

Hines, Claire; Kerr, Darren. 2012 *Hard to Swallow: Hard-Core Pornography on Screen*

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Reviewed by Thierry Leterre

With *Hard to Swallow: Hard-Core Pornography on Screen*, Claire Hines and Daren Kerr offer an efficient collection of chapters which belongs to the general repertoire of cultural studies. Focusing its approach on content analysis, it aims to move beyond the hyperbole of moral campaigners' arguments about screen pornography and its effects".

Divided in three sections: "Turned on, Hardcore Screen Cultures" "Come Again? Hardcore in History" and "Fluid Exchanges, Hardcore Forms and Aesthetics", the book includes an extended filmography, an index, and obviously, a table of content. The critical apparatus is referenced the American way: names and dates of publication are placed in parentheses cutting in the text, full references are pushed to end notes. It has the ordinary inconvenience of being somewhat confusing, especially in a volume promoting pornography as a relevant topic for academic research. As such, it legitimately entails a welcomed but exuberant display of references, pertaining both to academic critical production and to films themselves.

The two first sections follow an identical pattern: a first chapter establishes a baseline for more or less direct discussion in subsequent contributions. In the first section, Brian Mc Nair initiates the reflection with a study of the long-gone era when pornography was watched in movie theaters. Beyond the scope of a historical account, the chapter recounts pornography as "enhanced voyeurism", designed "for exclusively male audiences, gathered together in brothels or at stag parties, at a time when female sexuality was suppressed or prohibited from free expression". In a similar fashion, Linda Williams' chapter on "stag films" at the beginning of the second section uses the historical approach of these "uncredited, or bogusly credited, films" which "flourished in an underground circuit in the US and internationally during that extended period between the 1910s and the early 1970s" to analyze class and more generally domination relations in pornography. These two opening chapters set the tone and lead to multiple discussions about pornography as a male-dominant cultural device. The third section is significantly different and explores filmed pornography in more specific instances, such as (in the order of chapters) the fashion style in movies, the interplay of pornography and artistic purpose, filmed of pornography in Finland, gay pornography, and eventually the meaning of acting in pornographic movies.

Altogether, the book is rich of information and meets its goal of providing a critical outlook that does not resort to moral panic as regards to the showing of sex. Normativity is not absent though, and it is easy to perceive more or less discreet reticence towards some aspects of pornography – its evolution, its use of female bodies, its messages. More surprising is the use of a language that often fails to distance itself from the very language used in pornography: in an otherwise well-written volume, “fuck” is pervasive, and “porn” is often used in lieu of “pornography” or “pornographic”. Sometimes, this style conveys a normative strategy as when Williams engages in a nuanced discussion of the term “sex-worker” but has no problem with the derogatory (and reproving) “John” for the client of a prostitute. Most often, it translates the difficulty for the analysis to disengage from indigenous terms in order to render the reality of explicit sex on screen.

Interestingly enough, some chapters of the collection respond to this concern by incidentally dealing with the very possibility of a discourse on pornography – of what Mark Jones and Gerry Carlin call “metapornography” and Karen Boyle describes as the “meta-textual” condition of the discourse on pornography. They both point out a remarkable effect of pornography: if pornography is the showing of sex, the showing of the showing (whether in films or in books) is itself pornographic. While Boyle deals with TV documentaries on the sex industry, and Jones and Carlin focus on “the various intersections between the academic and the obscene” in the research on and the teaching of pornography (pleasantly called “pornogogy”), both chapters underline the troubling confusion between the analysis of pornography and pornographic content. Boyle indicates that documentaries on pornography borrow “the conventions both of reality TV formats and of soft-core pornography to offer (hetero)sexual arousal with an alibi in an ‘infotainment’ context” even if they have (if only for legal reasons) to maintain the distinction between filmed pornography and television. As regards to Jones and Carlin, they note that “academia and its critical authority is not perceived as immune to pornography’s contaminating discursive power”. It seems that one of the most specific features of pornography is that it traps discourses in an indefinite *mise en abyme*.

