This article was downloaded by: [189.122.57.117]
On: 13 April 2014, At: 10:38
Publisher: Routledge
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK

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

Between meaning and mattering: on affect and porn studies

Susanna Paasonen[a]
[a] Department of Media Studies, University of Turku, Finland
Published online: 21 Mar 2014.

To cite this article: Susanna Paasonen (2014) Between meaning and mattering: on affect and porn studies, Porn Studies, 1:1-2, 136-142, DOI: 10.1080/23268743.2014.880225

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2014.880225

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions

Porn Studies, 2014
Vol. 1, Nos. 1–2, 136–142, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2014.880225

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Between meaning and mattering: on affect and porn studies

Susanna Paasonen*

Department of Media Studies, University of Turku, Finland

(*Received 15 November 2013; accepted 20 December 2013*)

Affect has recently become something of an academic buzzword and a 'turn to affect' has been posed as an alternative to the investigations of meaning, representation and identity that have dominated media studies for the past decades. This article explores the implications, motivations and possibilities of such a turn within the framework of porn studies. It asks what may be gained from accounting for affect in studies of pornography, what limitations such investigations may have and how all this may contribute to our understanding of the fleshy appeal and power of pornography.

Keywords: pornography; affect; representation

Downloaded by [189.122.57.117] at 10:38 13 April 2014

Introduction

Studies of pornography have largely revolved around questions of cultural meaning on the one hand, and those of media effects on the other. The conventions and imageries of pornography have been extensively studied as representations that depict, give shape to and mould social categories such as gender, race and class (for example, Kappeler 1986; Kuhn 1994; Attwood 2002; Shimizu 2007; van Doorn 2010). Pornography draws on and works through types, rather than complex characters with psychological depth. It also routinely exaggerates embodied differences by resorting to the cultural reservoirs of stereotyping (as with 'barely legal cheerleaders' or the exoticism of 'interracial' porn). It is therefore not surprising that the imageries of pornography have been recurrently identified as sexist, racist and classist, and as reproducing and supporting social hierarchies of power and subordination.

In an anti-pornography framework, porn has been interpreted not merely as the fictitious representation of social relations of power but also as the documentation thereof, and as contributing to violence against women. Other views have framed porn as rebelling against bourgeois sexual mores and notions of good taste, and as subversive resistance to the hierarchies of social class (for example, Kipnis [1996] 1999; Penley 2004). Consequently, the marker of porn has been identified as a symptom and symbol of patriarchal culture, of heterosexual masculinity in crisis and of cultural resistance alike.

The notion of representation has been crucial to media and cultural studies since the 1970s. Following Richard Dyer (1993, 1), representation is a crucial focus of analytical attention since 'How we are seen determines in part how we are treated;

*Email: suspaa@utu.fi

© 2014 Taylor & Francis

how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation'. If representations do not reflect the world in as much as participate in its production, it is possible to intervene in the production of cultural identities and differences by studying them. Studies of representation have nevertheless been critiqued, especially within the framework of new materialist theory, because of the way that they presume the social categories for which they claim to investigate the construction. According to this critique, while aiming to destabilize and denaturalize social hierarchies and categories, studies of representation reiterate and reproduce them as *a priori* labels and norms (for example, Abel 2007). If the social categories addressed are assumed to 'be already there', it follows that they can be re-discovered time and time again, while acts of representation either reproduce or disrupt them (or perhaps achieve both). Since cultural images and texts afford multiple interpretations by definition, studies of representation may slide into relativism where representations are deemed as 'kinda subversive, kinda hegemonic', depending on the context (Sedgwick and Frank 1995, 17; also Cvetkovich 2001, 287). Something of this kind may be at play in how pornography, as a genre, has been interpreted as the symbol and symptom of mutually incompatible and conflicting cultural trends.

According to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003, 126), contemporary cultural theory relies on paranoid inquiry as a 'uniquely sanctioned *methodology*' that implies a compulsive will to knowledge through uncovering and revealing the hidden workings of power. These workings, however, are not hidden but are known from the start, since 'paranoia requires that bad news be always already known' (2003, 130). For Sedgwick (2003, 132 and 135), paranoid reading is both generalizing and tautological in that it 'can't help or can't stop or can't do anything other than prove the very same assumptions with which it began'. If, for example, we know from the outset that pornography is violent and works to reinforce social hierarchies of power – or, alternatively, that its images are ambivalent and afford multiple, mutually contradictory and possible subversive readings – then what can the ensuing investigation uncover that we do not already know? The investigation may easily border on the circular.

