsory classification of all videos (by "tagging" them with relevant terms) allow porn viewers to carefully tailor their viewing to coincide with their tastes.

However, the new territory of porn consumption created by video hosting is characterized by the consumer's private access to seemingly limitless free materials, and the accumulation of multiple genres and fetishes represented side by side. Perhaps porn viewers operating in this context are more open to exploring material outside of their usual purview, perhaps even challenging or disorienting material. While we have ever more ways to categorize the sexual milieu we video, and more ways to categorize our own sexual identities and predilections, it is also easier than ever to explore the sexual turf of others.

Videos are usually posted with thumbnail previews and descriptive titles, in the order in which they were uploaded, genres and categories notwithstanding. This results in page after page of video thumbnails, functionally a menu, where porn subgenres like "teen," "anal," "ebony," "bbw," "feet," and others are situated in close proximity. One click, and viewers can see for themselves what any given fetish or genre is all about. A different but related level of this new "ease" of exploration may be identified in YouTube-era viewing patterns, in which searches for carnivalesque imagery or imagery that triggers disgust seem increasingly to be part of searches for sexually arousing or explicit imagery.

Over the course of a year of casual survey, the material on Tube8.com underwent a slow but marked shift in the makeup of its content. The internationally-produced content doubled, then tripled in numbers. This trend was accompanied by an increase in the different languages represented in the comment threads. In general, tube sites seemed to be hosting more material from outside the U.S. On some sites, like Yuvutu.com, the element of internationalism was built into the site's design, with a small national flag located next to the poster's ID.

Video hosting comment threads, and perhaps comment threads generally, serve as sites where practices of social policing and disciplining of the desires of others can be seen quite clearly. This is of course very true of comment threads in the porn viewing context of Tube8.com. The critiques of clips portraying sexual objects of contested worth are often subjected to harsh words or dismissals that seem designed to shame those viewers who might derive pleasure from the imagery. The harsh words are also potentially directed at the performers themselves, a way of asserting one's privilege as a viewer to know and judge the object of one's gaze. Overt racism in Tube8's comment threads is frequent, as is the contestation of racist statements. More and more frequently, however, the comment threads on Tube8.com reflect the site's users' efforts to make sense out of material that diverges from the patterns of meaning to which they are accustomed.

If I read them correctly, Katalin Milter and Joseph Slade conclude their recent essay, "The Global Traffic in Pornography: The Hungarian Example," by suggesting that the success of video pornography produced in Hungary during the early 2000s is a testament to the ability or propensity of the global porn consumer to overlook or ignore "the social and political upheavals that swirl around us" and to focus instead on the "quotidian reality" of any and all bodies. In the Tube8 forums, however, is seems that an awareness of the social and cultural embeddedness of bodies and sexual performance is constantly an interest and concern for the site's viewers. It seems crucial to viewers' enjoyment of a video to determine whether or not the female performer is Brazilian or South Asian, for example, or whether the language being spoken is Italian, Spanish, French, Hungarian, Persian, or Swedish.

Indeed, the visual body itself cannot be fully meaningful, in a way that is inextricably intertwined with the sexual pleasure of seeing it, if its cultural markers cannot be established. A commenter bleats almost plaintively in response to a clip of Japanese porn star Maria Ozawa having sex with a young Japanese man with dyed hair, "if only she wasn't always fucking these funny looking red-headed Asian guys." In American porn, Asian men are rarely cast in a penetrative role, as Richard Fung has discussed. Another marked difference: Japanese porn involves very stylized female performances that are very different from the equally stylized performances of American female performers. Another clip from Japan prompts the following comment "do non-american asian girls actually like sex? they're always acting raped in these vids," suggesting the viewer's uncertainty and discomfort when faced with a scene of feigned sexual unwillingness.

For my purposes, it is precisely at the moment when it becomes clear to the porn viewer that the cultural markers at play *cannot* be established, cannot be fully understood, that things become particularly interesting. One of the reasons that porn (and perhaps we may extend this to popular cultural in general) may tend ever towards the formulaic within national genres and subgenres, is to underscore and cement for viewers a kind of mastery over narrative. In a seamless marketplace of national popular culture, there will be no surprises for the cultural consumer who does not seek them out or allow them in, no great struggles to apprehend meaning that is ultimately elusive, no moments of feeling ill-equipped to participate.

4.

