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Revisiting dirty looks

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Revisiting dirty looks

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Pamela Church Gibson and Roma Gibson's edited collection *Dirty Looks*: *Women Power, Pornography* appeared at a turning point in the evolution of pornography as a subject of academic study. This article takes the form of an interview with Pamela Church Gibson and considers the book's aim of opening up new avenues for the academic analysis of a variety of pornographies, its impact, the recent direction of 'porn studies' and changes within the industrial and representational nature of pornographic media.

Keywords: *Dirty Looks*; *More Dirty Looks*; feminism; porn studies

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Introduction

Pamela Church Gibson and Roma Gibson's (1993) edited collection *Dirty Looks*: *Women Power, Pornography* appeared at a turning point in the evolution of pornography as a subject of academic study. The 1980s had seen the rise of anti-pornography writing within the academy with the publication of Andrea Dworkin's (1981) *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* and Catherine MacKinnon's (1994) *Only Words*, which reinforced both the effects of the Minneapolis Ordinance (Dworkin and MacKinnon 1988) and the overall tone of the 1986 Meese Commission in the United States. Although Linda Williams (1990) had published *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the 'Frenzy of the Visible'* four years earlier, which swiftly became a seminal text, its objective, analytical approach avoided any overtly political stance, while the liberal work of Wendy McElroy (1993) and Nadine Strossen (1994) was still a few years away Figure 1.

In her introduction to *Dirty Looks*, Carol Clover suggested that 'for better or worse, pornography ha(d) become the feminist issue of the decade' and that the movement had become 'split down the middle' (Church Gibson and Gibson 1993, 1). The intentions of the two editors were therefore ambitious; they were both reacting against the pro-censorship movement and seeking to open up new avenues for the academic analysis of a disparate variety of pornographies. However, *Dirty Looks* did this in a way that distinguishes it from the straightforward rebuttal of anti-pornography feminist polemics that would characterize much liberal feminist writing on the subject. As Smith says of Strossen and McElroy, whilst their texts are 'the antithesis of the anti-pornography arguments' they also 'rely on the existence of those arguments in order to offer their own insights' (2007, 47).

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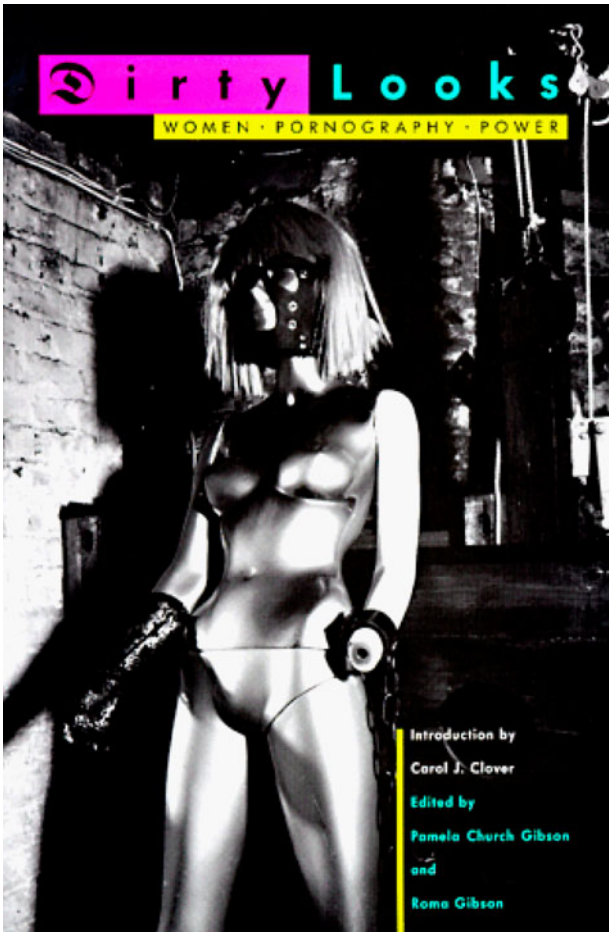

Figure 1. The cover for *Dirty Looks: Women, Pornography, Power* (1993). Photograph by Grace Lau.

