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Porn Studies: an introduction

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Academic journals don't usually grab popular media attention. However, the press release announcing the launch of *Porn Studies* attracted a great deal of interest across the media in summer 2013. On balance, the announcement of the journal's launch was largely positive. There were, of course, attempts to poke fun at the silliness of academic investigations of pornography in keeping with the perennial accusations of the superficiality of media studies, as well as more negative coverage questioning the need for a publication of this kind. How, then, to introduce this first issue of a journal that has already garnered more news interest prior to its launch than most academic publications receive over decades? We want to start out with a statement of why we think a journal in porn studies is needed and what we hope *Porn Studies* will become.

Recent years have seen a resurgence of public discussions (and scares) about a series of pornography-related topics, perhaps most notably the expansions of pornography across the internet, its putative links to rape and sexual violence, and erotic life-styling or the oft-cited 'sexualization' of culture. These have become over time topics of intense public scrutiny and debate – sometimes spilling into moral, legal or administrative action. At the same time, the same issues have become the focus of increasing scholarly concern. Pornography is now of interest for academics working across a range of disciplines. Historians and art and literary scholars turned their attention to sexually explicit works during the 1960s. The late 1970s and 1980s saw the publication of groundbreaking work such as film scholar Linda Williams' (1989) *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the 'Frenzy of the Visible'*. By the time the second edition of her book was published in 1999, she could point to pornography studies as an emergent field; the beginning of critical academic discussion about pornography, moving away from a 'porn debate' centred on disagreements about pornography's harmfulness. From this point on we can trace the gradual development of research focused on the history of pornography, the analysis of its production and consumption, its aesthetics, its significance for particular audiences, and its place in contemporary culture.

Scholarly interest in pornography has also been driven by technological changes. The increasing accessibility provided by various media technologies has opened up the market for pornography, and as a consequence amateur porn has proliferated,

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alongside a growing range of independent and alternative productions, while pornographies of all kinds have become accessible to a wider range of audiences. Mediated forms of sex have become more commonplace and commercial sex products, services and representations have become steadily more visible. Porn is becoming an important part of increasing numbers of people's lives, although what that means to them is something we still know very little about. The ways that porn is produced and distributed have undergone rapid, radical and incremental change, but much of the popular discussion about those changes is still based on guesswork.

Academic work has begun to chart these developments and the field has taken on a new urgency and significance given the continued position of pornography at the centre of controversies around media, gender, sexuality and technology. Pornographies, their spread, their imageries, their imaginaries and their consumption always have a high profile, but in the past decade or so interest in pornography has grown exponentially – with a concomitant increase in claims about porn's effects, both positive and negative.

These developments also raise important new questions, potentially opening up the study of pornography to a broader consideration of the ways in which sex, technology and the self are represented and experienced in contemporary societies. Furthermore, to pursue the study of pornography in a meaningful way requires the close and contextualized study of different facets and aspects of specific pornographies. In this way, it becomes possible to understand a variety of porn practices in their particularity.

This journal has been more than two years in its planning, followed by the exciting, though time-intense and anxiety-making, work of bringing together the content for a launch issue. *Porn Studies* has been a labour of love. Our interests in bringing the journal to fruition were born out of our personal and professional fascinations with the ways in which pornography matters and is discussed. Clearly pornography is a significant topic across a whole range of academic, public and policy domains, and yet the spaces in which it is discussed and debated are not always conducive to the sharing of research and the development of meaningful dialogue. Just as there are specialist journals, conferences, book series and collections enabling consideration of other areas of media and cultural production, so pornography needs a dedicated space for research and debate.

Researching pornography can be particularly complicated and challenging. Newspaper articles examine the proliferations of sexually explicit materials as evidence of changing mores, of other peoples' weaknesses and excesses; pornography as an industry is characterized as a 'big business' whose sheer size means it ought to be condemned. It (and pornography is almost always characterized as singular) is portrayed as an industry that succeeds by pandering to ever-more extreme interests and one that pulls everything, even the most innocent of people, into its orbit so that anything which hints at sexuality – dress, topographies of body hair, musical tastes, dancing, and so on – is marked by and marks 'pornography's influence'. With such 'overhead noise' about pornography, uncovering the histories and contemporary forms of sexually explicit representation, their production and consumption, their circulation and distribution, their importance and insignificances can be daunting.

