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The Heterotopian Character of Porn: Sexual Fantasies as Social Alternate Ordering

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Abstract:

While much have been written about the utopian character of pornography and there is, at least, one fruitful contribution which connects Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia with pornography, there has been no attempt so far to relate Kevin Hetherington's work to internet porn. Therefore, this article presents some thoughts on how Hetherington's conceptualization of heterotopia, as being 'spaces of alternate ordering', can be used to link the five distinct ways of understanding the relations between pornography and fantasy, which Martin Barker outlines, with the discussion around the 'stock characters' and the mainstream pornographic categorization of desires and fetishes. It is argued that the 'male narrative mainstream hardcore' which is produced nowadays from famous porn brands is an alternate ordering 'based on a number of utopias that come to being in relation to a tension that exists within modern societies between ideas of freedom and ideas of social control or discipline'.

Keywords: Pornography, utopia, heterotopia, sexual fantasy

1. Introduction

While much have been written about the utopian character of pornography (Attwood 2002a, 2002b; Langman 2008), there is also, at least, one fruitful contribution which associates pornography with Michel Foucault's (1984) concept of heterotopia; this is a disembodied notion of space whose fixed nature and location is constantly disrupted by transience and ever-shifting relations between places. In connection to that, Katrien Jacobs (2004: 72) argues that online porn consumers are multitaskers who move between activities such as socializing, buying commodities and searching information. Thus, in order to conceptualize the networked sexuality associated with online porn, Jacobs uses the notion of heterotopia which refers to an inherently open space that is constantly fragmenting and reforming itself as it links other spaces that differ from each another. Sex and porn consumers are travelling between sites, actual and virtual places and multi-tasking activities through these technological heterotopias. Consequently, they complicate the commercial breadth of online pornography (79).

However, there has not been a serious attempt to relate Kevin Hetherington's (1997) work to the current massively and mostly freely accessible internet porn. Therefore, in the following I will outline some preliminary thoughts on how Hetherington's concept of heterotopia, conceptualized as spaces of alternate ordering, can be used to link the five distinct ways of understanding the relations between pornography and fantasy, which Martin Barker (2014) outlines, with the discussion around the 'stock characters' and the mainstream pornographic categorization of desires and fetishes. More specifically Barker (2014: 154) notes the odd paradox that while pornography is effectively defined by its explicitness, it is surrounded and permeated by claims about its role as fantasy. Thus, while it is very common to stress that pornography 'leaves nothing to the imagination', at the same time it is this very literalness that somehow generates a 'fear of sexual fantasy'; the danger that people might 'blur or lose the distinction between fantasy and reality' (144).

2. Pornography as Utopia

For years, our awareness of pornography has coincided with a tendency to theorize the diffusion of the sexually explicit content produced by the traditional pornography industries. In relation to the atomization of pornography, it was apparent that we can find thousands of personalized fetishes and interest groups online (Jacobs 2009: 182). Additionally, it is usually claimed that the various porn categories, which have developed, reflect to some extent the wishes of the users (Bonik and Schaale 2007: 84). On the other hand, as Hardy (2008: 62) points out, while the internet appears to offer limitless choices and the freedom to explore multiple fantasies and desires – the Golden Age of the Golden Shower as Dery (2007: 135) has eloquently said – the options available on most websites are in fact restricted and highly codified. In other words, while the process of consuming sexual fantasies may be experienced by the individual consumer as an exploration of deeply personal preferences, taken as a whole, the overall effect of online sexually explicit material can be seen as the highly efficient commercial homogenization of desire.