Though anchored in a conception that regards pornography as a cultural product, the book also pays attention to the crossing of pornographic cultures and economic logics. The scope is not to provide an all-encompassing view of economic issues of pornography, but rather to show how market-driven forces overlap with content production from a variety of perspectives.

Retaining the fact that “economy” is not an abstraction, but a social system of labor relations, Linda Williams shows how the tradition of stag movies reflect in their imagery the condition of pornography actresses as “sex-workers” between prostitution and economic constraints. This situation amounts to the structuration of a milieu where class, race, gender, play in the production of the movies, and at the same time, are shown playing in the narrative of the movies. The economic dimension is inseparable from the way pornography fabricates an imagery of sex which is both the outcome and the reflection of the conditions in which it is produced.

In this context, the Hollywood industry plays a major role as a model and a mirror, whether to legitimize pornography as an entertainment or to organize its operations. This is what Hines studies in the chapter analyzing *Pirates*, a pornographic

release mimicking the Hollywood *Pirates of the Caribbean* blockbuster. The scope of Hines is to show that the parallel between the movie industry of Hollywood and its pornographic double, while being limited by the genre of the later, is to be found at many levels. It includes filmic assets such as the use of original music or the adaptation to new technologies and special effects, as well as direct economic traits, such as the way artists work under contracts which remind the Hollywood studio era.

The subtle study by Pamela Church Gibson and Neil Kirkham of clothing styles in hardcore production goes one step further: starting with the role of clothing in pornographic movies – and the irony is not lost since “popular imagination” associates pornography with full-on nudity – they show how clothes play a functional role in the porn narrative, “since they help to structure and slow down the route towards orgasmic climax” reminding us that the “human body is never, ever, totally naked”. But they extend their analysis beyond the question of contents and point out the connection between the pornography industry and the fashion industry and the tendency of the latter to pillage the codes of the former: the standards of the feminine body in both cases are close to one another and refer to the mandatory “sexiness” of women. Even if there is still “a significant disparity between the operations of these two industries” they nevertheless are “busily seeking to benefit from one another”.

The same twining of market outcomes and content framing is to be seen in Susanna Paasonen’s chapter on Finnish pornography. Showing how Finn porn emphasizes local, even touristic, references, the chapter draws a parallel with new market trends: “due to the small-scale production and the central role of women, Finnporn has been framed as ‘fair-trade’ in the sense that it lacks the kinds of exploitative work practices associated with the industry internationally. In a further analogy to locally grown consumables, Finnish performers are often defined as ‘organic’ (*luomu*) in the sense of not having gone through cosmetic surgery and having relatively little work experience in the field”. Hence a Finn pornography which manages to adapt to local audiences, and to a globalized market where it has to compete with the assets of a micro-producer.

The most debated issue in the book, however, is not the economy of pornography, but rather what Darren Kerr calls the “progressive potential” of pornography in his study of the movie *Behind the green door*, a production widely recognized as a “key moment in the history of pornography”. Because the showing of sex challenges conservative moral stances, it does have a transgressive dimension against the regular order of society. Repression (and not solely censorship) of pornography until the 60’s in Western countries has amply demonstrated the fact, and still does in moral reprobation or even new outbursts of repression, such as in the in U.S. when the Bush administration’s position against pornography led to the imprisonment of an extreme pornography film maker, Max Hardcore, whose case is studied by Stephen Maddison.

At the same time, pornography collects stereotypical views that promote a universe where females are – sometimes brutally – dominated for the benefit of man. This is why for Williams the progressive agenda of pornography is limited: “to the extent that sexual urges in pornography tend to overcome the usual divisions that separate classes, races, and even species, they may seem subversive. (...) this does

not mean that the barriers that separate genders, classes and races are not also reasserted, often in insidious ways”.

This debate is at the heart of the two first sections and the book often reckons structures of domination on women in the “male gaze” that impregnates pornography. The book nevertheless makes room for a more open understanding which can be summarized in Kerr’s reflection that the condemnation of sexual representation in the name of “pre-existing notions of sexual politics and power relations” can “inadvertently limit the reading and understanding of female sexuality and agency in pornographic film”.

