



Universiteit Utrecht

The Politics of Feminist Pornography:
An analysis of representation and
spectatorship in *Sweet but Psycho*

Jane Heinze

Student Number: 5996228

Media and Culture

Supervisor: Milica Trakilovic

Academic Year 2019-2020

Block 4

Submitted on: 16 August 2020

Word count: 7.179



Summary

The feminist sex wars (also known as the porn wars) in the 1970s and 1980s refer to the collective debates among feminists that deeply polarized the feminist movement because of the different opinions on matters of sexuality and sexual activity. Feminist porn aims to address existing issues of sexism within the mainstream porn industry and can thereby figure as a middle ground in these porn wars. The objective of this thesis is to examine how the politics of looking and the politics of representation are constructed in tandem in feminist pornography. Case study is the feminist pornographic film *Sweet but Psycho*, created by pioneer in the feminist pornography movement, Erika Lust. The main theory used entails Stuart Hall's definition of representation and Laura Mulvey's 'male gaze'. With the use of the semiotic approach and the discursive approach, as well as analyzing the construction of spectatorship, this thesis explores the power relations that are at stake with the constitution of the politics of looking and the politics of representation in this specific pornographic film. The analysis shows that Lust creates a pornography that is non-sexist, by providing, to a certain extent, a 'powerless' or 'genderless' gaze, while also putting female sexuality at the center stage. This way, Lust offers alternative representations of the female body, female sexuality and sexual interaction and thereby creates a more balanced pornography in terms of power relations, compared to conventional mainstream pornography.



Table of contents

1. Introduction	4
2. Research questions	6
3. Porn and Power	7
4. Methodology	13
5. Method	17
6. Analysis	19
7. Conclusion	25
Bibliography	27



1. Introduction

Pornography has been a central site for feminist debates about the regulation of sexual expression in society. The feminist sex wars (also known as the porn wars) in the 1970s and 1980s refer to the collective debates among feminists that deeply polarized the feminist movement because of the different opinions on matters of sexuality and sexual activity.¹ Feminist scholar Anna Ferguson discusses both sides of pornography that resonate in the general 'Sex Wars' in "Sex War: The Debate between Radical and Libertarian Feminists".² On the one side, the Radical feminists committed to a particular critique of the dominance of male pleasure in patriarchal culture.³ This anti-pornographic movement emerged as part of an increasing feminist activism against rape, mistreatment, and other forms of violence against women, emphasizing that pornography illustrates objectification and normalization of sexual violence.⁴ In contrast, Libertarian feminists questioned the tone of the anti-pornography movement. They feared that the movement had merged sexuality and violence (or at least heterosexuality and violence) and played a role in the traditional anti-sexual attitudes of American culture.⁵ In addition to this, Libertarian feminists were also concerned with the stigmatization of sexual minorities and the limited right to practice sexual choice that would be hindered without pornography.⁶ Over time, many feminist discussions about pornography within feminism have seemed to focus on pornography as a form of representative misogyny or as a matter of free sexuality. According to Tristan Taormino, writer of *The Feminist Porn Book: The Politics of Producing Pleasure*, feminist porn can figure as a middle ground in the porn wars.⁷ Taormino considers feminist porn to

¹ Ann Ferguson, "Sex War: The Debate between Radical and Libertarian Feminists" *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* (1984)

² Ferguson "Sex War", 106-112

³ Ann Ferguson, "Sex War," 106

⁴ Ann Ferguson, "Sex War", 106-108

⁵ Estelle B Freedman and Barrie Thorne. "Introduction to "The Feminist Sexuality Debates"." *Signs* 10, (no. 1), (1984), 103

⁶ Ann Ferguson, "Sex War:" 106-112

⁷ Tristan Taormino "The Feminist Pornographer" interview by Tracy Clark-Flory, accessed 13 april 2020

https://www.salon.com/test/2013/02/24/the_feminist_pornographer/



be both a genre and a movement.⁸ An important part of feminist pornography according to her is ‘exploring the idea of how to make the process of making porn more ethical and addressing the issue of labor.’⁹

