Porn Poacher

Coming Out as an Aca Porn Fan

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Thank you so much for fighting the good fight to destigmatize and humanize the adult industry...and for being a fan, too :P It means a lot to me, and so many others, that you recognize the value in what we create.
– twitter DM from Angela White

I find many pleasures in porn. As a cultural scholar, I enjoy unraveling the evolution of this multifaceted medium and industry that has so much to teach about gender, power, and biopolitics. As an Americanist, I revel in understanding the US, its taboos, and its complicated relationship to the body through the lens of pornography. As a teacher, I am rewarded with highly motivated students who often catch the Porn Studies fever. As a feminist, I find a lot of pain in the ongoing turf war about pornography,[1] but at least as much joy in connecting with a sex-positive community. Sex workers have taught me more than I could ever return. As their ally, I give but also receive genuine solidarity. As an activist, I have found a voice, unknown strength, and a purpose in ending stigma against porn. As a cinephile, I go to porn film festivals, appreciate porn's aesthetics, am entertained by its humor, celebrate this form with others in the shared space of the porn cinema. As a consumer, I am rooting for its producers and performers at award shows, follow their lives through social media, subscribe to their OnlyFans, tip them. As a sexual being, I find healing in porn from much of my own sexual shame. And yes, I masturbate to porn. I am, in short, what has been labeled an "academic-fan" (Hills 2002)—an aca porn fan.[2]

When I said these words in my talk for the Porn Studies section at the 2019 MAGIS Film Studies Spring School in Gorizia, Italy, I did not think it was something daring to say. In contrast to the rather hostile academic contexts in which I often find myself the porn scholar outlaw, this room was filled with colleagues who I assumed would not only share my belief that pornography deserves scholarly attention, but also a certain affection for it. Yet, what I saw in the eyes staring at my slide saying *aca-fan* in bold black letters was, if not shock, at least surprise. When I heard each syllable of *mas-tur-bate* reverberate in awkward silence, I realized how much we had desexualized and disembodied our shared study object and along with it, ourselves. After my talk, a dear colleague came to me and said: "I apologize for the lack of more inclusive language, but what you just said took balls." Another whispered to me: "Bold!" It was only then that I became fully aware of the lack of conversation we have around our personal, physical

relationship to porn, even within our own, close-knit research community. I felt like I had named the elephant in the room, a taboo among those who consider it part of their profession to break taboos.

The paucity of outspoken aca-fan culture in Porn Studies is hardly surprising. Working in a field that still finds itself in a constant state of justification, "researchers identifying as 'users' of pornography, let alone as fans, might be constructed as politically suspect and ethically compromised," as Feona Attwood and I. Q. Hunter point out (2009, 549f). When Routledge launched *Porn Studies*, the first academic journal entirely dedicated to research on porn, prominent anti-porn feminist Gail Dines called its editors "cheerleaders for the industry" (qtd. in Cadwalladr 2013). When scholarship that strives for neutrality instead of being explicitly anti-porn is already vulnerable to such attacks, how is there supposed to be any room for actual celebration? Maybe the only public form of fandom you may commonly come across in our field is what David Church has fittingly called "Vintage Pornoisseurship" (2016, 151), which could be described as more of a nerdy film buff / collector type, though, who finds safety in historical distance and presents as disconnected from any masturbatory practice; an enthusiast of the 1970s more than of porn, really. As a lot of porn's stigma is transferred to studying it, we cannot afford, it seems, to mix academic business and physical pleasure—even less so as women and, Heaven forbid!, as feminists. Too little has changed since Linda Williams wrote in her introduction to *Hard Core*:

> I should want to protect myself against the perceived contaminations of a 'filthy subject'—lest I be condemned along with it. For even though I know that the slightest admission that not every image of every film was absolutely disgusting to me may render my insights worthless to many women, I also know that not to admit some enjoyment is to perpetuate an equally invidious double standard that still insists that the nonsexual woman is the credible, 'good' woman. (1989, xi)

It was the genderedness and the notion of self-protection in these lines that would haunt me later that sunny weekend in Italy and became a major motivation to write this text.

"So that was quite the confession you made, huh?" says the professor smirkingly when sitting down across from me on the train to the airport after the conference. We had not spoken before. "Do you see yourself in porn?" he continues, "You'd sure find an audience." His eyes travel across my body. My thoughts instantly get lost in so many different directions that I cannot remember what or whether I replied. Out of nowhere, he tells me how much he is turned on by donating sperm. "Too much information!," is what I want to respond, but say nothing at all. It makes me feel uncomfortable how his knees touch mine. I feel trapped in this crammed wagon. I get off at the next stop and sitting there, waiting for the next train, I catch myself thinking: "Well, I was asking for it!" It took me weeks to understand that this was nothing other than internalized victim blaming. We should not have to pay for presenting as sexual beings. It should not be a 'confession' for academics to acknowledge that we do have a body. And yet, it is still a reality, which especially female porn scholars have to face, that

our research invites violations of our personal space. Let us talk about how we can protect ourselves in other ways than by erasing our own sexuality. This text is a way of reclaiming mine. I can be a sexual woman and a credible one, to use Williams' words; I can be a qualified porn scholar and an ardent porn fan and still have boundaries—and so can you.