Yet it is too easy to focus on the problems of researching pornography, and we also ought to be able to celebrate successes. Research on pornography has found a home in journals and a presence at seminars and conferences across various

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disciplines. However, as important as these have been, they have not provided the dedicated space that allows for the development of a research tradition and for discussions about the kinds of approaches and methods which will produce good research. We need a dedicated space to explore the complexities and potentials of research into pornography. This is the right time for a journal for porn studies. We need to develop our methods and theories, and to talk about the importance of different technologies, their particular employment as platforms for distribution, and the contributions these make to the kinds of pornographies that are available. We need to be able to engage with and examine the variety of legislative moves against pornography and how those might be tied to concerns about the spread and accessibility of other forms of information, and we need to recognize where regulation is being lessened or loosened and why this is so.

With this journal we do not simply want to reach those areas where porn studies are quite well established – for instance, in film and media studies – we also want to reach out to those where there is hardly any sustained publication of academic work – for instance, business, marketing, and human/computer interaction. By offering a space for researchers to develop conversations across different disciplines, the study of porn will move in new directions. This is how areas of study grow and develop over time.

Cultural, economic, political, feminist, artistic, psychological, medical and media discourses all contribute to the examination of pornography but often involve the deployment of specialist languages and concepts that carry with them their own implications, histories and problematics. Intellectual, political and moral disagreements over pornography can be compounded by ingrained disciplinary sub-divisions: academics communicate within their own disciplinary boundaries and can sometimes be hostile to other approaches.

Interdisciplinarity requires that different research traditions talk to each other and begin to learn from each other, not so that we all speak the same language or that we all agree, but so that our analysis grows. There are important insights scattered across the various domains interested in pornography: how might different definitions, frameworks and methodologies open up representations, practices, consumption, industries and politics to good research? What, for example, might engagement with past and present practitioners enable? We hope that the journal will become a central space for drawing together work from across disciplines. We also hope that the establishment of the journal will encourage more publication on pornography as authors interested in this area will recognize that there is a 'home' for their research.

History informs many of the claims that are made about pornography, and we believe that research should not simply be a matter of throwing off the past in order to present the shiny 'new'. It is too easy to speak of the 'newness' of pornographic forms – as in, for example, claims that there is increasing violence in pornography or that the representation of fetishes is entirely contemporary. In fact, sexual acts such as fisting, anal sex or BDSM practices are not new, and neither are attempts to create pornographic representation under the rubrics of feminist ethics and/or politics. Innovative approaches are always needed and welcome, but the present needs to build on the past. So we hope the journal will become a lively contemporary forum, a space for historical work, and an archive; a place to review books,

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seminars, conferences and festivals, as well as media representations and political and policy debates about pornography.

We also hope that the journal will create a stronger community of researchers that reaches beyond the walls of the academy. This is especially important because although the idea that porn studies operates within exclusively academic environments has never been true, more and more academic researchers are gaining opportunities to contribute their skills and knowledge in public fora. This is as it should be, but there are problems that should be acknowledged. The complexities of academic research are too often sidelined for the easy media story. For example: a recent study into young peoples' practices of 'sexting' was taken up by UK media pleased to present the testimonies of young people 'in danger' while leaving aside the researchers' more thorough-going and important critique of everyday sexism in schools (Ringrose et al. 2012). It is absolutely right, indeed necessary, that academic research feeds into policy-making, but this should not simply be to shore up calls for 'something to be done'. We know from experience that such contributions to political processes are not always happy and that they can come with considerable personal cost for individual academics. Too often the platform offered by the media only permits academics to provide a truncated and distorted account of research that has taken months or years to conduct. The realities of mis-represented and caricatured research can be mitigated by a strong community of researchers, and a dedicated journal that is the venue for the presentation and interrogation of research.