Dirty Looks was rather different. Lynne Segal's opening chapter challenged the work of Itzin (1992) and others in attempting to establish a causal link between pornography and violence, but what this essay underlines is the more noticeable theme of a direct challenge to the scapegoating of sexual deviance. Clover noted how previous attempts to censor pornography fell 'heavily on marginal or minority sexualities' (Church Gibson and Gibson 1993, 3), while essays by Laura Kipnis, Anne McClintock and Maureen Turim respectively analyzed the representational practices of 'she-male' pornography, sadomasochistic pornography and eroticism in Asian cinema. The authors organized a conference at the National Film Theatre (NFT) to launch the collection, which featured papers on gay and lesbian pornography by Richard Dyer, Clare Beavan and Mandy Merck. The same patterning would continue in *More Dirty Looks: Gender, Pornography, and Power* (Figure 2), which Church Gibson edited 10 years later (Church Gibson 2004).

In this regard, the 1993 collection anticipates the post-millennial shift in pornography research. In 2002, Feona Attwood wrote of the new direction that

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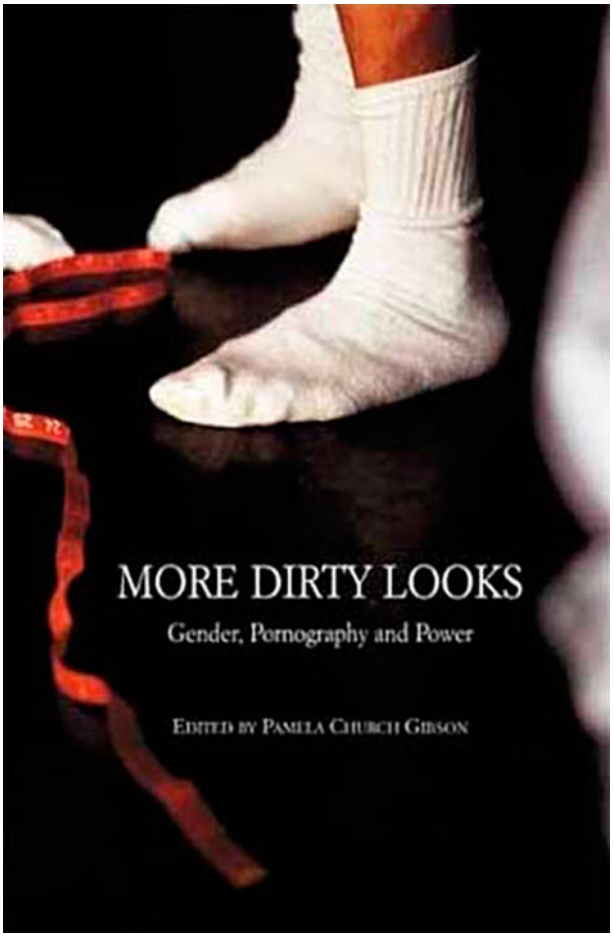

Figure 2. The cover for *More Dirty Looks: Gender, Pornography and Power* (2004). Photograph by Jeff Burton.

work on pornography was taking. For her it was carried out through an analysis of pornography as:

> a category of the profane or transgressive, as an 'outlaw discourse' and as a debased low culture genre … through the attempt to describe the generic attributes of pornography within a range of media; and through research into the ways in which pornography is consumed and integrated into everyday life. (Attwood 2002, 93)

The first *Dirty Looks* – and the second – contains academic work on a range of cultural practices, from film and print media to erotic and performance art. The first anthology is of course unavoidably dated by its publication before the evolution of online technologies, which irrevocably changed the world of pornography, but in many ways it helped to set the template for the range of edited collections that would follow over the next two decades and indeed for this very journal.

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I interviewed Pamela Church Gibson in January 2014 at the London College of Fashion, where she is Reader in Cultural and Historical Studies. I wanted to know whether she shared my view of the book's impact and to seek her opinions on both the recent direction of 'porn studies' and changes within the industrial and representational nature of pornographic media.