Circular reasoning where premises double as findings is common in cultural investigation motivated by political ends, as in antiporn activism and feminist analyses that aim to reveal structural inequalities in order to change them. Following Sedgwick, such investigations are representative of *strong theory* that produces (and necessitates) unambiguous results. They are firm in their premises – as in the definite understanding of what porn is and what it stands for – and in the project of destabilizing the operations of power. They are also potentially totalizing in their outcomes. Reparative reading, the alternative that Sedgwick (2003, 145–146) proposes, is weaker as theory: partial, open to moments of not knowing and lacking in unequivocal outcomes.

Like all epistemological stances, reparative reading affords the production of certain kinds of knowledge while rendering others less viable. While I am arguing for careful contextual analysis in studies of pornography, I am not suggesting that social inequalities and historically layered stereotypes do not matter or exist – that they are figments of paranoid imagination (cf. Ahmed 2008). Instead, I am suggesting a scholarly perspective that explores these representational dynamics as the very building blocks of porn as a genre while also pushing for more complex theorizations

Downloaded by [189.122.57.117] at 10:38 13 April 2014

of how these cultural images, texts and sounds work and what they may do, and how these depictions of bodies work with and in relation to the bodies of the audience. This necessitates explorations into the visceral and the affective.

Visceral encounters

For Sedgwick (2003, 130 and 136), paranoia is a theory of negative affects that blocks access to positive affects (such as interest, excitement, enjoyment or joy) of the kind that reparative reading aims to tap into. According to this line of critique, cultural theory is negative in its over-emphasis on ideology, representation, identity, lack, meaning and signification and fails to pay sufficient attention to the material and the embodied, as well as to the affective dynamics of cultural practices (see also Massumi 2002; Thrift 2008; Liljeström and Paasonen 2010). The so-called 'affective turn' in cultural theory (Blackman and Venn 2010; Koivunen 2010; Seigworth and Gregg 2010) has involved an attempt to work through the alleged lack of attention afforded to the somatic and the sensory in scholarly investigations to date. Unpacking the different strands of affect theory and their often mutually incompatible definitions of what affect is and what it does is beyond the scope of this short essay (for these, see Seigworth and Gregg 2010; Paasonen, Hillis, and Petit forthcoming). My question here concerns the methodological ramifications that studies of affect – as weak theory – may have in the context of pornography, as well as the role that the representational (the iconographic, the symbolic, the generic) plays in such investigations.

Porn studies have not extensively addressed the power or appeal of porn, its visceral grab and its power to move those looking, listening and reading beyond the ideological affects that the genre is seen to hold (for notable early exceptions, see Williams 1991; Dyer 2002). The appeal of porn is connected to its fleshy, excessive modality; that which could be defined as the 'physical residue in the image that resists absorption into symbol, narrative, or expository discourse' (MacDougall 2006, 18). The carnal resonance (Paasonen 2011) of porn involves the viewers' ability to recognize and somehow sense the intensities, rhythms and motions depicted in porn in their own bodies. Such resonance may involve unpleasant dissonance as well as reverberations of altering intensity that range from sharp jolts to the barely noticeable: the issue is one of visceral contact that can harbour a range of affective responses. Affect, then, points to uncontrollability in our encounters with porn – to a rupture between gut reactions and the fantasy of self-control, as well as to the capacity of images, words and sounds 'to physically arouse us to meaning' (Sobchack 2004, 57). In other words, practices of sensing and making sense – and the notions of sense and sensibility – need to be addressed in tandem (see Armstrong 2000; Sobchack 2004).

There are (at least) three different layers to working with affect in studies of porn. The first of these is to theorize the broad dynamics of attachment, intensity and intimacy related to the genre, and to conceptualize affect as a non-personal and precognitive intensity that animates encounters with images (cf. Abel 2007; Shaviro 2010). In this framework, the issue is one of encounters between different bodies (be these human bodies or bodies of representation) and how these bodies may produce or experience intensity as they move from one state to another. Such an investigation may extend to particular images and the resonances they afford, yet these

Downloaded by [189.122.57.117] at 10:38 13 April 2014

reverberations – understood as impersonal and separate from the phenomenological (see Massumi 2002) – are generally detached from the particularity of viewing bodies and their experiences.

A second possible approach, or analytical layer, is to investigate articulations of affect, namely the rhetorical work through which sensory intensities are translated, mediated and explained through and within language. This involves a move from the non-personal towards the more particular, embodied, situational and phenomenological. Articulations of distaste, excitement, shame and bemusement *vis-à-vis* porn help to make sense of what is being sensed, to show how pornography as an object is being constantly defined and given meanings to. This approach is, in different ways, present in antiporn explorations of feminist grief, sorrow and anger related to porn (see Dworkin [1987] 2000; also Paasonen 2007), as well as in studies of porn fandom (for example, Lindgren 2010).

A third methodological option, which connects explicitly to the feminist tradition of personal writing (for example, Gallop 1988; Miller 1991), brings the writing subject even more explicitly into the foreground as reflections of the author's own sensations and experiences of being moved by the pornographic and of her own body moving from one state to another. Since we can only have first-hand experience of our own affectations, reflections thereof may facilitate more nuanced analyses of the visceral appeal of porn. At the same time, this may limit reflection to the singularly phenomenological (the 'me and the my') without the possibility of generalizing the singular (Paasonen 2013).

