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Fair-trade porn + niche markets + feminist audience

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FORUM

Fair-trade porn + niche markets + feminist audience

Recent discussions around pornography have raised yet another question: is feminist porn an oxymoron? Changing the game of the 'market' is one of the many goals of feminist porn and it is an important task. The various efforts to put into practice a feminist ethics of representation and production have taken centre-stage in recent debates, and in this short piece I explore some examples of the ways in which producers have attempted to present fair-trade modes of production and ethical representation to their audiences.

One click into Pink Label TV – the feminist porn on-demand website that gathers the new generation of independent material with high production values – and the graphic of a carton of milk with 'GRADE A' stamped on the package reminds you that the quality of the products are – click again – interlinked with queer feminist porn produced by fair-trade studios. Once again, sex and its representations are connected with food and, more specifically, a type of food that has many symbolic connotations of the 'good life', going beyond simple nourishment: queer feminist porn seems here characterized as an essential staple; not only to feed your sexual fantasies, but to develop and nurture your sexuality. The link with food brings closer the connection to a fair-trade model of production and distribution that might reconfigure the interventions made by new types of pornographies. Ventures such as Pink Label TV are trying to build a business model for porn that explicitly speaks of and operates through a feminist ethics and which could appeal to feminist audiences. In a section of the website hosting a wide range of written contributions, Syd Blakovich, co-producer of Pink and White Production, performer and multi-media artist, comments on how this kind of endeavour is assembled around a different model from the capitalist American productions we are familiar with. Blakovich contends that:

> If you want to make porn, or any other form of arts based product, and have limited funds to begin with, sustainability comes before profit. Most individuals in these fields lack access to large start up capital, so it's a very DIY beginning and a lot of time and elbow grease. Grassroots businesses, especially in communities without a lot of financial support, rely heavily upon connections from friends and family. (Blakovich 2013a)

In this endeavour, porn production is about a DIY ethic that has its most recent antecedent in punk subculture, sustainability (as in fair-trade systems that highlight the sociality of the business practice), and a community that gathers around specific values and identities. Blakovich stresses the importance of respecting the rules and regulations of the trade and valuing all the agents involved in the production. The positive apparatus thus created includes community-building thanks to pornographic material that is seemingly inserted in a circuit where producers, directors and

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performers share the values of the audiences they are marketing to. Thus, these consumers are potentially engaged in forms of consumption that inextricably and explicitly bind together certain cultural and economic choices more than in any other pornographic production. The website reinforces the notion of a fair-trade model through a distribution policy that grants profits directly to the directors of the porn productions hosted. In addition, an ethics of production is explicitly stated on the site – opposed to exploitation and (non-consensual) degradation, operating with the conscious effort to treat performers as individuals not as commodities.

On the Crash Pad Series website, performers talk about sexual practices they themselves want to try out, foregrounding their own and co-performers' well-being, and stressing individual agency. For instance, in a post dedicated to tips for performers, Blakovich (2013b) discusses the importance of aftercare; and in another entry, Rozen DeBowe (2011) stresses the need for self-care strategies. These discourses and practices sustain the notion of fair treatment of all the agents involved, thus highlighting once more the possibilities of a non-exploitative business.

The feminist porn trailblazer Tristan Taormino points out how caring for performers is one of the key requirements of fair-trade, organic feminist porn. In order to bring feminist values into mainstream straight porn for women and men, and reconfiguring the field, Taormino implements standard practices of the industry (e.g. the 'No List' of other performers that one performer is not willing to work with) with other strategies in order to care for her performers while presenting them as 'three-dimensional human beings' (Taormino 2013, 259) to the public. Fair compensation, fair labour conditions, caring on set before, during and after the shooting, different filming practices including showing, for instance, authentic female pleasures, giving the performers the opportunity to enact their own desires with the performers they have chosen, and interviews where sex workers are speaking for themselves – these fair practices benefit workers because the focus is on their humanity and value. They also create for feminist porn a structural make-up, a set of discourses around it as a genre, in opposition to the mainstream, and as a niche market.

Ultimately, these practices and discourses are intended to build consumer confidence – not just for those looking specifically for feminist porn, but also for those consumers who feel uneasy at the perceived lack of ethics in mainstream productions, and for those who might be sceptical of porn altogether. As Constance Penley contends, porn is labour and porn is a business (2013, 193–194) and these two aspects are inextricably linked. Taormino and others like her in the industry are affecting the field from within in multiple ways, but they are also having an impact on the perception of porn, its producers and audience, and on the actual consumption of porn. Again, with fair-trade organic feminist porn, Taormino and other directors and producers might meet the demand of an audience that may or may not identify as feminist and that is dissatisfied with the industry as it is or as they perceive it to be. In the meantime, they are supporting the development of a new consumer base that perhaps stayed away from porn because of worries about harms to its performers, but who may now feel more comfortable with the possibilities of ethical productions.

The attendant debate amongst sex-positive feminists is not only about fair-trade production, another central question regards content: what is represented and how. Talking about feminist porn, Ann Sabo outlines the importance of 'high cinematic

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production values' and a 'progressive sexual-political commitment' (2013, 52) focused on variety and diversity – of bodies, of sexual orientations, of fantasies and acts – and offering gender democratic heterosexuality, consensual voyeurism and scopophilia: all characteristics thought to espouse a 'fair-trade' logic of representing desires. The discussion over content is polarized in two opposite directions, with different ethical premises. Sabo goes beyond the centrality of the conditions of production and labour fundamental to fair-trade porn discourses, and contends that 'porn is more than a workplace: it's essentially a genre delivering a discourse on sex and gender as it seeks to arouse the viewer. And if the content of this discourse isn't feminist, the porn isn't feminist' (2013, 51).

The independent erotic filmmaker Petra Joy goes further, suggesting that feminist porn, by definition, should subvert conventional rules and present equality of the sexes (Sabo 2013, 49). For instance, she opts for boundaries around the type of sexual acts shown in her films, and in how they are performed, choosing 'not to portray any sexual actions that many women experience as degrading such as forced fellatio, extreme anal sex and cum shots into the woman's face' (Joy 2013). Another vision of feminist ethics around content is present, for example, in the words of the erotic writer, film director and producer Erika Lust when she argues that it is impossible to label certain sexual acts or preferences as feminist and some others as not feminist (Sabo 2013, 50). Defining certain acts or practices, 'feminist' or 'non-feminist' brings to the fore the hierarchizing of some desires as 'more ethical' than others, a worrying possibility whereby some desires – for example, the pleasures of temporary and consensual self-objectification, BDSM, consensual and risk-aware violence, extreme fantasy, or desires that are sensitive in political terms – are delegitimized as failing on some ethical standard and are therefore ruled out as viable and feminist desires.

Fair work conditions are an essential concern, but alongside these there are also issues around content that potential audiences defining themselves as feminist will wish to see addressed. There are individuals and communities committed to envision, create and promote new ways of representing all kinds of desires with awareness and reflexivity, they are working towards re-appropriating and reconfiguring tropes, genres and stereotypes, along with the cinematic, narrative, visual markers that signify that these practices can be feminist and can be represented in feminist ways.

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