With the goal of making porn more accessible to women, feminist porn aims to address existing issues of sexism within the mainstream porn industry. Erika Lust, a Swedish erotic film director, screenwriter, producer and writer has played an instrumental role in promoting feminist porn, as both a movement and a genre. As she grew tired of the lack of creativity in mainstream pornography, Lust created her own independent adult short in 2004. In the following months, the film was downloaded over more than two million times. As by her own saying, Lust creates ‘ethical porn’, an alternative to mainstream porn, both in its content and in its production process. She mentions in her book *Good Porn* that she aspires ‘to create feminist adult films with a focus on female pleasure, intimacy and relationships, as opposed to the standardized male-oriented films, that focus on ‘ass-fucking and ejaculations’, objectify women and uphold no racial and/or sociocultural diversity in its production’.¹⁰ Her work seems a significant site to consider in regard to the politics of feminist pornography. How and in what way feminist porn challenges the conventions of mainstream porn can be further analysed with a focus on the content of one of Lust's films. By deconstructing the film as a medium I attempt to find out how this specific feminist pornfilm, as opposed to mainstream pornfilms, represents gender and sexuality, and if and how it constructs a gendered gaze. On that account, this thesis considers feminist pornography as a genre that is opening up questions around the way it may or may not be challenging the notions of the politics of looking and the politics of representation in the context of erotic films.

⁸ Taormino, interview.

⁹ Taormino, interview.

¹⁰ Erika Lust *Good Porn* (Seal Press, California: 2010): 13-15



2. Research questions

I started writing my thesis because the following question is of interest to me: “What role does feminist pornography play in feminist debates about pornography?” As this is question broad question as well as too open to interpretation, I chose to look at one specific feminist pornfilm, created by a pioneer in the feminist pornography movement, Erika Lust. Her work will figure as a case study, and will be analyzed through a feminist lens. I narrowed down the main question in my research to:

How are the politics of looking and the politics of representation in the feminist pornographic film *Sweet But Psycho* constituted and to what extent does this differ from conventions of mainstream pornography?

From this primary research question, I elaborated further questions that need to be answered in order to reach a conclusion about the main subject.

- How does Lust represent the female body in *Sweet but Psycho*?
- How does Lust represent female sexuality in *Sweet but Psycho*?
- How is spectatorship constructed in *Sweet but Psycho*?
- To what extent can the politics of looking constructed in *Sweet but Psycho* be considered novel, compared to conventional spectatorship in mainstream pornography?
- To what extent can the politics of representation constructed in *Sweet but Psycho* be considered novel, compared to conventional representations of the female body and female sexuality in mainstream pornography?



3. Porn and Power

In *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the 'Frenzy of the Visible'* Linda Williams, a pioneer in the relatively recent field of pornographic studies, analyses what hard-core film pornography is and does - as a genre with a history, as a specific cinematic form, and as part of today's discourse on sexuality.¹¹ This thesis analyses the feminist pornographic film *Sweet but Psycho*, as well as the way it posits a (gendered) subjectivity and represents the pornographic female body. This is why in this chapter I will briefly discuss Linda Williams' perspective on pornography in all its forms, while also deliberating the scientific discourse surrounding pornography as a cultural and political entity. I will elaborate on the ranges of theoretical approaches that critically engage with this topic in the light of the politics of representation and the politics of looking, related to notions of power, sex and gender. The following approaches and concepts will be discussed in consecutive order: the scientific and cultural discourse around pornography, Stuart Hall's interrogation of the role of representation in images and Laura Mulvey's theory of the 'male gaze'.

The political charge of pornography makes the term challenging to define for several scholars. Williams cites the remarkable consensus on the need to include 'power' as the important new term in its formulation.¹² She cites Michel Foucault's *The History Of Sex*, and refers to his claims about "the modern compulsion to speak incessantly about sex."¹³ As stated by Williams, this urge to talk about sex is nowhere more evident than in hard-core video pornography. Video pornography seems to be able to satisfy 'the spell of an immense curiosity'¹⁴ about sex directly, locating the viewers as invisible voyeurs, positioned to view the sex

¹¹ Linda Williams, *Hard core: power, pleasure, and the "frenzy of the visible"* (Berkeley: University of California Press. 1989), 15

