

PORNSCAPES. RE-ENACTING PORN FILM IN THE LANDSCAPES OF CONTEMPORARY PORNOGRAPHY

Giovanna Maina, Università di Pisa

I was born in 1974. And I am a woman. For these reasons I have never been inside an adult movie theatre, unfortunately. Until a few years ago, my idea of x-rated films and their use was limited to the infamous separate section of the video rental shop, or the assortment of DVDs on the innermost shelf of the newsstand near home. So I have no direct personal memories that allow me to describe the actual experience of a *movie-goer*, who goes out especially to see a hardcore film in a specialized cinema. Of course, I could base my ideas on the “real life” stories of people who *have* been to a porn cinema at least once. I could collect and analyse colourful descriptions imbued with the flavour of legend, or the nostalgic air of the “good old days”.

Alternatively I could try to trace this singular visual experience in its cinematic reconstructions. Starting with the *incipit* of the *porno chic* classic *The Opening of Misty Beethoven* (Radley Metzger, 1975), up to the recent documentary *Inside Deep Throat* (Fenton Bailey, Randy Barbato, 2005), there are several examples of films (even mainstream ones) in which the audience of porn cinemas is portrayed, even though often incidentally. Or I could turn to the books of authors such as Linda Williams and Eric Schaefer in the United States or Pietro Adamo, Piero Calò and Giuseppe Grosso Ciponte in Italy. These scholars have widely described both the multi-coloured fauna of men and women, often in couples, who filled porn cinemas in the 1970s, and the sad, anonymous crowd of rain-coated men who went on hanging around in these “equivocal” movie theatres a decade later.

These strategies would maybe provide me with a description of the social composition of this particular audience or of its behavioural habits. Or maybe I would verify the multiple meanings that theatrical porn consumption has gained in our collective imaginary. Yet an “archaeological” reconstruction of this type, however accurate, would never allow me to understand “what you really feel” when you watch explicit images of sex, projected on a large screen in a public place, where other individuals are sitting in the dark, waiting for some forbidden *frisson*. For this reason, it is therefore difficult for me to compare “traditional” pornography with the contemporary forms of hardcore visual material, which I have been able to experience directly. I’m referring of course to the multiform complexity of *proliferating pornographies*¹ that rage in the home video market, on the Internet, or on UMTS cell phones.

The accessibility and pervasiveness of the new pornographies have radically changed the time and place of the use of hardcore materials, as well as its rules of etiquette. Not only have they rendered pornography ubiquitous in the media panorama, but the consumption of explicit images has become a more everyday, generalized phenomenon than ever before, in terms of user age and gender. In the attempt to get round the obstacle of the “original sin” of my date of birth and gender, and abandoning, for the moment, the temptations of *media ethnography*, I will try to define the interrelations between these two different poles in the experience of *moving image pornography*, taking as a starting point a series of prevalently textual facts. My aim is to try and

record references, similarities and differences between the new pornographies and the classic feature-length hardcore narrative film, in terms of the production of sense².

For evident reasons of space, I can only examine a small part of the many features of contemporary pornography. I will therefore concentrate on *net porn*, leaving aside home video and UMTS. I have also decided to further limit my investigation of Internet pornography, and to exclude from this analysis the more directly interactive aspect of *cyber porn*. More specifically, I will not deal either with ISS (Interactive Sex Simulators), a kind of hardcore videogame available on line, in which your avatar can have virtual sex with a pin up, or with sexcams (webcams with sexual content). Neither will I deal with cybersex – the fairly widespread habit of indulging in sexual relations *in absentia* «with someone who is not physically present in our space but connected through the computer»³. In fact these forms of pornography would pose a whole new range of questions, regarding, for example, “real time” sexual relations (or in the simulation of real time), between “real” bodies (or with figures that simulate the sexual behaviour of real bodies), interwoven with “real” relationships (or supposedly real) through the mediation of technology.

I will, therefore, only treat those situations, in which the moment of use follows the moment of production, as was the case with cinematic pornography, and in which the bodies performing on the computer screen do not respond to us directly – apart from generally addressing the *viewer-user*, that is anyway a standard convention of the new features of hardcore.

In my experience, the simplest, most direct and most neutral way, of getting into contact with Internet pornography, is via the free porn sites modelled on *YouTube*, that function thanks to a click and surf interface and keyword research. Sites such as *YouPorn*, *Pornotube*, *XPorn*, *XTube* and *RedTube*⁴ are easily accessible – it is sufficient to declare that you are over 18. Right from the home page, they present themselves as a “gallery” of thumbnail images. Each image is distinguished by a title that alludes to a particular sexual act (anal, oral, threesome, etc.), to a particular “taste” or setting (outdoor, office, bizarre, interracial, etc.) or to the characteristics of the bodies that we will see in action in the various clips (brunettes, MILF, hairy chicks, Asian, etc.), at times even combining several of these options («crazy old mom outdoor anal fucking», for example).