"I suppose I have always been something of a fan" (1992, 4) writes Henry Jenkins, one of the earliest and most outspoken self-identifying aca-fans, in *Textual Poachers*. He explains that "it was [his] fannish enthusiasm and not [his] academic curiosity that led [him] to consider an advanced degree in media studies" (5). In my case, it was studying porn that turned me into a fan. Even though I have always watched porn, I was a mere consumer beforehand. Neither did I particularly appreciate the medium, nor the people in or behind it. I did not even know their names. Porn was something happening to me. Despite actively seeking it out, it never felt like a conscious choice. Nothing I reflected on or cared about. By contrast, I felt ashamed for watching. I deleted my browser history just like so many other people do. Never would I have considered myself a fan.

Only when I turned my academic attention to it, my relationship to porn changed. I started to engage. I mingled with the Berlin indie porn scene and twitter played a major role in connecting with porn people in the US, so did podcasts such as *Holly Randall Unfiltered*. In her intro, Randall says: "I'm grateful to have this show to sit down with performers and be reminded of their humanity." So am I. Hearing them speak about their kids, pets, or hobbies was a much-needed reminder for me, too, that these people exist outside of their scenes; that these bodies have personalities, anxieties, dreams, and deserve respect and rights. I strongly believe that being a porn fan is essentially about humanizing porn. Especially at a time when the intransparency and contextlessness of tube sites have done their best to dehumanize it.

The digital age has brought a lot of positive democratizing and diversifying changes to the adult industry, but the ensuing overabundance and endless availability of online pornography has also enabled a public perception of porn as disposable. To quote industry veteran Mike Quasar: "Nobody's gonna be reminiscing by the fireplace, going: ha, I remember EXACTLY where I was when Interracial Cheerleader Cuckhold 14 came out" (qtd. in Randall 2017). I wonder: Is that really true for all porn? And if so, does it matter? Can't porn just be a momentary pleasure, like a delicious snack? Does longevity truly define value? Quasar goes on about how he cannot believe anyone would "pay for this shit" (qtd. in Randall 2017) – indeed, most people do not. In a capitalist society, how are you supposed to consider something valuable that is so easily accessible for free?

Listening to Quasar, I laugh at his refreshing signature sarcasm, but also feel a strong resistance to his understanding of porn as utterly worthless. I think of author Saskia Vogel, who tenderly wrote about tearing up while watching Jiz Lee masturbate in a porn scene, explaining: "it struck me how generous an act it is to share yourself, body, and pleasure in this way" (2020, 105). I can relate. It is precisely this vulnerability that often gets to me, but also the shame-free joy with which performers indulge in their sexual selves. All the more so, if their bodies

and pleasures have been marginalized or erased entirely by society. It frees me to watch them being unhinged, seemingly existing outside of social norms on my screen. This feeling can hit me in a genderqueer solo performance, such as the one Vogel refers to, as much as in a random amateur hotel threesome, a pup play domination scene, or a glossy studio produced gang bang. I'm not sure how to describe it, but it might be what empowerment feels like—even if my own freedom only lies in allowing myself to watch, without policing my fantasies. I let my body decide what to respond to. For better or for worse, lubrication has no conscience and no politics. I do not mean to romanticize porn, but to me, it has value. Beyond, but also through arousal.

I specifically remember the moment I first thought of myself as a porn fan. I was working at a b2b sex toy convention when I unexpectedly ran into Rocco Siffredi. I stopped and stared. He came over with a smiling "Ciaao," kissed me left, right. And there I was, a 30 something porn scholar, PhD candidate, and feminist, shyly giggling, unable to say much more than ask him for a selfie. He put his arm around me, I could feel and smell him. Even though, visually, I know every inch of it inside out, it was hard to fathom that this body physically existed. Oddly, it was less of a sexual than a surreal moment. In fact, I realized I preferred fantasizing about touching Rocco—which is precisely how porn operates. Not all the millions of viewers clicking on fauxcest porn actually want to have sex with their stepmom. These reflections came later, however, when my scholar identity kicked in again that had temporarily abandoned me when next to Rocco. I posted our selfie that day, captioning: "I just had my first ever porn star struck fan girling moment."