What was the context in which *Dirty Looks* evolved?[1]

The context, frankly, was one of repressive censorship. The book was a feminist intervention and a political statement, if you like. I think it is very important – especially for younger readers of this journal – to remember, to understand, the social and political context in which we were working. The United Kingdom – like the USA – was a very different place then. The Tories had just won the 1992 election, and there was an oppressive political atmosphere around censorship – a direct legacy of the Thatcher era, together with the strange residue of Clause 28, a legal move which sought to outlaw work within education that might be seen as promoting homosexuality. Roma worked in the editorial department at the British Film Institute (BFI) with Colin MacCabe, who was then head of publishing, and when she suggested an anthology of feminist anti-censorship writing around pornography, Colin agreed and invited Roma to edit this proposed book. She said she would do this if she could work with someone from within the academy and suggested that I become involved as co-editor. We attended early FAC (Feminists against Censorship) events at the Conway Hall and elsewhere – it was at these meetings that we found one of our contributors, photographer Grace Lau. The others were either academics whose work we admired, some of whom had already written on the subject, or women active in forms of practice-based media that were relevant to our approach.

Did it not bother you that there were no academic precedents to the collection?

Not in the slightest. It was precisely because nobody had published a feminist anti-censorship anthology that we saw the need for an intervention of this kind. Linda Williams had already published her landmark text; Roma and I heard both Linda and Laura Kipnis speak at a BFI symposium in Scotland which we attended. This event was not in the public domain due to its controversial subject matter – hard to imagine now. Other high-profile academics such as Carol Clover, who had just published the influential *Men, Women and Chainsaws* (Clover 1992), also agreed to contribute. And we knew that there were precedents in Angela Carter's work (*The Sadeian Woman*, 1979). We very much wanted to include her in the collection but she sadly died in 1992.

As it was a collection *by* feminists *for* feminists we wanted all the contributors to be women, although certain male academics, notably Paul Willemen and Ed Buscombe, helped a great deal with the publication of the book. But we also wanted to experiment and to use practitioners in the collection, hence the chapter by Bette Gordon and Karyn Kay, and Grace's contribution. Their work of course was not pornographic, but looked at sexuality in a very interesting way. Grace's work at the time was quite controversial. She was a freelance photographer who enabled members of the public to play out their sexual fantasies in front of the camera. We found this particularly interesting, particularly the story of a Royal Marine who wished to be photographed in an old fashioned nightgown, tied up with very specific marine knots such as the clove hitch.

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That last point is reminiscent of Richard Freiherr von Krafft-Ebing's work on sexual perversion, and the collection seems concerned with discussing a disparate number of sexual tastes and practices. Was that a primary aim?

Yes – the context of the early 1990s was that all sexual tastes seemed to face oppressive censorship. When performance artist and film-maker Annie Sprinkle – the self-styled 'post-porn feminist' – first came to London, although her films were screened at the NFT she was forbidden to perform on stage. We discovered that there was an ancient statute in the City of Westminster which made it illegal for women to take their clothes off and talk at the same time. They could stand for hours like nude statues, of course. And lastly it was not until 1999 that you could legally purchase any hard-core pornography in this country due to the reworking of the R18 certificate. Also censorship extended beyond representations of sex – the aforementioned conference in Scotland included a speaker working in the music industry, who was having to deal with the censorship of hip-hop acts such as NWA and 2-Live Crew. It is important to stress just how repressive the climate really was in the early 1990s.

Ten years later in the introduction to *More Dirty Looks* I described changing practices around shopping, the shift from seedy back-street video shops to chic boutiques selling designer sex toys. One store I mentioned was the 'Private Shop' in Oxford, because there, not only did the would-be consumers of pornography have to shuffle in and out as inconspicuously as they could, they were also likely to be photographed or filmed by anti-porn feminists from the East Oxford Women's Centre nearby. More importantly, I wrote about the 1991 clashes between feminists outside the (long-gone) feminist bookshop, Silver Moon, in Islington. Lesbian photographer Della Grace (1991) had published a collection of her photographs *Love Bites*. It generated controversy everywhere – the United Kingdom, the USA and Canada – because of its explicit images of leather lesbians and its depiction of sadomasochism. Grace is a self-proclaimed queer activist, now practising as Del LaGrace Volcano. The book hardly looks controversial today, but in 1991 pro-censorship feminists eventually forced the owners of Silver Moon to remove *Love Bites* from the shop.