¹² Linda Williams, *Hard core: power, pleasure, and the "frenzy of the visible"* (Berkeley: University of California Press. 1989), 15

¹³ Michel Foucault. 1978. *The History of Sexuality*. Vol. 1: *An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), 77 quoted in Linda Williams, *Hard core: power, pleasure, and the "frenzy of the visible"* (Berkeley: University of California Press. 1989), 2

¹⁴ Michel Foucault. 1978. *The History of Sexuality*., 77 quoted in Linda Williams, *Hard core*, 2



‘act’ itself rather than hearing about it, as Williams explains.¹⁵ Video pornography thereby becomes one of the main treatises that speak of sex and sexuality, by evoking the ‘truth’ and organizing knowledge about sexuality and pleasure.

Williams describes video pornography in the following way: “(...) as the visual (and sometimes aural) representation of living, moving bodies engaged in explicit, usually unfaked, sexual acts with a primary intent of arousing viewers.”¹⁶ She adds to this: “What distinguishes film and video pornography from written pornography, or even, to a lesser degree, from still photography, is the element of performance contained in the term sexual act.”¹⁷ Following this, Williams ties in an important note by Annette Kuhn: “(...) that pornography in general produces meanings ‘pivoting on gender difference.’”¹⁸ Kuhn points out that pornography, parallel to psychoanalysis, is obsessed with bodily and sexual differences. Both pornography and psychoanalysis focus on the woman's sex as a fundamental sign of “otherness,” a threat that requires control so that in images and representation, sexuality and power are inseparable. Hence, Kuhn considers the visual impact of pornography as a regime of representation, constructing a social discourse on the nature of human sexuality.¹⁹

While Kuhn claims that the sexual representation in mainstream pornography pivots on gender difference, Tristan Taormino, writer of *The Feminist Porn Book: The Politics of Producing Pleasure*, considers the sexual representation in feminist pornography a site for resistance.²⁰ Feminist pornography, Taormino argues, creates alternative images and uses its aesthetics and iconography to expand established sexual norms and treatises.²¹ Taking this into consideration, the

¹⁵ Williams, *Hard core*, 5

¹⁶ Williams, *Hard core*, 30

¹⁷ Williams, *Hard core*, 30

¹⁸ Annette Kuhn, *The Power of the Image: Essays on Representation and Sexuality*. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 24 quoted by Linda Williams, *Hard core: power, pleasure, and the "frenzy of the visible"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 30

¹⁹ Annette Kuhn, *The Power of the Image: Essays on Representation and Sexuality*. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 24

²⁰ Taormino, interview.

²¹ Tristan Taormino, *The Feminist Porn Book: The Politics of Producing Pleasure*. (New York: The Feminist Press, 2013) 9-10, 15



study on the feminist pornographic film *Sweet but Psycho* asks for a thoughtful reflection on representations of gender and sexuality. Stuart Hall, one of the founders of Cultural Studies, offers the following definition of representation: “(...) the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture through the use of language, signs and images, which stand for or represent things”.²² According to Hall, each image has its own specific meaning, constructed by the system of representation. Hall argues that the process of representation itself shapes the world it wants to represent, exploring how the shared language of a culture, its signs and images, provides a shared conceptual map that gives meaning to the world.²³ On that account, he proposes two main approaches when examining the process of representation: the semiotic approach and the discursive approach. As Hall puts it, both of these approaches are constructionist, and concentrate on how language and signification (the use of signs in language) work to produce meanings. However, the semiotic approach is concerned with the way language produces meaning, whereas the discursive approach is more interested in the effects and consequences of representation - its politics.²⁴ I will elaborate on this more in the next chapter about my used methodologies.