There is a range of epistemological issues related to drawing on accounts of personal experience in the production of knowledge over pornography. Gut reactions are ambivalent: while sharp, they may also be difficult to make sense of. Sensations of disgust, for example, may intermingle with those of interest and titillation, and the sharp intensities of shame may be intimately tied to, and intensify, those of sexual arousal (see Paasonen 2011). The imageries of pornography actively play with, and try to evoke, such ambivalent entanglements in order to grab audience attention. An image may evoke disgust in one person, amusement in another, or sexual arousal and fury in yet others. There is no guarantee that an image evokes any particular sensations at all, and one person's sensations vary over time, given that the relationship between sensing and making sense is both unpredictable and contingent (Tomkins 1995, 54–55). Affective intensities are hard to pin down, highly variable yet central to the dynamics of porn as a genre. As such, they form no firm basis for generalization or for the composition of strong theory.

As Anu Koivunen (2010, 23) notes, the rhetorical figure of an affective turn evokes and promises 'drama and change of direction'. This kind of drama is much less evident in scholarly exercises concerning affect: despite a recurrent 'turn away' from the representational, analyses of affective force are enmeshed in questions of formula and genre, meaning and signification (see Abel 2007; Shaviro 2010). It is easy to agree on the expansive uses of 'text' and 'reading' in cultural research to date (Hillis 2009, 27), yet a 'turn to affect' need not – and, indeed, cannot – involve a simple turn away from the textual for the very reason that theorizations of affect are just as much a form of textual and linguistic exercise as any other type of scholarly investigation. There is no retrospective access to the initial, precognitive visceral encounters with porn and the sensations they evoke. One can reconstruct something

Downloaded by [189.122.57.117] at 10:38 13 April 2014

of such an undifferentiated encounter but one cannot relive or re-inhabit it in the acts of reflection or writing. Affective dynamics alter and modulate in the course of recurring encounters (as in acts of looking, reading and listening), and ultimately they are not for us to master. As Susan Kozel (2007, 18) points out, one should not assume that we can reach the pre-linguistic and 'shake off our inscription by language and culture' in analytical work unfolding through language. Analysis is both retrospective and linguistic reflection of an event after the fact. While the pre-reflective cannot be reached, we may hold on to its traces in acts of making sense (Kozel 2007, 19).

What to do with affect?

The turn to affect, as it has been diagnosed throughout the 2000s, involves many potential pitfalls that have been amplified by affect becoming something of an academic buzzword. First of all, the very notion of affect is ephemeral and diverse in its definitions and applications across different theoretical frameworks. When referring to affect, one therefore needs to specify what is meant by the term and how it is being applied: 'affect', as such, explains or clarifies little. A second group of problems, connected to the first and already briefly addressed above, involves methodology and the challenges involved in tackling the precognitive within the linguistic.

Working with affect in studies of porn involves the attempt to explore questions of mattering and significance (cf. Miller 2010, 125; Skeggs and Wood 2012, 41). At the same time, when working with image, text and sound, the level of the representational – that which is being depicted, how and through what means – needs to be accounted for. In other words, meaning and mattering, signification and significance are 'inextricably fused together' (Barad 2007, 3) and decoupling them involves considerable analytical violence. If one does not remain specific about aesthetics and modes of depiction, it makes virtually no difference in terms of the conceptualization whether one is studying gonzo porn, romantic comedy or minimalist art: once detached from the empirical, conceptualization enters a sphere of its own. When studying cultural images, it is crucial to understand how they have been put together and what historical traces may linger on within them.

In sum, rather than proposing a turn 'to' affect as a turn 'away' from issues of meaning, representation or social power in porn studies, I am suggesting an analytical perspective that is able to account for the force of porn to move us in embodied and unpredictable ways, and one that does not start from fixed assumptions or received knowledge concerning what pornography is, what pornography does, or what it can do. Scholarly investigation would do well to maintain an openness to surprise. This involves conceptualizing pornography as an umbrella term for different aesthetics, working practices, ethical concerns and monetary exchanges, rather than as a singular entity, cultural symbol or social symptom that can be seen as either positive or negative. If porn is understood as divergent and contingent in its subgenres and production practices, then the critical, analytical and conceptual frameworks deployed in studying it need to be equally diverse, sensitive to difference and sharp in their specificity.

Downloaded by [189.122.57.117] at 10:38 13 April 2014

References

Abel, Marco. 2007. *Violent Affect: Literature, Cinema, and Critique After Representation*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Ahmed, Sara. 2008. 'Imaginary Prohibitions. Some Preliminary Remarks on the Founding Gestures of the "New Materialism."' *European Journal of Women's Studies* 15 (1): 23–39. doi:10.1177/1350506807084854.