More specifically, a number of pornographic sites today use narrative story lines to present sexual photos and videos (Kammeyer 2008: 186). But these texts are being criticized of adopting a basic schema, or matrix, repeated again

and again, although its articulation differs at the surface level of the text (Johansen 2004: 50). As Jensen (2008) has stressed, the whole discussion constantly reminds us that pornography is relentlessly intense, but at the same time is also incredibly 'repetitive and boring'. Through its minimal variations in endless repetition, it is clear that pornography has become purely 'parodic' in the sense that each pornographic scene becomes the parody of another or the same in a deceptive form (Cramer and Home 2007: 160). In particular, the formulaic representational conventions are usually accompanied with the familiar 'stock characters' (e.g. the plumber and the horny housewife) and the easily recognizable scenes (e.g. the horny housewife surprises the plumber).

Nevertheless, this is not a new issue. Don Smith from 1976 (18) was using Goffman's phraseology to hold that these easily identifiable sex scenes are the social establishment of pornography. It was in this context that the famous theorist Linda Williams (1989: 163) was highlighting the utopian world of the porn stories (pornotopias) which 'offer unrealistic solutions to the sexual problems (of scarcity and exhaustion) presented in the non-fantasy section of the narrative'. More specifically, the 'dissolved' form of utopia is basically achieved through women's sexual roles and insatiability, through endless sex, or through, as Williams puts it, the 'banishment of the ill effects of power in pursuit of cheerful pleasure' (178). In this sense, pornography threatens, according to Attwood (2002: 97), to 'overturn the established cultural hierarchy and provides the base ground on which that hierarchy is erected' – all these in the context of the reconciliation of the everyday with pornography (Juffer 1998: 1-8). Moreover, while a number of social anxieties are emerged, pornography becomes the field where the established order is overturned and a utopian solution of actual social problems occurs (Williams 1989 153-83).

In addition, it should also be mentioned that Williams' approach is largely based on Richard Dyer's 1977 essay 'Entertainment and Utopia' where the well-known film scholar mapped the utopian sensibilities of entertainment. For Dyer (2002: 20), the point of entertainment is to present 'what utopia would feel like' and to provide solutions to social tensions experienced in everyday life. This being so, the utopian promise of entertainment is 'something better' to which viewers can escape that, at the same time, moves and touches them on the plane of the affective. Respectively, the utopian promise of porn is one of carnal intensity, sexual plenitude and pleasure (Morris and Paasonen 2014: 215). As Paasonen (2007: 50) would say, 'bodies speak in porn stories and they do so in the language of 'pornotopia' – a fantasyland of freely flowing desire, abundance of sexual acts and bodily displays envisioned in pornography'. What should be added is that in the context of nowadays digital reality¹, pornotopia, as a land of endless fantasies (Marcus 1966: 268-72), or as an imagined pornographic state (Collins and Skover 1994: 1375)², appears to constitute a state where, as Slater (2002: 234) had pointed out long ago, the 'absence of scarcity' is experienced as 'a limitless, inexhaustible sea of sexualized representations and sexualized people'³.

Moreover, as Langman (2008: 669) would have put it, the 'pornutopia' is a space where the usual moral obstacles and constraints to have sex don't exist because 'porn is a world where personality simply doesn't matter: what a refreshing vacation from the daily reality of coupledness'. The carnivalesque character of pornography has the ability to provide a reimagined view of the world where sexual repressions and social conventions are released in various ways. Thus, this fact represents an apparent criticism of the established social values and ethics despite the fact that it ultimately serves the hegemonic status quo because it channels away the criticism from the political into the cultural 'where it could be neutralized' (2008: 662). On the whole, pornotopia comes forward as the outcome of the combination of pleasure-seeking trends, consumerist logic and emerging technological advances. Collins and Skover (1994: 1375) stress that 'the greater this synergy, the greater is the tendency toward a culture in which self-gratification replaces self-realization, in which the irrational consumes the rational, and in which images dominate discourse'.

