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Tristan Taormino interviewed by Georgina Voss

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FORUM

Tristan Taormino interviewed by Georgina Voss

What would you say are the key changes in the production of porn in the last 10 years from your own experience?

The key changes are budgets, the talent pool, and the battle over condoms. Ten years ago, I had more time and more money to make a movie than I do today. Budgets have decreased, yet the demand for new content remains high, so companies want filmmakers to create a unique product with fewer resources. Because consumers access porn across multiple platforms, including on the web and mobile devices, what we shoot has also changed; there is more of an emphasis on individual scenes rather than full-length movies. The talent pool is larger and organized differently. A decade ago there was only one agency that represented a fraction of performers, but today the majority of performers have agents. In theory, this gives performers an advisor, an advocate they can call if something goes wrong on a set, and someone to make sure they get paid. Agencies keep track of performers, make sure they arrive to set on time and prepared, and if someone is a no-show they have a pool of possible replacements. As in the mainstream entertainment industry, porn agents run the gamut from professional to unscrupulous. Empowering performers with more choice and agency about who they work with and what they do is more prevalent than ever.

We are currently in the midst of a major shift in the industry with the passage of Measure B in Los Angeles that mandates all performers use condoms during intercourse scenes and producers comply with stringent protocols on set. Lots of people in the mainstream industry, including performers, are very resistant to this new law. There is speculation that it may drive the industry underground to shoot without permits or out of Los Angeles to avoid the hassle and expense of complying with the law.

How do you feel the areas of sex education and porn production overlap in your work? Is there scope for developing the way porn is used as a form of education further? What do you think about calls for porn to be included as a topic in school sex education?

One of the most prevalent arguments against porn is that viewers learn sexual behaviour from unrealistic sexual representations. Most responses from within the industry reiterate the same point: we create entertainment for adults; it is not intended to be sex education. While porn is an easy target and scapegoat, the real issue that this fear raises is the lack of comprehensive sex education for young people, especially in the United States. Instead of addressing how dysfunctional and disempowering it is to teach abstinence-only sex education, porn takes the fall. Missing from the argument that porn teaches people bad things about sex is the question: what if it did not? What if we could use explicit sexual media to teach people about sexuality? That is the central issue I am tackling with my sex education

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films. I want to teach people techniques for pleasure, but I also want to explore concepts that we are rarely taught: consent, communication, boundaries, and negotiation.

I would like to see more explicitly educational porn. People are hungry for knowledge about sex. It is illegal to show my films or any X-rated films to people under 18, which precludes them from ever being used in schools. I would like society to evolve to be able to bring explicit sexual imagery into a sex education framework for young people. We know that they have widespread access to online porn. For now, education programmes need to acknowledge this reality and provide a safe space for students to develop porn literacy, ask questions and receive honest answers, and discuss fantasy and reality. We need to create a forum where they can talk frankly about how they feel about what they watch and how it may (or may not) affect their own sexual self-image and behaviour.

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How do you see your own position within the broader porn 'industry'. One of the criticisms that anti-porn activists make is that feminist/queer/indie porn producers are irrelevant because they are marginal and atypical – they do not tell us anything about 'mainstream' porn. What do you think of this argument? How would you define your work in comparison – or not – with what is considered mainstream?

In the United States there is not necessarily a clear, discrete division between 'feminist/queer/indie porn' and 'mainstream porn'. There is a great deal of overlap. There are feminist pornographers (like me, Candida Royalle, Nina Hartley, Madison Young, and Carlos Batts) and feminist performers (including Dylan Ryan, Jiz Lee, Lorelei Lee, April Flores, Kelly Shibari, and Sinnamon Love) who work for/with mainstream companies such as Vivid, Wicked, and Adam & Eve. Candida Royalle's work has inspired several generations of female filmmakers to make their own porn, and she created a kind of template for 'couples' porn that still dominates the marketplace. Women like Joanna Angel, Bobbi Starr, Jacky St. James, Stoya, and Kimberly Kane working in the mainstream industry do not label their films feminist, but do self-identify as feminists. Then, there are feminist pornographers working independently who have clearly had a significant impact and influence on mainstream porn. Jackie Strano and Shar Rednour produced the independent dyke classic *Hard Love/How to Fuck in High Heels*, which became a crossover success story. It sold well in diverse markets without a mainstream distributor and won the AVN Award for Best All-Girl Feature in 2001. I would argue that the success of filmmakers who specialize in authentic lesbian/queer-produced lesbian/queer porn such as Strano and Rednour along with Shine Louise Houston, Dana Dane, and Courtney Trouble gave rise to the popularity of non-lesbian/non-queer-owned companies that specialize in what is marketed as 'real lesbian sex', such as Girlfriends Films, Filly Films, and Sweetheart Video. Mainstream star Belladonna had a strong queer and feminist following, and she did a unique film called *Strapped Dykes* where she paired mainstream female performers with performers from the queer porn world; it is another clear example of the blurring between the two worlds.

I situate my own work in both worlds: I make feminist pornography that is funded and distributed by mainstream companies and features primarily mainstream performers. My films differ from a lot of mainstream porn because they are mission-

driven and challenge one-dimensional, stereotypical, repetitive depictions of gender, race, class, and sexuality as well as power, pleasure, and sexual agency. I specifically incorporate ethical production values and a sex-positive ethos into everything I make. I always cast people of colour in my films, and steer clear of racializing and fetishizing them, as is typical in mainstream depictions. I prioritize representations of diverse modes of giving and receiving pleasure, non-heteronormative sexual practices, and authentic orgasms. I do it through an unscripted process where the performers participate fully in creating their representations, and I ask them to abandon typical porn formulas and performances. I strive to create a diverse landscape that challenges our existing intercourse-centric model and redefines what constitutes sex.

Can you tell us about your experience as editor of *The Feminist Porn Book*? Scholarly interest in queer/alternative/feminist pornography is increasing, but it feels as though academics and porn workers share a certain degree of separation from mass media and public opinion. Do you think that academic interest in pornography can affect the general public's perception of what pornography is? And to what extent could a better knowledge and understanding of (feminist) porn improve the working conditions of porn performers and their social status?

As society voraciously consumes porn, it simultaneously denigrates and devalues the people who make it. Pornography's stigma in the United States is deeply rooted in our Puritanical values, our simultaneous curiosity and fear of sex, and the devaluing of sex work. There is a lot to disentangle and undo before we begin to conceptualize porn as just another form of media and see the people who make it as workers, entertainers, and, in some cases, artists. By studying porn as a form of labour, as an entertainment industry, and as a mass medium, academics can begin to challenge the stigma, shift perceptions, and raise awareness about the working conditions of performers.

Sociological work that highlights interviews and experiences of porn performers can go a long way toward educating people inside and outside academia about this often misrepresented and misunderstood line of work. But it takes a deliberate effort on the part of academics to get their work out to a larger audience and make it accessible to the general public. One of the very exciting things about *The Feminist Porn Book* is that we created a hybrid of academic and non-academic writing, and it has garnered some great mainstream attention that has led to many more nuanced public discussions about porn.

Scholars working in Porn Studies approach pornography from many different disciplines, which is very important. It is consumed so broadly but acknowledged so rarely in public spaces. Bringing porn to the classroom helps take away the shame, destabilizes its designation as a dirty little secret no one discusses, and analyzes it in broader contexts of media, popular culture, capitalism, and politics.

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