The database or archive aspect, already evident in this first contact with the site, is accentuated by the fact that, once we have visited the home page, we can choose which of these fantasies we want to indulge in. The only thing we have to do is simply type in a few key words, and thus we can refine the choice and mould it, either according to our habitual sexual preferences, or following a momentary fancy. Having clicked on the image, a brief film clip appears on the screen in front of us. We can watch it for the first time, and then watch it again and again, as many times as we like. Alternatively, we can move freely from one scene to another, either sticking to a precise *leitmotiv* (anal sex, for example) or succumbing to very different and unexpected suggestions (from anal to blow jobs to orgies and so on). In this way, we can construct a visual experience based around a sort of combinatory “vertigo”.

Leaving aside absolutely basic questions, such as the physical conditions under which the material is viewed, this first aspect already reveals the enormous differences that exist between navigating in a site like *YouPorn* and viewing a “normal” porn film, above all if we consider films produced in the 1970s and 1980s⁵. In this case, in fact, our power of choice seems to halt at the door of the screening room, as the general conventions of this type of consumption allow us only to choose which film to see and/or which cinema to go. And so, this prearranged one-way vision contrasts sharply with the absolute freedom of choice and combination provided by net porn. This statement is so obvious as to seem banal. On the contrary, behind this opposition there is, at a deep structural level, a hidden substantial likeness between the morphology of a site like *YouPorn* and a classic porn film intended as text.

According to Linda Williams, the feature-length hardcore film is characterized by a compositional principle based on the alternation between narrative segments and sexual numbers, largely similar to the sequence of narrative parts and musical numbers that gives form to the musical. In her essay *Hardcore. Power, Pleasure and the "Frenzy of the Visible"*, Williams draws attention to the relation of interdependence between these two components, destroying the myth (at least from a critical point of view) that the narrative parts of a porn film are completely uninfluential and serve only to guide the spectator from one act of copulation to the next. Nevertheless, it is an established fact that the sexual numbers *are* the high points of a hardcore film, in much the same way that song and dance routines are fundamental to a musical. They are moments in which the narration seems to stop, leaving space for the spectacle of the *maximum visibility* of the bodies in action.

But what do we mean exactly by "sexual numbers"? In 1977, Stephen Ziplow published *The Film Maker's Guide to Pornography*⁶ that, although written only five years after *Deep Throat* (Gerard Damiano, 1972), demonstrated an early awareness of the highly conventional nature of the genre. In his guide, in fact, Ziplow draws up a list of sexual practices that should never be missing from a porn film, even going so far as to advise the would-be pornographer that "at least ten separate *come shots*"⁷ in every film are an absolute must. The practices listed are: *masturbation* (almost exclusively female), *straight sex* (that is penetration between man and woman), *lesbianism*, *oral sex* (intended both as fellatio and cunnilingus), *ménage-à-trois*, *orgies*, *anal sex* (always between men and women in each case). It is clear from the start, therefore, that it is the combination of the various sexual acts that gives structure and sense to any porn film, notwithstanding the so-called "mimetic"⁸ tendency of 1970s cinematic pornography.

If we take Ziplow's list to be a kind of paradigmatic indication, the single films could be considered as actualized syntagms. Thus each syntagm is composed of different elements (the sexual numbers), chosen and placed in succession in a variety of ways according to the internal compositional demands of any particular text. This, for example, is the structure of the film *Deep Throat* in terms of how sexual numbers alternate with narrative (Table 1)⁹.

Each sexual number that makes up the final sequence certainly has its own connotations (the type of setting, the positions of the actors and actresses, their physical characteristics, the soundtrack etc.) that make it absolutely unique from a textual point of view. At the same time, however, each one of these images of explicit sex, refers to a well-defined, highly-codified set of numbers.

This fact allows, or even forces, the spectator to "read" the film in two different ways. On one hand he follows the movie as a linear narrative sequence; on the other hand he separates each sex scene from the whole movie and takes pleasure in every single fragment. Furthermore in this way he's able to recall other similar scenes he has already seen in other movies and to compare them with the ones he's seeing at the very moment of the screening. A horizontal reading is thus combined with a vertical reading that constantly refers to a sort of paradigmatic axis of all the sexual numbers. This operation of cross-reading, while possible at a certain level with any type of text, is facilitated here by the extremely conventional nature of cinematic pornography discussed above, and by the clearly marked borders between the sexual numbers and whole of the text.

In terms of the production of sense, this obsession for cataloguing represents the main point of contact between the feature-length narrative *hardcore* film and the *click and surf* porn described above. In fact the Net provides a sort of constantly open paradigm, both extremely amplified and hyper specialized, that puts into practice the combinatory and taxonomical dream of traditional pornography. Out of curiosity, I tried to contrast the sexual numbers present in *Deep Throat* with a research into the same numbers on *YouPorn*, using Ziplow's definitions as key words (Table 2)¹⁰.

