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Publisher: Routledge
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Porn Studies
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rprn20

Authenticity and its role within feminist pornography

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Published online: 21 Mar 2014.

To cite this article: Madison Young (2014) Authenticity and its role within feminist pornography, Porn Studies, 1:1-2, 186-188, DOI: 10.1080/23268743.2014.888250

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2014.888250

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Porn Studies, 2014
Vol. 1, Nos. 1–2, 186–188, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2014.888250

Routledge
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FORUM

Authenticity and its role within feminist pornography

In an industry built on filming the glamorous performance of sex, the concept of authenticity is an anomaly. The facilitation of creating space for the expression of authentic self in relation to our sexual desires has the ability to radically change pornography.

In the depths of the San Fernando Valley, young women with crisp fake tans, long platinum blonde hair extensions, silicon breasts, and acrylic nails are fucking cocks that are artificially erect. They vocalize a performative sense of pleasure with moans and squeals as their male counterparts lead them through a formulaic equation of sexual positions that 'opens' the penetrative action up to the camera for the viewer's pleasure – not their own. This assemblage of 'fast food' pornographic sex continues until the female performer is instructed to 'fake' an orgasm and receive a load of hot cum on her face.

This is the formula that the mainstream porn industry has constructed to create a product. This product is based on sales, and caters for and often enforces sexual shame and inaccurate portrayal of women's bodies. Propagating inauthentic displays of both female and male pleasure and unrealistic exaggerations of sexual arousal and response can set unrealistic expectations for what the viewer's sexual experiences and sexual response cycle should look like. Or they can suggest that all of our sexual experiences should be mimicking these scenes which we see in porn – and if they do not, there is something wrong or broken with our sex life.

Porn is not simply viewed as a form of entertainment and fantasy but is one of the only windows that we have as a culture into what sex looks like. These issues can be problematic when examining pornography through a feminist lens. As a feminist and activist, I acknowledge the importance of documenting our sexual culture and I am highly invested in an accurate representation of women and men's sexual desire and our sexual identity. For these reasons I chose to dedicate my career to creating change within the field of pornography and harnessing the powerful medium of sexual documentation as a catalyst for healthier societal perceptions of sexuality.

To create change within any capitalist structure or industry there are two primary strategies: infiltrate the industry and create change within its existing structure, or create a movement and structure of our own that operates separately from the existing model.

Although challenging, it is not impossible to be a feminist in the artificial environment of mainstream pornography. Nor is it impossible to disrupt the inauthenticity of this staged environment through acting upon one's feminist ethos. As a performer, the simple yet revolutionary act of expressing pleasure (and orgasm) in a way that is authentic to the individual and guiding one's on-screen partner through verbal communication to a type of touch that is pleasurable to the individual, breaks

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the trend of perpetuating an unhealthy concept that it is 'better' to pretend or perform one's pleasure rather than articulate and seek authentic pleasure and connection with one's partner.

This revolutionary act of documenting authentic sexual pleasure and/or orgasm smashes the pre-set notions that orgasms look 'pretty'. During orgasms and heightened states of sexual arousal, bodies might shake, tremble, contort. There may be guttural screams or deep belly moans, or primal animal-like sounds during climax or, for some individuals, a less noticeable body tremble, flushed face and warm smile. We have seen performers such as Kimberly Kane and Lorelei Lee, who identify as feminists within the mainstream adult industry, creating change through this process of the authentic expression of pleasure.

We have also seen feminist directors successfully working within the mainstream adult industry, most notably Tristan Taormino and the tremendous body of work that she has directed for Vivid. Tristan Taormino has brought an important feminist voice to one of the largest adult production companies in the world. Within Tristan's Vivid Ed (a sexual educational series) and Rough Sex series, the educator and director captures an element of authenticity essential in the feminist porn movement. We see couples that have chosen one another as scene partners, individuals that are honestly and openly discussing how they experience their own sexual desire and how they experience sexual pleasure in their bodies. Through a series of interviews we are first introduced to performers as individuals with a specific insight into their authentic sexual desires and then brought into a more intimate portrait of the individuals' sexual explorations.

Although working within the mainstream existing structures of the adult industry is possible, it still has its own sets of constraints that are dependent on the production company. The industry will always value profit above ethics, and social movements will always value ethics above profit. The feminist porn movement is a social movement and acts as an alternative to the existing industry. Within the feminist porn movement we have clung to the term 'authentic' as a consistent ethical ingredient in what makes feminist porn, well, feminist.

For me as a feminist porn director, I find that my job is to create safe space for authentic sexual connection and pleasure to occur. I document the authentic pleasure that I have facilitated space for. Essentially, I am a documentarian. Documenting and creating space for authentic pleasure to occur while someone is holding a camera over your body does not simply happen without creating a safe container for that sexual connection to exist.

When a person disrobes and performs sexually in front of the camera they are making themselves vulnerable. I acknowledge that and respect that, I have been in that position myself hundreds of times. Standing bravely without clothes in front of eyes, in front of a camera, in front of a production crew. It is essential for my personal ethics as director to develop a trust with the performers in which they feel comfortable, empowered, and valued as the individual that they are.

There is so much body shame and sexual shame inherent in our culture that documenting authentic exploration and celebration of one's sexual self involves creating a safe environment that celebrates a sense of self and individuality.

We are not a series of buttons and formulas, we are not a face and body of airbrushed sameness; we are a celebration of difference. Our authenticity is manifest in different moans, screams, yelps of pleasure, of ecstasy. Our authenticity is embracing

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the way our body tightens and arches and contorts and convulses and whimpers under the touch of a lover or scene partner that the performers have chosen.

Choice. Choice empowers us all. Sometimes we do not realize that we have a choice. Feminist porn makes this choice apparent by presenting the performers with choices such as scene partners, how they would like to engage with their partner sexually, fantasies they would like to explore in this safe negotiated space, preferences of lube, and allowing space for the individual's natural sexual instincts to flourish in a supportive environment in which the performer(s) understand that their desires are valued and that their voice and choices are being listened to and respected. It is the negotiation of healthy sexual expression.

This results in the expression of authentic sexual desire, authentic sexual pleasure, in a way that is honest and true to the individual. It results often in authentic orgasm, but if there is no orgasm, performers are never instructed to fake one. Some people simply do not reach a physical climax every time they engage in pleasurable sex. And that is ok. Instead, they are expressing sexual pleasure in the manner in which they are honestly and authentically experiencing it.

Viewers are able to experience the documentation of how individuals authentically express their sexual desires in a way that is honest and truthful to them and the environment they were a part of creating, through their numerous decisions and negotiations that lead to the manifesting of a desire that they chose to explore in this safe documented setting. Much of this negotiation I often leave in my films. It is an important skill that we are imparting to viewers of how to vocalize their own personal desires, know that their personal desires are of value and are not shameful, and how to construct and negotiate safe space with your partner to explore your personal fantasy.

Authenticity shatters one of the greatest dangers that sex workers face – stereotypes. In giving space for the authentic expression of self, we are creating space for performers to be valued and recognized as individuals as well as creating space and permission for the viewer to explore their own authentic sense of self.

My hope as an activist and filmmaker is that feminist porn acts as a catalyst for further dialogue and conversation about sexuality and sexual desire with our partners, friends, and community. Those conversations, those dialogues, are what make the difference between questions around identity and sexuality that go unanswered and suppressed or are brought to the surface, de-stigmatized and explored with knowledge, research, and curiosity as we all discover ourselves and our relationships on newer and deeper levels.

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