In contrast to other male porn performers, there is no single remotely intellectual argument I could bring forward about why I am fascinated with Rocco. He does not challenge notions of masculinity (like Michael Vegas does) or of fatherhood (like King Noire), does not bring bi (Wolf Hudson), trans (Jamal Phoenix), Middle-Eastern (Sharok), or queer Black (Bishop Black) representation to porn, does not share my politics (like Xander Corvus or Dante Dionys do), has no acting skills (like Seth Gamble), no distinct sense of humor (Tommy Pistol), no unique aesthetic (Owen Gray), and is no particularly beautiful mind (Mickey Mod)—I simply like the way he fucks on camera. Shouldn't that be enough? Though talking about a "body genre" (Williams 1991), I tend to justify my fondness of porn through rationalizing it, through retreating to a socially acceptable value system. I, too, do obviously not fully own my porn fandom and its physicality.

I probably feel most insecure in "my dual state as a fan and academic" (Jenkins 1992, 8) in the classroom. When I first taught a session on gonzo porn, I used the story of how I met Rocco as an ice breaker. My students laughed, it segued nicely into our material and yet, in the back of my head, I wondered: Is this appropriate? Whenever I ask myself this question, I remind myself of my mantra to treat porn just like any other cultural text. So, would it be appropriate for a literature professor to tell their students how they ran into their favorite author at a book fair and asked for a selfie? To mention in class that he loves reading? To put her favorite book on the syllabus? To sit on the jury for a literature prize? Is it acceptable for a film

professor to share an opinion on the Oscars? To have a favorite director? To tweet screenshots of beloved scenes? Can someone in game studies enjoy their PS4 or go to Gamescom without defending themselves? Can an art historian be married to an artist without losing credibility? May Bowie scholars mourn Bowie?[3] The answer is: yes, yes, yes! "Enthusiasm for any other object of study is not taken as an indication of corruption or failed rigour," finds Clarissa Smith, "but somehow when it comes to the sexual, the only approach should be at least dispassionate, if not disapproving" (2009, 579). This is no coincidence, but a common double standard. Alas, as Peter Lehman points out: "pornography is always a special case" (2006, 1)—one, it turns out, in which critical and fan appreciation are not easily reconciled.

None of this is to say that the role of the aca-fan is an altogether uncomplicated one when it comes to other, especially pop cultural, media. Hills noted with regard to cultural texts more generally that "when academics do take on fan identities, they often do so with a high degree of anxiety"—a "fear of a loss of respect" only granted to "the 'good' and rational academic who is expected to be detached" (2002, 12). Pointing to the same academic respectability politics, Alexander Doty explains that many scholars of (pop) culture "feel [they] have to play down or eliminate [their] fan excitement and play up [their] more serious role as theoretically savvy analyst" (2000, 13). However, twenty years have passed since these observations, during which both Pop Cultural Studies as a discipline and the aca-fan as a figure have become much more visible and accepted within academia. Neither of this is true for Porn Studies. Then and now, the balancing act between personal investment and critical analysis is by no means singular to, and yet much more complicated and urgent, for the porn scholar.

A major added challenge with aca *porn* fan culture comes with the fact that porn consumption in and of itself is already stigmatized—regardless of whether or not someone is an academic and whether or not porn is also their study object. Despite the shifts in porn audiences brought about through the digital age,[4] the continuing taboo around watching and enjoying porn still leads to a lot of isolated, often secret fans with little organized fandom outside of largely anonymous online communities.[5] In public discourse and consciousness, they almost exclusively exist as *white* heterosexual middle-aged male "masturbating loners" (Lindgren 2009, 175) at best, or as porn addicts at worst. Porn fans are an essentially invisible and, therefore, easily and heavily stereotyped group. Likewise, it is "a curious characteristic of research into pornography," finds Alan McKee, "that in trying to understand pornography, the people who consume it are consistently silenced" (2017, 383). While figures of consumption have exploded with the easy availability of online pornography, we still know rather little about the 115 million people who apparently visit Pornhub.com every single day ("The 2019 Year in Review," Pornhub, https://www.pornhub.com/insights/2019-year-in-review).

If we "other" the porn consumer, as McKee (2017) convincingly argues, how are we supposed to identify as such? For the academic, then, what comes on top are matters of class affiliation. In a milieu that loves to call anything pop-cultural 'a guilty pleasure,' how can someone embrace their enjoyment of a cultural product

that is commonly considered "the lowest of the cultural low" (Kipnis, 1999, 174)? In the case of porn, "the academic who also claims a fan identity," as Hills phrases it (2002, 2), is experiencing the collision between a sophisticated self-understanding and a low-brow medium, between a sense of moral superiority and an industry often (mis)understood as unethical, between a disembodied and a highly physical identity, between reason and affect. The relationship with porn is thus conflicted for most intellectuals, even without the further complications of a potentially endangered scientific objectivity a porn scholar faces.