TABLE 1

The syntagmatic structure of <i>Deep Throat</i>			
0'	to	5' 36"	Introduction Title and Opening Credits
5' 36"	to	9' 17"	Oral sex (cunnilingus)
9' 17"	to	13' 11"	Narrative
13' 11"	to	14' 57"	Anal Sex + Money Shot
14' 57"	to	16' 51"	Ménage-à-trois (MMF) + Money Shot
16' 51"	to	21' 19"	Orgy
21' 19"	to	28' 19"	Narrative
28' 19"	to	33' 22"	Oral sex (fellatio) + Money Shot
33' 22"	to	35' 47"	Narrative
35' 47"	to	39' 22"	Mixed number alternating: - Oral sex (fellatio) - Straight Sex (man on top) - Bizarre (man drinking coke from Linda's vagina)
39' 22"	to	40' 37"	Narrative
40' 37"	to	41' 05"	Straight Sex ("doggie")
41' 05"	to	42' 27"	Narrative
42' 27"	to	43' 08"	Straight Sex ("doggie")
43' 08"	to	44' 22"	Narrative
44' 22"	to	45' 05"	Oral sex (fellatio)
45' 05"	to	46' 06"	Narrative
46' 06"	to	50' 31"	Mixed number alternating: - Straight Sex ("doggie") - Oral sex (fellatio) - Straight Sex (woman on top) - Oral sex (cunnilingus) - Straight Sex (side to side)
50' 31"	to	51' 16"	Narrative
51' 16"	to	53' 43"	Bizarre (Linda shaving her pubic hair)
53' 43"	to	54' 18"	Oral sex (cunnilingus)
54' 18"	to	54' 28"	Masturbation
54' 28"	to	57' 43"	Narrative
57' 43"	to	1h 0' 14"	Oral sex (fellatio)

Once explicit sex scenes were the main attraction of the porn film. Now they are transformed into fragments, free from any plot or structured diegetic universe, though they may be linked to stereotypical situations or characters belonging to a common, easily-recognisable imagery. Thus removed from their context, they appear to multiply themselves infinitely within the spaces of the Net. These short videos are absolutely perfect for the type of consumption that Emanuela Ciuffoli has ironically called *prêt-à-pornier*¹¹. Easily accessible and readily available, the *YouPorn* clips apparently allow the *viewer-user* to “get straight to the point” without having to wait, as in the past, for suitable narrative conditions to be created, so that a specific sex scene can take place in a given film. The sense of “expectation” that characterised the feature-length narrative hardcore film would seem to be totally absent in a use of this type.

TABLE 2

<i>Deep Throat</i>	<i>Sexual Numbers</i>	<i>YouPorn</i>
5	Oral sex (fellatio)	630
3	Oral sex (cunnilingus)	628
3	Straight Sex ("doggie")	403
1	Straight Sex (man on top)	181 (not relevant)
1	Straight Sex (woman on top)	233
1	Straight Sex (side to side)	9 (not relevant)
1	Anal Sex	403
1	Ménage-à-trois	3 (241 as "threesome")
1	Orgy	278
1	Bizarre (drinking coke from vagina)	46 (not relevant)
1	Bizarre (Linda shaving her pubic hair)	421 (as "shave")
1	Masturbation	505
3	Money Shots	482
9	Narrative segments	0

Actually, even *net porn* has elements that contribute to delaying the visual satisfaction of the user. As Zabet Patterson correctly notes in her essay *Going On-line: Consuming Pornography in the Digital Era*¹², first of all every kind of information doesn't present itself autonomously on the web but rather has to be *found*. Secondly, even on free sites like *YouPorn*, to access the content the user has to go through a series of procedures that become more complicated on paying member sites. In this way a new form of delay develops: «The delay of logging on, the delay of finding a site, the delay of "signing through" the initial contract, the delay of having the thumbnails load, and then, finally, the delay of waiting for the selected image, sequence of images, or video segment to appear»¹³.

One could even argue that it is precisely the presumed limitless possibilities of *net porn* that create another form of delay in the *viewer-user's* satisfaction. With such an excess of information and suggestions, we are so sure we will find what we're looking for, that we skip feverishly from video to video, from site to site, from fantasy to fantasy, searching for the perfect image, succumbing more to the seduction of the search than to the pleasure of the result. The feature-length narrative hardcore film is obviously just one of the multiple forms that *moving image pornography* has assumed in its long history. And yet the archetypal value with which it has been invested in our fantasies makes it a perfect touchstone for understanding contemporary pornographies.