Then as now, the thing I found most worrying was the rift created within feminism. We saw censorship as directly curtailing sexual freedom and were particularly concerned with the cause of gay and lesbian groups. As a result, we wanted to make the collection as wide reaching as possible.

Was there any opposition to this from inside or outside the academic community?

Not with the book itself, although interestingly Grace Lau's cover image made some readers rather uncomfortable, even though it depicted a mannequin. Perhaps it was the fact that the mannequin lacked a hand and was languishing in a dark cellar. There were, however, problems around On/Scenities: Looking at Pornography, the conference we organized at the NFT to tie in with the publication of our collection (Figure 3). I had to spend an afternoon with James Ferman, then director of the British Board of Film Censors, who was invited to participate in the event, at his office in 3 Soho Square. I was there to argue the case for the use of explicit imagery at the conference and it was a very serious meeting. He had not read the book, but gave me a lecture, informing me that his role as he saw it was to protect women and children. At one point he showed me a German S&M video he had confiscated, suggesting that this was the kind of thing from which he needed to protect women

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ON/SCENITIES: LOOKING AT PORNOGRAPHY
A Conference at the NFT

10:00 Colin MacCabe (Head of Research & Education, BFI).
Welcome and Introduction

10:15 Linda Williams (University of California, Irvine)
Pornographies On/Scene:
The Pornography and Performance Art of Annie Sprinkle

11:15 Anne McClintock (Columbia University, New York)
Maid to Order: Commercial S/M and Gender Power

12:15 - 1:25 Lunch

1:30 Mandy Merck (Film-maker & writer), Clare Beavan (Film-maker)
Screening of 'Every Conceivable Position', a programme about lesbian and gay attitudes to pornography made for the BBC but not screened

2:45 Richard Dyer (University of Warwick)
Idol Thoughts: Self Consciousness and Orgasm in Gay Pornography

3:45 Tea/Coffee

4:00 **PLENARY SESSION: Panel discussion**

James Ferman (BBFC), Lynne Segal (University of Middlesex), Linda Williams (University of California, Irvine) Simon Watney (Author and activist).

Chaired by Pamela Church-Gibson (London Institute)

5:30 End

6:30 Book Launch of Dirty Looks Edited by Pamela Church Gibson and Roma Gibson, BFI Publishing. (Colonnade, MOMI)

Figure 3. The conference programme for 'On/Scenities: Looking at Pornography', held at the NFT in 1993. (Please note that although James Ferman was invited and listed on the panel discussion, he did not eventually attend.)

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and children. Then, as indeed now, there was a lot of misunderstanding of and opposition to practices within the S&M community. The Operation Spanner case of 1990, the prosecution of gay men for consensual acts, had led to prison sentences and an appeal to The European Court of Human Rights. That is one reason we thought it was important to include Anne McClintock's essay in the collection. Interestingly, Ferman really liked Annie Sprinkle, impressed by her wit – he particularly praised her film *My Father is Coming* (Treut 1991).

Did this affect the conference in any way?

Not in the end. Richard Dyer wanted an edited video compilation of come-shots for his talk on 'Self-Consciousness and Orgasm in Gay Pornography' and I had to

seek help from the technicians at the BFI who were rather uncomfortable with this unfamiliar task – but good humoured and helpful. Overall, the conference (which was invitation only) was itself very good humoured. James Ferman did not in the end form part of the panel discussion, as the programme suggests. I wonder what part he might have played in the discussion that took place. He might have enjoyed Richard Dyer's presentation. This began with his announcement that he was, at the time, addicted to three things: the novels of Barbara Pym, cups of strong tea and hard core pornography. There were several presenters – Richard's paper was preceded by Mandy Merck and Clare Beavan. Here they discussed their work for *Out on Tuesday* (1989–1991) – a Channel 4 magazine series dealing with lesbian and gay issues – but they focused particularly on the censorship of a short film they had made for the BBC about lesbian and gay attitudes to pornography entitled *Every Conceivable Position* (Beavan 1991), which was especially commissioned but never broadcast.