When people think of a porn fan, very few will picture a young *white* woman in academia—but here I am, typing this in my Sasha Grey fan hoodie. "In conflating the critic and fan, cultural critics fantasize that the academic can cross over and adopt the extra-academic, popular position," writes Richard Burt critically (1998, 15). While I think there is an uncomfortable truth to framing aca-fandom as such an arrogant academic flex, I believe to be able to distance myself from such "fantasies of cultural omnipotence" (Hills 2002, 11). I am not writing this text to claim a "master perspective" (Burt 1998, 17) on porn and elevate myself in any way above non-fan porn scholars or non-scholar porn fans. This, to me, is not about interpretative power. Neither is it about freeing myself from the political consciousness of the intellectual (cf. Burt 1998, 16f). By contrast, the ongoing stigma around the production and consumption of porn, the century-long erasure and pathologization of female sexuality, the age-old dichotomy of mind over body, and academia's relentless respectability game make coming out as an aca porn fan a political act for me. Without a doubt, it is also a privilege. I hope that those who cannot afford to do so will read this and maybe, quietly, feel seen. For I know I'm not the only one.

In writing this text I want to, as Jenkins put it almost thirty years ago, "participate in the process of redefining the public identity of fandom, to use my institutional authority to challenge stereotypes, and to encourage a greater awareness of the richness of fan culture" (1992, 7). May it serve as a reminder that "pornography fans do exist" and that "both porn studies and fan studies can learn from them" (McKee 2018, 519). Just as the people creating and performing in porn, those watching porn need and deserve to be humanized, too. As Laura Kipnis aptly put it: "Pornography isn't viewed as having complexity because its audience isn't viewed as having complexity" (1999, 177). As scholars striving to refute the former, we should also work on disputing the latter. Let us start with ourselves and overcome "our inability [as academics] to link ideological criticism with an acknowledgement of the pleasures we find within popular texts" (Jenkins 1992, 8). Let us practice what we preach and take porn seriously; not by trying to intellectualize it into something it is not, but by valuing it for what it is: a pleasure tool. Let us stop self-exceptionalizing our field of studies because of the stigma we have internalized. Take this text as a demand for equal rights to aca-fandom across disciplines, media & cultural hierarchies and as a plea to be bolder and prouder about what we do, to re-embody ourselves and our study object, and to allow ourselves to find many, intellectual and physical, pleasures in porn—unapologetically.

Notes

1. The 1970s and 80s, with their increased visibility of pornography due to loosened obscenity laws in the United States, saw the rise of the so-called 'Feminist Porn Wars': anti-pornography feminists considered all porn violence against women, as summarized best in Robin Morgan's popular slogan "Porn is the theory, rape is the practice;" anti-censorship or sex-positive feminists, on the other hand, did not believe porn to be inherently problematic but, instead, believed in its potential for female empowerment and that, to quote feminist porn pioneer Annie Sprinkle, "[t]he answer to bad porn is not no porn, but to make better porn!" As Betty Dodson noted in 2014, "the porn wars rage on" (23)—she did not live to see them cease and, realistically, neither will I. For further reading, I recommend Lynn Comella's "Revisiting the Feminist Sex Wars" (2015).
2. While it is difficult to pinpoint exactly when and by whom the term 'aca-fan' was coined, the concept emerged with the rise of academic interest in understanding fandoms in the 1980s and was popularized by Matt Hills' 2002 *Fan Cultures*, which understands it as a "hybrid identity" (11) of scholars who are also fans. Hills builds on earlier work on fan cultures, by Richard Burt, Alexander Doty, and Henry Jenkins. The latter can be considered "one of the most ardent American proponents of finding productive ways to write and teach as a scholar-fan" (Doty 2000, 13). Jenkins had already approached the phenomenon in his 1992 monograph *Textual Poachers* and later consolidated the term with his ongoing blog *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*. Key concerns of aca-fan scholarship are questions of mutual skepticism but also synergies between (communities of) personal fascination and academic interest. For a more recent take, see Booth 2013.
3. For an interesting insight into the specific aca-fandom around Bowie and a new perception of the aca-fan conference, see Cinque 2019.
4. In one of the rare studies on online porn fandom, Simon Lindgren persuasively calls for the increasing need to revise "the image of porn consumers as isolated from one another" towards a more "interactive and creative collective of critical audience members" (2009, 175).
5. A major exception in the US context is the annual AVN Adult Entertainment Expo in Las Vegas, as Lynn Comella vividly describes in "Studying Porn Cultures" (2014).

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