Perhaps one of the most important reasons for *Porn Studies* is the very topicality of pornography; we believe it is the right time to launch this journal because the subject is so politically and emotionally charged. Pornography has a public presence as an object of concern and as a metaphor used to designate the boundaries of the public space. *Porn Studies* will focus on pornography as an area deserving of study in its own right. It will develop knowledge of pornographies past and present, in all their variations and around the world – their histories, modes, aesthetics, genres and subgenres; their institutional and industrial structures; and their consumption and their regulation.

Whatever its disciplinary origin, we are not interested in work that is either antagonistic or celebratory; in assumptions about porn as essentially oppressive or corrupting, liberatory, subversive, conservative, empowering, harmful or dangerous. Instead, we seek work that makes clear its methods and theoretical underpinnings and engages with pornography as texts, productions or performances; as occurring in various kinds of 'spaces' with various significances; subject to various kinds of legal and other regulatory frameworks and with different importances for its participants and for observers of those participants. We have plans for special issues on racial pornographics, on gay male porn, on porn audiences and consumers, on porn and surveillance, on gonzo, on European pornography, on porn and performance art, and porn celebrity and stardom. We will also have a dedicated Forum section featuring shorter pieces to further enable debate and discussion.

What are the practices of pornography research: what are the relations between research methods, the politics of the research process and its implications for policy? This, we hope, will become a recurrent discussion in the journal – but not one on which we think the journal should have a 'line'. The journal is intended as a place for debating the practices of research, and what constitutes good methods – too often there is more debate about the 'idea of pornography' than evidence of research into

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its myriad forms. In addition, we want to develop a broad-based definition of what constitutes pornography, not least because of the multiple diversities of sex, sexuality and sexual representations that often refuse to be contained within strict cultural and social boundaries even if they are located within particular geo-economic regions. The most obvious driver here is the internet, but it is not the only one. Transnational flows require more exploration, as do traditions of research beyond the dominance of Anglo-American ideas of what constitutes methodology and theory.

Where do we want *Porn Studies* to be in 10 years?

- The go-to publication on pornography, and sexual representations more generally.
- A publication that has accumulated individual studies of particular pornographies in particular places and times.
- A space in which debate and argument can flourish without rehearsing the same old arguments of the porn debates.
- A space that has enabled the discipline to grow and develop and become an archive of and for those developing studies.
- A truly international space in which the Anglo-American 'debate' about porn is not the default framework for discussion. The cross-cultural and global aspects of pornography are a particular priority for the journal, and we hope to pay special attention to the ways in which pornography is made, legislated, accessed and experienced differently across the globe and in regions such as Pan-Asia, Eastern Europe, Oceania, Europe, the Middle East and Africa, and sub-Saharan Africa, exploring national and regional differences and boundary crossings.
- An environment in which various approaches, ideas, concepts, methodologies and theories can be explored and debated. This entails work that does not start out already knowing all of the answers or assuming that we already know what the porn industry looks like, what porn means, or what impact it has on people's lives. It necessitates choosing the most appropriate theoretical frameworks and methods for its object of study, whether that is the economic dimensions of porn production; the connections between mainstream film, cult cinema and sex-works; the dimensions of individual porn stardom; or the intersections between sexually explicit media and current social and political mores.

A number of thanks are due, especially to John Mercer who has overseen the book reviews for this issue and Giovanna Maina who has overseen our first Forum. Members of our editorial board have been fantastic in offering support and advice. In addition, a number of people have gone above and beyond the call of duty in turning around reviews very quickly. We would also like to thank all at Routledge for their support for what has been at times a controversial and difficult project, and particularly our editor Katherine Burton who has been clear-headed, thoughtful and good-humoured throughout the entire process.

There is no doubt that there has been extensive interest in pornography for considerable time; this journal does not mark the beginning of a nascent field. What it does mark is the beginning, we hope, of new conversations, of new ways of conceptualizing the terrain. Of course, we are feeling the pressure to offer, alongside

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our ambitions and hopes for the future, a first issue that will pre-empt or prevent howls of irritation that we have not answered the most pressing questions about pornography, but this is a long-term endeavour in which those pressing questions are up for examination. *Porn Studies* is emerging into a public arena in which many have already made up their minds as to its contents and its politics; we will either disappoint or confirm their second-guessing. Perhaps it is not enough to simply state the most obvious thing: that we are here and hope to be here for some considerable time, but yes, we are.

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