The impact of contemporary censorship was one aspect of the day that really struck me – particularly the number of those present who had not seen any hard-core pornography at any point in their lives and so were ignorant of its generic conventions or the different forms it could take. As I said before, this was a different era, an age of seedy shops in Soho and purchases hidden in brown-paper bags. It was before the advent and impact of the internet, before the change in UK law and before the widespread proliferation of sexual representations.

So had the issue of censorship abated by the time of *More Dirty Looks* in 2004?

Not in relation to imagery at least – the building blocks plastered over the Jean Noel Rene Clair image used by Royce Mahawatte are evidence of that. But I think that whilst in 1993 the issues seemed very black and white, there was more of a shifting climate for the second collection, as I suggested in my introduction. *Dirty Looks* had sold consistently well and pornography was now seen by many as an academic topic, if still a highly controversial one. In *More Dirty Looks*, since men – gay or straight – were the primary consumers of pornography I thought we should invite them into the collection, and this took us into new areas of debate. Richard's work was familiar from 10 years earlier, but we had Ed Buscombe on film genre, Paul Willemen and Chuck Kleinhans on child pornography and Royce Mahawatte's use of literary theory in examining issues of race and ethnicity. I attended a strand on pornography at Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS) – which would have been unthinkable 10 years earlier. There I found a number of people (Jane Juffer, whose book I knew; Amy Villarejo, with whom I had worked on another project; Rich Cante and Angelo Restivo) whom I co-opted. I specifically invited Jane Gaines to contribute, while Henry Jenkins' essay on teaching pornography was especially commissioned. So too was Linda Williams' essay 'Second Thoughts on Hard Core'. Lastly, in 2001 I attended an exhibition in London of recent work by the American photographer Jeff Burton. His work at the time featured film sets, usually those used for gay male pornography – he was then working as a stills photographer. I commissioned an essay to consider and locate his work from Alistair O'Neill. Burton kindly provided our memorable cover image.

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In between the two volumes you edited *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies* with John Hill (Church Gibson and Hill 2000) and gave a chapter to Laura Kipnis to talk about pornography (Kipnis in Church Gibson and Hill 2000). Was that an attempt to get the topic onto the Film Studies syllabus?

It was more that we saw it as a genre like any other which might, for whatever reason, take its place in the academy. Plus, of course, Laura Kipnis is an excellent writer.

It is a very unusual thing to do, though – very few undergraduate introductory film texts make any reference to pornography

That's just us – ahead of the game. In all seriousness, though, we just thought if we were going to include essays on horror, or the musical, then we had to include pornography. From what I understand, in the USA attempts to put pornography on the syllabus in various places generated serious problems. Academics like Constance Penley had great difficulties with the university authorities and so I commissioned Henry Jenkins' essay 'So You Want to Teach Pornography?' for *More Dirty Looks*.

I do not know of anyone in the United Kingdom who teaches material specifically around pornographic film, but then I do not think we ever thought it could be absorbed into Film Studies like any other genre, simply because of its avowed function, which is to turn people on. What was interesting for me was that soon after the publication of *Dirty Looks* I was in the States and met a young graduate student from Duke, who had been inspired by the book to write a undergraduate unit he called 'Adult Pleasures' about pornography. It was very popular but attended only by male students (mainly jocks), who after he showed them his clips – which they enjoyed – would not speak and seemed deeply embarrassed.