Even if Kerr’s point is taken, it does not seem to be reconcilable with the production of extreme pornography analyzed by Maddison in which “the meaning (...) lies in the pleasures of subjugating women”. This kind of pornography aggressively reproduces the traditional scheme of male domination of female and the function of women as victims of male desire. According to Maddison, extreme pornography, though rejected even by the pornographic milieu, is not an isolated phenomenon: it illustrates the “history of increasing explicitness, a frenzy to capture sexual pleasures in representational form that are inherently physiological”. At this point he follows Williams’ often quoted concept of “frenzy of the visible” and shares her critique of female subjugation through pornography.

However, in the course of a subtle discussion, Maddison shows that things are more complex. He notes that the disturbing reality of extreme porn coincides with a form of representation of pleasure that is *not pleasurable* and for him this contradiction is far from being just a puzzling detail. It has to be understood in the context of a general economy of pleasure inherent to contemporary neoliberal systems, which dedicate individuals to their pleasures, promoting a system of personal fulfilment in lieu of collective achievements. Pornography is the exact measure of the phenomenon as pleasuring viewers (or enticing them to pleasure themselves) is the very goal of the genre which can pass for a “pre-eminent neoliberal cultural form”. However, such a dynamic reveals its inherent fragility when the quest of pleasure basically denies pleasure itself. Even if it would be too ... extreme to say that extreme pornography suffices to challenge neo-liberalism, it nevertheless draws the limits of the system, by provoking the moment when neoliberal injunction to pleasure collapses in its own frenzy.

This collapse takes another form when one considers John Mercer’s chapter dedicated to gay pornography and Rebecca Beirne’s contribution dealing with Lesbian pornography. By definition homosexual pornography challenges the standards of heterosexual pornography, even if the situation is more complex than a simple opposition. As Williams notes it, quoting historian Thomas Waugh, there is a homoerotic dimension in the display of the male body engaged in heterosexual “mainstream” pornography, while lesbian sexuality is a routine arousal for heterosexual male viewers in what Beirne calls “‘All-Girl’ mainstream porn”.

Still, because homosexuality is a complex intertwining of gender and sex, we find in these chapters many elements that point towards the redefinition of visual pornography. It is for example illustrated by Beirne’s powerful analysis of the movie *The Crash Pad* where “the feminine Dylan directs the actions of the two more masculine women who are ostensibly topping her, regularly switching positions to

optimise her own pleasure". Clearly the traditional dichotomies male/ female as active/passive and top/down and penetrating/penetrated are subverted to promote "an empowered feminine sexuality that knows what it wants". For Beirne, lesbian pornography aims to restructure the way females consider themselves in pornography, and tries to emancipate itself from heterosexual depiction of women's sexuality. At the same time, she acknowledges that this type of pornography is also suitable for male viewers, and in this, we might find an indication of the reorganization of the "gaze" on sexuality.

Gay pornography addresses the question of sexual domination even more directly. Mercer shows that challenging a well-established pattern of domination between "top" and "bottom" performers has been a crucial evolution of gay pornography. Initially, the phantasmagoria displayed by gay pornography, if we follow Mercer, rests on the domination of the one who penetrates and who shows the signs of masculinity and the one who is penetrated and who follows the esthetics of Greek ephebes. From there, Mercer argues that the evolution of gay pornography is linked with the multiple subversions of this core phantasmagoria – whether by playing on the physicality of performers or on their role. In this reorganization, the theme of the "power bottom" plays a crucial role: "power bottom" is a label for characters to whom pornographic plots actually gave agency despite the fact that their role is supposedly the one of a dominated character.

Mercer's chapter is important for two reasons. Firstly, it introduces diversity in an otherwise mostly hetero-centered conception of pornography sometimes labelled "mainstream" in the book. Secondly, it discreetly contributes to challenge the very question that is so intensively debated in other chapters where the dominant heterosexual viewer of pornography is regarded as imposing his codes on women's sexuality. It points out the fact that pornography itself challenges its traditional codes. The phenomenon is not limited to gay pornography. It is also to be perceived in the emergence of the proteiform "alt porn" studied by Feona Attwood. "Alt porn" is an attempt to suit new audiences unlikely to appreciate traditional anti-feminist, male dominating, roughly filmed pornography, by providing more artistically produced material, claiming to be "tasteful and hip", while the inherent offensiveness of pornography which crosses the boundaries of decency is turned into "a claim to authenticity and subversiveness."