Armstrong, Isobel. 2000. *The Radical Aesthetic*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Attwood, Feona. 2002. 'Reading Porn: The Paradigm Shift in Pornography Research.' *Sexualities* 5 (1): 91–105. doi:10.1177/1363460702005001005.

Barad, Karen. 2007. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Blackman, Lisa, and Couze Venn. 2010. 'Affect.' *Body & Society* 16 (1): 7–28. doi:10.1177/1357034X09354769.

Cvetkovitch, Ann. 2001. 'Fierce Pussies and Lesbian Avengers: Dyke Activism Meets Celebrity Culture.' In *Feminist Consequences: Theory for the New Century*, edited by Elisabeth Bronfen and Misha Kavka, 283–318. New York: Columbia University Press.

Dyer, Richard. 1993. *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations*. London: Routledge.

Dyer, Richard. 2002. *Only Entertainment*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

Dworkin, A. (1987) 2000. 'Pornography and Grief.' In *Feminism & Pornography*, edited by Drucilla Cornell, 39–44. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gallop, Jane. 1988. *Thinking Through the Body*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Hillis, Ken. 2009. *Online a Lot of the Time: Ritual, Fetish, Sign*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Kappeler, Susanne. 1986. *The Pornography of Representation*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Kipnis, Laura. (1996) 1999. *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Koivunen, Anu. 2010. 'The Affective Turn? Reimagining the Subject of Feminist Theory.' In *Working with Affect in Feminist Readings: Disturbing Differences*, edited by Marianne Liljeström and Susanna Paasonen, 8–29. London: Routledge.

Kozel, Susan. 2007. *Closer: Performance, Technologies, Phenomenology*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Kuhn, Annette. 1994. *The Power of the Image: Essays on Representation and Sexuality*. London: Routledge.

Liljeström, Marianne, and Susanna Paasonen. 2010. 'Introduction: Feeling differences – Affect and Feminist Reading.' In *Working with Affect in Feminist Readings: Disturbing Differences*, edited by Marianne Liljeström and Susanna Paasonen, 1–7. London: Routledge.

Lindgren, Simon. 2010. 'Widening the Glory Hole: The Discourse of Online Porn Fandom.' In *porn.com: Making Sense of Online Pornography*, edited by Feona Attwood, 171–185. New York: Peter Lang.

MacDougall, David. 2006. *The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography, and the Senses*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Massumi, Brian. 2002. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Miller, Daniel. 2010. *Stuff*. Oxford: Polity.

Miller, Nancy. 1991. *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts*. New York: Routledge.

Paasonen, Susanna. 2007. 'Strange Bedfellows: Pornography, Affect and Feminist Reading.' *Feminist Theory* 8 (1): 43–57. doi:10.1177/1464700107074195.

Paasonen, Susanna. 2011. *Carnal Resonance: Affect and Online Pornography*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Paasonen, Susanna. 2013. 'Grains of Resonance: Affect, Pornography and Visual Sensation.' *Somatechnics* 3 (2): 351–368. doi:10.3366/soma.2013.0102.

Paasonen, Susanna, Ken Hillis, and Michael Petit. forthcoming. 'Networks of Transmission: Intensity, Sensation, Value.' In *Networked Affect*, edited by Ken Hillis, Susanna Paasonen, and Michael Petit, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Downloaded by [189.122.57.117] at 10:38 13 April 2014

Penley, Constance. 2004. 'Crackers and Whackers: The White Trashing of Porn.' In *Porn Studies*, edited by Linda Williams, 309–331. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. 2003. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, and Adam Frank. 1995. 'Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins.' In *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, edited by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, 1–28. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Seigworth, Gregory J., and Melissa Gregg. 2010. 'An Inventory of Shimmers.' In *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, 1–28. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Shaviro, Steven. 2010. *Post-cinematic Affect*. Winchester: Zero Books.
Shimizu, Celine P. 2007. *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Skeggs, Beverley, and Helen Wood 2012. *Reacting to Reality Television: Performance, Audience and Value*. London: Routledge.
Sobchack, Vivian. 2004. *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. Berkeley: California University Press.
Thrift, Nigel. 2008. *Non-representational Theory: Space / Politics / Affect*. London: Routledge.
Tomkins, Silvan. 1995. 'What are Affects?' In *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, edited by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, 33–74. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
van Doorn, Niels. 2010, 'Keeping it Real: User-generated Pornography, Gender Reification, and Visual Pleasure.' *Convergence* 16 (4): 411–430. doi:10.1177/1354856510375144.
Williams, Linda. 1991. 'Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess.' *Film Quarterly* 44 (4): 2–13.

Downloaded by [189.122.57.117] at 10:38 13 April 2014