There is a certain promise, or expectation, attached to conceptions

of the internet, illustrated by the name whose acronym continues to prefix most web addresses: World Wide Web. There is a myth, a myth of a new global consciousness which is expected to organically result from the kind of international access with which we are now privileged. With the global marketplace for cultural goods available online, as well as the technologies of file-sharing and video hosting, access to the cultural products of other nations and cultures is theoretically easier than ever. How then do we understand the persistent lack of engagement of U.S. audiences with these products, and what might be understood as a related lack of cross-cultural knowledge, understanding, and empathy?

Examining the case of Spanish language radio and television in the U.S. may prove useful to open up some of these ideas. Spanish language radio and TV have been a part of the U.S. cultural field for decades, preceding the kinds of access to cultural forums enabled by the internet. Thousands of non-Spanish speakers in the U.S., non-participants in U.S. Latino culture, skip past these stations without a second thought every day as they peruse broadcast media. There is no time to pose the question of whether or not listeners might enjoy the Spanish-language programming, visual or musical, or be moved by it. The exploration is cut short before it can even begin.

This is a kind of interpellation at work. When cultural consumers skip past a Spanish-language radio or television station, it is as if they are obeying an implicit address: "This is not for you." The gaze is disciplined, elaborately, away from representations of ethnic/cultural/national Others not mediated by the discursive mechanisms of control constituted by Western media.

I argue, still somewhat tentatively, that pornography constitutes a space in which these mechanisms of disciplining the gaze towards ethnic/cultural/national Others may be allowed to fail, if only temporarily and without clear consequences. Doesn't the consumption of pornography often involve a certain perversity of interpellation? We often dissociate ourselves from whomever porn is "made for." Porn is "made for" men, but women can enjoy it (although always imperfectly). Porn is "made for" adults, but children can stumble upon it and be educated by it in potentially problematic ways. Porn is "made for" perverts, with its formularized fetishistic content – that we of healthy sexual appetites and proclivities can nonetheless develop a taste for. Porn then, has the potential to slip representations of ethnic, and national otherness past our usually rigorous culturally-disciplined borders in part because of a disconnect between address and reception that is characteristic of porn as a cultural category. The question of "who makes porn for whom?" becomes somehow disconnected from the question of "who ends up looking?"

The archetypal representation of this disconnect is the well-known tale of the "discovery of Dad's Playboys," the account of a crime of opportunity that is also the beginning of an education in a discourse of sexuality and pleasure that precedes our own desires. Another fine illustration of this disconnect of address is David Sedaris' short story "Next of Kin," in which Sedaris as a child, in the company of his sisters, stumbles upon a pornographic novel. The novel is riddled with incestuous storylines and absurd spelling errors that interfere with the siblings' enjoyment of the book, and yet it compels their attention nonetheless due to its taboo nature and the fact that it is the only porn on hand. The book comes seemingly from nowhere. Each sibling relinquishes or abandons the book to the next sibling, until eventually it is discarded -- only to be discovered (as if from nowhere) by the

siblings' amused mother, and still later chucked into a stranger's truck in a bid to get rid of the thing once and for all.

The experience of porn by those for whom it "wasn't intended" is often characterized by opportunism and appropriation. While we may come to "master" many stylized formulas of porn, become fluent in its language of repetitive genre, perhaps our engagement with porn is never without the imprint of that moment of discovery and the destabilizing effects of being immersed in an elaborate new system of meaning. After our uninvited arrival and initiation into the discourse, we come to porn expecting to know what we know -- but perhaps we are not terribly surprised to discover that we never know enough.

Assuming our engagements with international porn do constitute a site for potentially undisciplined engagement with representations of ethnic and national otherness, it is necessary to ask whether these moments of sexual culture shock ultimately serve to undermine or reinforce our understanding of global subjects *as* subjects, worthy of our empathy, respect, and regard. A "fuckable," or even "knowable" body is not the same as a "grievable" one. Are we sexual tourists in this contact zone, entitled and serene and motivated first and foremost by our quest for pleasure as we have already framed it? Or do we aim for a kind of dislocated participant-observation, trying to understand the sexual logics to which we are exposed on their own terms even if in so doing we destabilize our understanding of the world and our own sexuality? Perhaps we will inevitably be both. Even as we pursue the pleasure/privilege of knowledge, the pursuit itself forces the revision of its own terms.

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