And even with regard to the hardcore materials available on the Net, the *click and surf* free sites are just an aspect of a complex *pornscape* that also includes, for instance, the so called *indie porn* or *alternative porn*, whose relation to the feature-length narrative film is completely different: in this case, in fact, the porn film can be re-enacted through the manipulation or parody of its narrative and stylistic codes. Moreover, in *indie porn* the very features of visual hardcore are often twisted by an identitary *detournement* related to queer culture or to other pre-existing subcultures, such as BDSM or fetish.

Anyway, many questions still remain. For example, how important is the size of the screen to the viewer's experience? What is the influence of the dialectic between the overwhelming, engulfing vision of *larger-than-life* performing bodies at the cinema and the embrace that seems to join the user to the computer screen¹⁴? Besides, how can we reposition the concept of public

and private in the light of the new forms of porn consumption? Must we simply consider movie theatre viewing as “public” and home computer viewing as “private”? Or is it true that the pervasiveness of the new media makes it necessary to completely re-evaluate this opposition?

We have seen therefore that the tendency to taxonomy and paradigm is common to both the porn site and the hardcore film, from a structural point of view. Furthermore, in both situations the mechanism of the *viewer-user's* pleasure moves in a complex dynamic of alternated expectation and satisfaction. In any case, it is precisely at the point where these two forms seem most different, where one seems static and the other dynamic, one finite and the other infinite, that in my opinion a shared geometry is concealed. And perhaps this common inner setting traces deeper ancestral geometries linked to profound aspects of human experience, such as desire and its eternal dis-satisfaction.

- 1 This term has been used several times by Linda Williams to indicate the protean nature of the forms that pornography takes on in the contemporary media landscape. In particular see Linda Williams, *Proliferating Pornographies On Scene: An Introduction*, in Id., (ed.), *Porn Studies*, Duke University, Durham-London 2004.
- 2 For a critical-historical reconstruction of the birth of the feature-length porn film see, amongst others: Linda Williams, *Hardcore. Power, Pleasure and the “Frenzy of the Visible”*, University of California, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 1999; Eric Schaefer, *Gauging a Revolution: 16mm film and the Rise of the Pornographic Feature*, in Linda Williams (ed.), *Porn Studies*, cit., pp. 370-400; Pietro Adamo, *Il porno di massa. Percorsi nell’hard contemporaneo*, Raffaello Cortina, Milano 2004.
- 3 Linda Williams, *Screening Sex*, Duke University, Durham-London, 2008, p. 313.
- 4 For the functioning of sites in this category, see amongst others: Emanuela Ciuffoli, *XXX. Corpo, porno, web*, Costa & Nolan, Milano 2006, and the recent article by Roy Menarini, “La pornografia nell’era di YouTube”, in *Duellanti*, no. 44, July-August 2008, pp. 92-93.
- 5 Home video presents some differences. In fact there is a tendency to produce sectorial materials aimed at reaching the different market niches with specific products. In this case, DVD titles often recall those categories described above, as they are meant to guide the spectators in choosing films that can satisfy their general taste. And above all DVDs (and also VHS) allow the viewer to move through the texts, with fast forward, rewind or chapter selection.
- 6 Steven Ziplow, *The Film Maker’s Guide to Pornography*, Drake, New York 1977.
- 7 *Ibidem*, quoted in Linda Williams, *Hardcore. Power, Pleasure and the “Frenzy of the Visible”*, cit., p. 93. The “come-shot” or “money shot” is an extreme close-up of an external male ejaculation and is considered the fundamental mark of the porn film.
- 8 By the “mimetic” tendency we mean the wish, on the part of pornographers like Damiano and his contemporaries, not so much to create a new genre, but rather to imitate *mainstream* production in all aspects, thus aiming at an integration of explicit sex in the cinema itself (for this very reason, this type of product has been associated with the term *crossover*). See Pietro Adamo, *Il porno di massa*, cit.
- 9 In order to identify the various sexual acts present in the film, I have used the categories proposed by Ziplow to the letter. In two particular cases, however, I had to use a more modern term (“bizarre”), that I find more suitable to describe the scenes in question.
- 10 The research was made on March 19, 2009 at 1:05 a.m. In some cases the results were not relevant, in the sense that the clips that appeared after the research, absolutely did not contain the sexual practice that had been searched for. Furthermore I find it amusing that, having keyed in the word “narrative”, I obtained 0 results.
- 11 Emanuela Ciuffoli, *XXX. Corpo, porno, web*, cit., p. 117.
- 12 Zabet Patterson, *Going On-line: Consuming Pornography in the Digital Era*, in Linda Williams (ed.), *Porn Studies*, cit., pp. 104-123.
- 13 *Ibidem*, p. 109.
- 14 Significantly Linda Williams dedicates to this problem the conclusion of her most recent study on sex in the movies. See Linda Williams, *Screening Sex*, cit., pp. 299-326.