According to media scholar William John Thomas Mitchell, visual culture is not limited to the study of images or media, but extends to everyday practices of seeing and showing.²⁵ This is why visual feminist pornography also requires a thorough examination of the politics of looking, which is necessary when discussing the meaning of its images within contemporary culture and as part of a larger feminist discourse. Feminist film theory takes as a starting point an analysis of the relationship between the see-er and the seen and the particular power relations that are at stake between those who are looking and those who are looked at. Particularly feminist film theories, such as the gaze in relation to voyeurism and

²² Stuart Hall, *Representation: cultural representations and signifying practices*. (London: SAGE Publications, 2003), 15

²³ Hall, *Representation*, 6

²⁴ Stuart Hall, *Representation*, 20-27

²⁵ W. J.T. Mitchell, “Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture.” *Journal of Visual Culture* 1, no. 2 (August 2002): 170



identification, will allow me to speculate on how the visual operates in cinematic pornography. The British film theorist Laura Mulvey has exerted a great deal of influence on this discourse. Influenced by philosophers Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, her essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' inaugurated the intersection of film theory, psychoanalysis and feminism, thereby shifting the direction of film theory to a psychoanalytic framework.²⁶ In this essay, Mulvey defines two types of scopophilia (the pleasure of looking) that occur through gazing: voyeurism and narcissism.²⁷ With the process of voyeurism, the viewer's pleasure is in looking at another person. An 'illusion of looking in a private world' is created by the darkness in the auditorium and separates the objects on the screen and the owner of the gaze. As a result, a sexual, instinctive pleasure of staring and fetishizing someone is created.²⁸ This kind of voyeuristic scopophilia involves an active way of looking.²⁹ A more passive form of scopophilia is narcissistic scopophilia.³⁰ According to Mulvey, cinema also facilitates the narcissistic process of identification with an ideal ego seen on the screen. In this process, the viewer's pleasure is in self-recognition when viewing the image of another person. Narcissism is a "'fascination with likeness and recognition: the human face, the human body, the relationship between the human form and its surroundings, the visible presence of the person in the world'".³¹ According to Mulvey, this relationship is constructed as the spectator re-enacts with what Jacques Lacan called 'the mirror stage'. The mirror stage is the phase in which a child has an encounter with a mirror and realizes he or she has an external appearance.³² Spectators are identifying with the gaze of the camera and are seeing themselves as 'other'. In that sense, the viewer finds its idealized self ego on the screen.³³

Although the two types of scopophilia defined above seem contradictory - one separates the viewer from the person on the screen, the other reinforces the

²⁶ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16.3 (1975)

²⁷ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure", 3

²⁸ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure", 6

²⁹ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure", 3

³⁰ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure", 8

³¹ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure", 4

³² Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure", 4

³³ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure", 3



viewer's ego by identification- they prove a dialectical relationship in film, as stated by Mulvey. The cinema offers a particular 'illusion of reality' in which this contradiction between libido and ego comes about in a complementary fantasy world.³⁴ In this fantasy world on screen, the woman as representation/image 'crystallizes' the paradox that a look can be both pleasurable and threatening at the same time.³⁵ According to Mulvey, Hollywood's solution to this conflict is to position women as objects to be looked at, while positing men as bearers of the gaze with which the spectators can identify. As such, the male gaze is controlling, voyeuristic and focused on the woman as 'Other' as an object of desire.³⁶

Although Mulvey has taken an important place in the discourse on feminist film theory, her piece has also been criticized. Janet McCabe for example, author of *Feminist Film Studies: Writing the Woman into Cinema*, considers Mulvey's essay significant for feminist film studies, but in some ways also problematic.³⁷ According to McCabe, feminist film theory is based on 'the paradox of the unrepresentability of the feminine', namely: access to pleasure and desire for the female spectator can only be made possible through male identification. According to McCabe, Mulvey's research leads to a certain deterministic logic. A closed system as such makes it almost impossible to find spaces for resistance and differences when revealing 'the difficulty of femininity as a sexual position or category in relation to the symbolic'.³⁸ This is an important note to take into account in the light of this thesis, as the analysis aims to investigate whether the film succeeds in exposing the pornographic female body while at the same time representing and promoting a 'non-male' or even 'female' gaze. Another side note of Mulvey's theory can be placed on the fact that her work has been overly applied to a range of cultural products for which it was not originally intended. In *Male gays in the female gaze: women who watch m/m pornography*, Lucy Neville writes that a number of writers have specifically questioned the usefulness of the concept of the look in pornography, arguing that the pornographic gaze is different from

³⁴ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure", 9

³⁵ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure", 5

³⁶ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure", 2-6

³⁷ Janet McCabe, Janet Elizabeth McCabe, Terri Murray, *Feminist Film Studies: Writing the Woman into Cinema* (London: Wallflower Press, 2015) 33-36