3. Pornography, Fantasies and Social Alternate Ordering

Barker (2014: 145) sketches five broad orientations 'for shifting thinking away from the five widely-claimed dimensions of fantasy in uncritical thinking': fantasy comprises wild, undisciplined imaginings; these products of imagination are by nature childish or immature; fantasies entail erroneous, unsupportable beliefs; generically, fantasies are other-worldly stories populated by stereotyped characters; and people who hold them are unable to function normally, since they are disconnected from reality. In opposition to these, Barker proposes five modes of describing the roles that people call 'fantasies': fantasy as a conscious accentuation of a desire; fantasy as a means to look at our responses to things; fantasy as a world of possibilities to be explored and thought about; fantasy as a visit to a distant realm of desires and activities; and fantasy as what I might or might not be. These five dimensions, as accounts of the relations between people and their experiences of pornography, are 'neither good nor bad in themselves'; each of these can be used constructively, as well as exploitatively and hurtfully too. As a result, what does not make sense, according to Barker, is the idea of 'losing the distinction between fantasy and reality', which is just 'an illusory notion, made possible simply by a linguistic oddity' (155).

Considering the above, it is argued that the 'male narrative mainstream hardcore' which is produced nowadays from famous porn brands is on the one side an 'outlaw discourse' (Wicke 2004: 187) and on the other hand, to use Hetherington's (1997: ix-x) terminology, an alternate ordering 'based on a number of utopic that come to being in relation to a tension that exists within modern societies between ideas of freedom and ideas of social control or discipline'. In order to be more precise, Hetherington defines heterotopia as spaces of alternate ordering in the sense that they organize 'a bit of the social world in a way different to that which surrounds them' (viii); spaces in which 'a new way of ordering emerges that stands in contrast to the taken-for-granted mundane idea of social order that exists within society' (40). Heterotopia is not quite a space of transition, but a 'space of deferral', 'spaces where ideas and practices that represent the good life can

come into being, even if they never actually achieve what they set out to achieve – social order, or control and freedom’ (ix).

Hetherington uses the word ‘alternate’ to suggest that ‘some form of difference is involved, a difference that involves the deployment of a utopian alternative’ (52). The argument he puts forward here is that heterotopia come into existence ‘when utopian ideals emerge from forms of difference which offer alternative ideas about the organization of society’ (53). In other words, heterotopia is a concept that describes ‘places of Otherness’, ‘whose Otherness is established through a relationship of difference with other sites, such that their presence either provides an unsettling of spatial and social relations or an alternative representation of spatial and social relations’ (8). Thus, ‘the power of the concept of heterotopia lies in its ambiguity; that it can be a site of order just as much as it can be a site of resistance’ (51). Heterotopia is multiple spaces set up ‘to fascinate and to horrify, to try and make use of the limits of our imagination, our desires, our fears and our sense of power/powerlessness’ (1997: 40)⁴.

Therefore, in order to link Barker’s and Hetherington’s work as far as commercial porn is concerned, an example from a significant digital porn brand can be used. Brazzers is well-known for its ‘sex episodes’ with familiar everyday characters which are performed by famous pornstars. For instance, ‘Dicking Down the Doctor’ is a scene where Veronica Avluv and John Strong play. According to the description, ‘Dr. Avluv gets off on helping people. Especially when they’re handsome, strapping dudes like John Strong. The instant Veronica spotted dude waiting in the ER, she knew she was going to break all the rules for him. John doesn’t have insurance, so this Milf might have to try some alternative methods to cure what ails him. Check out what happens when Veronica tries out her special techniques of sexual healing on her patient’s fat cock’ (<http://www.brazzers.com>, accessed 25/07/2020).

When viewing this porn scene, one may try to relate Barker’s modes of fantasizing with Hetherington’s conceptualization of alternate social ordering. That is to say,

- Fantasy as a conscious accentuation of a desire, i.e. Veronica ‘spotting dude waiting in the er’,
- Fantasy as a means to look at our responses to things, i.e. Veronica ‘getting off on helping people’,
- Fantasy as a world of possibilities to be explored and thought about, i.e. Veronica’s ‘alternative methods to cure’,
- Fantasy as a visitation to a distant realm of desires and activities, i.e. Veronica’s ‘special techniques of sexual healing’, and
- Fantasy as what i might or might not be, i.e. Veronica ‘breaking all the rules.’