Heterosexual male students tend to behave in this way and that is what is so compelling about films such as Larry Clark's *Impaled* (Clark 2006) in the Destricted project

Well yes, and we have both found this, students are very happy to sit in the dark sniggering but as soon as you turn the lights on they cannot participate in discussion. Laura Kipnis was there for various reasons, for within Film Studies the topic can be dealt with but in a rather uneasy way. In fact, I find it increasingly difficult to write about pornographic film now – I did so with you in *Hard to Swallow* (Church Gibson and Kirkham 2012), but am much more interested in questions around pornification. I appreciate that several texts have addressed pornification over the last decade or so, the work of Brian McNair (1996 and 2002) and Susanna Paasonen (Paasonen et al. 2007), but I do not think that it has been taken far enough and it certainly has not been discussed by more than a handful of scholars. We do not think *why* young girls might want to emulate glamour models and I want to provoke more interdisciplinary enquiry. I co-edited a special edition of *Fashion Theory* on pornography and fashion – Vicki Karaminas and I discovered that few people seem actually to watch porn, which might explain the lack of detailed textual analysis in a lot of academic writing. When Richard Dyer talked at the NFT conference 20 years ago, he addressed the traditional narrative structure within these films (the arrival of

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the pizza delivery boy as narrative impetus, the way that the film is punctuated or is episodic), but whilst people might have watched pornographic films from beginning to end then, they perhaps do not anymore. When material was illegal people perhaps took more time over pornographic films, but now that it is everywhere, in snippets, within the public domain, it is these very snippets that are watched – fragmented narratives, if you like.

Which is interesting, given that one of the apparent reactions to the internet's gradual destruction of the economics of the American porn industry is to almost force producers to invest in porn-parodies or longer, feature-length films (as is the case with *Digital Playground* and others)

Well, that would be an interesting angle was I to do another *Dirty Looks*, which I may. I would commission an essay on what is happening in the industry itself after the impact of the internet. What is also worthy of note is that when Mandy and Clare made their film for Channel 4 about the porn industry, it was flourishing – those days are long gone. But regardless of this, I do still feel that pornography is a hot academic topic once again – the fuss over this very journal proved that; it was discussed at length in the *Guardian*, Gail Dines has called the editors of this journal 'cheerleaders for the industry', and there was a huge fuss in the States around whether Routledge should be publishing it at all. Another topic would be the disappearance of narrative films – when academic discussion began, they were at the centre of books such as *Hard Core*. But can you do this kind of analysis anymore now that consumption involves snippets on smartphones? It is difficult, but I do think that all of these elements should be brought together for discussion, including new elements such as pop-ups, which I mention in the *Fashion Theory* article (Church Gibson forthcoming).

In the article for *Fashion Theory* you addressed the pornification of young women's dress but also raised the suggestion that the 'porn wars' have recommenced. Why do you think this has happened and how should feminism react?

What I find worrying is the fact that feminism might implode under the weight of all this – can it be sustained when it is under threat in other ways and riven by generational conflict? Gary Needham suggested that I should look again at Lisa Duggan's (1995) work on the 'sex wars'. She implied then that the 'porn wars' were over – as a young lesbian woman that was her battlefield at the time. She talked about the scars of these 'porn wars', but sadly those scars are massive fault lines now and feminism is imperilled once again.

Then, as now, with a terrible circularity, both sides of the new porn wars see their stand as self-evident. The anti-censorship side see it as the exploration of sexual freedoms (as is the case with the editors of this journal), while for the pro-censorship side it has become more complicated due to several new social factors – which include increasing sexuality in dress, the ubiquity of internet images, and so on. Academic feminists, like Annette Lynch in *Porn Chic* (2012), and journalists like Natasha Walter (2010), in her revisiting of her earlier work, and Ariel Levy (2005) are saying very similar things. These last two explain that as feminists they assumed they had the right to explore their sexuality and that this was what they were

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supposed to do: but both Walter and Levy had moments when they thought enough might be enough. For Levy, it was the incident I cite in the article when she saw a young 10-year-old girl twanging her thong in the hall of a Junior High to attract a much older boy – in the case of Walter it seems more complex, as she now feels young women are being socialized as 'living dolls'. But both of them seem worried about increasingly sexualized dress and increasing sexualized behaviour. Ariel Levy writes a great deal about *Girls Gone Wild* (www.girlsgonewild.com), for example; this is 10 years ago, of course, but there are all sorts of contemporary equivalents. I do not know if *Girls Gone Wild* is still streaming.