A significant attention is thus paid to new ways of filming sexual intercourses, which is also illustrated by Beth Johnson's chapter on John Cameron Mitchell's movie *Shortbus* (2006). The film showcases "the contemporary social and cultural anxieties associated with sex" in a project where the aesthetics of filming dominate over the codes of pornography. It thus creates "an increasingly permeable space – a space in which previous delineations between heterosexual hardcore and homosexual hardcore, art and pornography, pleasure and pain, can co-exist" as Johnson puts it.

Hard to Swallow: Hard-Core Pornography on Screen is a good introduction to contemporary issues raised by sexually explicit movies. However, the goal to return "to the screen as a text, which is the primary focus of this collection" may exceedingly emphasize meaning and narratives over filming and spectacle. While it gives way to subtle analyses of gender relations or female agency, it also tends to neglect the technical aspects of filming pornography. If comments on filmic constructions

of the narrative are present in some passages, there is little information about the evolution of representation, the increased quality of filming, how it is filmed, what type of bodies are shown or not (typically these questions are only raised for non “mainstream” pornographic representations), what type of sexual intercourse are more prominently displayed, who is filming ...

Such a choice also leads to neglect the performance dimension. As Clarissa Smith remarks it, in one of the rare chapters focusing on pornography as a filmic (albeit minor) genre, we cannot “equate acting with speaking (...) in a body genre, such as pornography”. “Performance” “is about more than lines being spoken with feeling.” To paraphrase Smith “reel sex” is not “real sex” and “doing sex on camera” (the title of her chapter) is not simply having sex. This contributes to balance the impression of an overarching understanding of pornography as a genre of repetition of figures amounting to no more than “an essentially private past time, indulged in as an accompaniment or prelude to masturbation” (McNair).

On certain aspects, the book does not fully engage current tendencies. Some references are made to new technologies and to “the large-scale sub-genrification of pornography, over the last three decades” (Gibson and Kirkham). But it is to assimilate it to “illicit material” on the Internet and no specific text addresses the new types of pornographic expressions deriving from this situation. Preferred references are still movies which keep the general framework of the film industry – which is also shown by the abundant filmography at the end of the volume. This is why also, in spite of many references to it, there is no detailed analysis of the overwhelming “gonzo” genre which is usually evoked in contrast to more traditional forms of filmed pornography. And as regards to the other emergent pornographic genre of the *hentai*, only Kerr makes a passing reference to it.

Another issue is that pornography is rarely questioned in its specificity. For instance, Williams’ prominently influential concept of “frenzy of visible” is certainly relevant—but relevant to what? It is not pornography alone (or specifically) that has become more explicit, that has explored in a more detailed way visual renditions; it is the whole universe of TV, cinema, video. What is shown on our ever more numerous screens is constantly a race towards showing more. It seems pornography has followed a general trend in a world where images are more and more available, and if this general tendency has specific implications for pornography, then this should be addressed and not solely mentioned.

In many of the contributions that form the collection, the reference for filmed pornography is a standard that remains undefined, an impossible mainstream of non-mainstream cultures. Is there still such a standard? Or has it just become one option among other possibilities that are endlessly multiplying? It would have been interesting to have more room for the analysis of this diversity, and for the “fluidity” of sexuality that pornography promotes, as well as for the evolutions it reflects or contributes to provoke. In this regard, one has to regret that the implicit epistemological claim of the book is to focus on how pornography reflects social trends (and might be criticized when such trends consist of the most unpleasant chauvinism) or influence them (through the question of the “pornification” of society”) but includes little reflection on how it contributes to societal changes in our understanding of sex. This very possibility is not ignored, but is always regarded as departing from

a "traditional" model of pornography. This is why, despite its undeniable interest, the collection largely reflects the immediate past of pornography, with its identified channels of distribution, its (poor) narratives, its relatively monotonous heterosexual construction of desire and pleasure and its closeted excesses, rather than current orientations of pornographic sex cultures.