Another example would also help to show how Barker and Hetherington’s approaches may indeed be a fruitful way to theorize digital videos of pornographic phantom stories. ‘Naughty America’ is a very famous pornographic film studio and one of the first companies to produce story-based porn videos. The famous pornstar Veronica Avluv has also shoot some scenes for Naughty America. In one of them called ‘American Veronica Avluv fucking in the couch with her petite’, as stated in the synopsis, ‘Veronica Avluv wakes up late because she’s a bit tired from her naughty night. Recanting her story to her friend on the phone, the hornball teacher apparently got fresh with young guy, took him home and blew him, but he passed out! Well, a long story short, it turns out the guy she tried to fuck is the same guy who appears on her stoop for his tutoring lesson with her! Avluv forgoes the lesson and pulls out her big tits, and starts up where she left off with his big dick in her mouth!’ (<http://www.naughtyamerica.com>, accessed 25/07/2020).

Bearing the aforementioned in mind if we connect Barker and Hetherington’s points of view, it could also be said that alternate ordering appears as fantasy orientations; so, fantasy can be read:

- As a conscious accentuation of a desire, i.e. Veronica being ‘a bit tired from her naughty night’,
- As a means to look at our relation to things, i.e. Veronica ‘got fresh with young guy’,
- As a world of possibilities to be explored and thought about, i.e. Veronica’s ‘forgoes the lesson’,
- As a visitation to a distant realm of desires and activities, i.e. Veronica realizing that she was having sex with ‘the same guy who appears on her stoop for his tutoring lesson with her’, and
- As what i might or might not become, i.e. Veronica ‘recanting her story to her friend’.

4. Conclusion: The ‘Latent Heterotopia’

One may stress that the process of consuming sexually explicit material can include alternative decoding of the porn texts, differentiated identifications, varied modes of empathy, etc. This is true and certainly not in contrast with the aforementioned approach. The reason is that Barker’s fruitful typology is a flexible one where probably all these diversifications can be contained. Additionally, Hetherington’s conceptualization is also a flexible one. When Veronica in both scenes is having sex with people that in ordinary, expected situations would not have, she constructs ‘a place of alternate ordering’ which takes place in a hospital in the first case and a tutor’s home in the latter as Other, as an example of an alternative way of doing things (1997: viii). In this sense, sexual activity in an infirmary or in a classroom is, not apparently, expected to take place in these places but at the same time it is not impossible. In other words, while the whole state is characterized by an imaginary/utopian dimension, it is precisely because ‘these things actually happen’ that sexual scenes shoot for example by Brazzers and Naughty America render hospitals, educational organisations, business premises, offices, other people’s homes etc. a place where sexual activity can possibly take place; renders them a ‘latent heterotopia’.

5. Notes

- Plummer (1995: 4) laid emphasis on the fact that every invention, from mass print to virtual reality, has little by little contributed to ‘provide a veritable erotopian landscape to millions of lives’.

- More specifically, Collins and Skover point out that while pornotopia 'emerges from the regimes of profit and pleasure', particularly in a condition where people are intoxicated with their First Amendment rights (1994: 1382), the 'pornographic state depends on a critical symbiosis of advanced capitalism, mass commercialism, electronic technology, and unbridled entertainment' (1378).
- Chow-White (2006: 884) is correct to draw attention to the important concerns regarding dystopian and utopian outcomes of internet use which while is providing a freer and more democratic context, at the same time it might be 'deepening social inequality and structures of difference'.
- See, for instance, Evans, Riley and Shankar's (2010) analysis of how female-oriented sex shops could be considered as 'postfeminist heterotopias.' It is also worth mentioning that the authors conclude that 'while the postfeminist heterotopia can be used in ways that alternatively order space, this alternative ordering neither assumes radical political action nor escapes the laws of gender' (2010: 227).

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