It is. These sites never go away

I think it is interesting to look at the work of Levy and Walter because they are not academics, they are journalists and they are comparatively young – many would assume that in the new 'wars' they would be fighting on the other side. Both sides, as I suggest, see their position as one of unassailable common sense. In Lynch's (2012) recent book *Porn Chic*, there are paragraphs that are difficult to dismiss out of hand, where she writes about the impact of the new sexualized dress on very young girls, pre teens, in the States – and their new vulnerability in public places. One of her jobs, in addition to being a professor of textiles and apparel, is as director of the centre for violence prevention on campus – and Lynch sees these two things as linked. She sees pornography and sexualized dress as coming together to make women increasingly vulnerable. Here of course she is in direct conflict with the young feminists of the 'Slutwalk' movement on both sides of the Atlantic. What I find fascinating is the flip side: women using nudity and sexualized images to make overt political points, like the Femen protests as well as those involved in the Slutwalk movement, which I have written about in the article.

So feminism is newly polarized, again just as it was when we wrote the first *Dirty Looks*, but in a more complex way because it has become generational. Levy and Walter are unusual in that they are younger women on that side of the fence – but a lot of the anti-porn writers are now older and want to protect younger women, young girls. A lot of young feminists have increasingly taken to online forums to make their voices heard – I am thinking here of Jessica Valenti, her website feministing.com and others – and obviously all of the Slutwalk protesters are very very young in comparison with many women working in the academy, as are the Femen women. So I do feel that this resurrection of the 'porn wars' is particularly worrying – that is why I wrote about it in my article and why I might revisit it in *Dirty Looks 3*. The idea of empowerment through dress and sexuality has become highly divisive for feminism and it seems to foster generational conflict. Previous conflict was focused on images, but now it is linked to dress and behaviour in general – outside a narrow sexual arena.

But what do you think about the new anti-pornography writers, such as Gail Dines, who do still focus on the images and particularly internet pornography?

Well, I critique her work on dress in the article and in a way I see *Pornland* (Dines 2010) as – in part – a continuation of the old anti-pornography approach. But what I find most interesting is linking it to what is happening elsewhere in visual culture

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because one of the problems with the contemporary academy is that people will only look at their own discipline, they will not look sideways across visual culture as I have said in the past. You cannot write about cinema without looking at the internet, at magazine journalism, because of the new reconfiguration of visual culture. It is not possible, really.

Convergence …

Precisely, it is 'Convergence Culture' – Henry Jenkins (2008), who of course wrote for us in *More Dirty Looks*. But things have not been properly pulled together apart from Feona Attwood's (2010) *Porn.com* collection.

What are your thoughts on pornography online? Because it does take the myriad of forms that you are suggesting

What I do not like is the rampant misogyny and the oppressive quality of it. The whole point of the early anti-censorship material was that the consumption of these images was supposed to do with choices of various kinds: you have no choice now if you are looking at a particular site and you encounter pop-ups – the element of choice is completely taken away. The pop-up I mention in my earlier article proclaimed 'Ugly girls need cock too – just sign up and fuck these poor women'. Now, as you know, I am very interested in Drucilla Cornell's ideas of zoning, outlined in *The Imaginary Domain: Abortion, Pornography and Sexual Harassment* (Cornell 1995), and it would be interesting to know what she has to say about zoning now. She writes about the oppression of a trip to the corner shop – now women can be oppressed in the privacy of their own homes. And on their own computers. The other thing I find interesting and would discuss myself in *Dirty Looks 3* is the fashion world's new love of near-pornography, which inspired our special issue. Jeff Burton, whose work I saw in that chic West End gallery in 2001 and about which I commissioned an essay, is now a fashion fixture. He is in demand for fashion editorial features as well as promotional shoots for cutting-edge designers – he has even made a fashion film for Lancome. Last year Kate Moss and Mario Testino collaborated with Rihanna on a photo shoot for the very chic US magazine *V* – which took its visual inspiration from the images of soft porn. All this flirtation with pornography, on the one hand, coupled with the more serious issue of feminist fighting so vigorously renewed – maybe it really is time for the third *Dirty Looks*.

Note

1. The text is a verbatim transcript of an interview which Neil Kirkham conducted with Pamela Church Gibson in January 2014.

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