³⁸ Janet McCabe, *Feminist Film Studies*, 34-35



that in the narrative cinema because the intended effects of the respective films differ.³⁹ However, Neville mentions, despite this criticism, certain facets of the idea of the male gaze have been adopted to understand the dynamics involved in viewing heterosexual pornography. Williams, as mentioned before, analyses the historical development of the pornographic genre and claims that it is a social construct in which power dynamics are present in genders.⁴⁰ The gaze implies a concept that assumes that the one who watches and the one who is watched are always in 'gendered' positions related to power. This is a critical concept in the light of this thesis, as feminist pornography operates from the belief that it can manifest a more balanced relationship to power through representing female agency and subjectivity.

Now that I have elaborated on this theory of the male gaze, as both Stuart Hall's interrogation of the role of representation in images and the ranges of the scientific and cultural discourse around pornography, I will amplify in the next chapters what methodologies and methods I will use to analyse the way women are displayed in *Sweet but Psycho*, and the ways in which the film incorporates permutations of the gaze into its very structure, determines how the woman should be looked at.

³⁹ Lucy Neville "'Male gays in the female gaze: Women who watch m/m pornography'". (Porn Studies, 2(2-3), 2015), 4

⁴⁰ Linda Williams, *Hard core: power, pleasure, and the "frenzy of the visible"* (Berkeley: University of California Press. 1989



4. Methodology

In order to keep the research manageable within the given time frame, I had to make some decisions about which material I wanted to use. I have chosen to focus exclusively on feminist video pornography so that I can develop an in-depth approach, looking at the way women are represented and how the film determines how the woman should be looked at. I have limited my material to a selected film made by feminist pornographer Erika Lust. Lust describes her work as adult cinema ‘where the feminine viewpoint is vital, the aesthetic is a pleasure to all of the senses, and those seeking an alternative to mainstream porn can find a home’.⁴¹ Lust aspires to create pornography that is plot-driven and aesthetically pleasing, but in addition to this functions as a critique of the mainstream porn industry. With this in mind, I chose to focus on one of her short films *Sweet but Psycho*. *Sweet but Psycho* is part of XConfessions.⁴² XConfessions is an on-going series of dozens of short films, ‘inspired by real-life sexual fantasies of real women’.⁴³ For this series, Lust published an appeal to women to write and direct to her their sexual fantasies. Lust chooses these fantasies and turns them into short films. Part of the goal of this series is to make more lifelike films that not only women can identify with, but also to make films in which they can participate in the process of making.⁴⁴ In addition to this, Lust uses the film *Sweet but Psycho* as a promotional film to draw visitors to the website and her brand and therefore it seems representative of her work. Last of all, I believe that Lust's work is very suitable for analysis, because her work floats across the boundary between pornography and independent art and between hard-core and soft-core. It is this difference from mainstream pornography and especially its subtleties that make it relevant to analyse the different ways in which a feminist porno such as *Sweet but Psycho* can create new conventions and

⁴¹ Erika Lust, www.erikalust.com accessed August 15, 2020.

⁴² ‘XConfessions by you & Erika Lust’, Erika Lust, accessed August 10, 2020 https://xconfessions.com/?utm_source=erikalust.com&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=top_menu

⁴³ ‘XConfessions by you & Erika Lust’

⁴⁴ ‘XConfessions by you & Erika Lust’



paradigms.

Feminist film theory has largely inspired me to write this thesis. Feminist film theory has engaged with three methodologies within film and media studies: representation, production and spectatorship. For my thesis, I will focus on representation and spectatorship. I will focus on these two components because I am largely interested in the visual components of the film; thereby I aim to show how the politics of looking and the politics of representation are constructed in tandem in the film *Sweet but Psycho*. In my analysis, I attempt to show these constructions as existing within a larger feminist discourse and in terms of sex, gender and power. To analyse how both representation and spectatorship are constructed in the film, I will make use of two different methods: a semiotic approach and a discursive approach.

Stuart Hall's concept of representation is crucial to this thesis. In *Representation: Cultural Representations and Significant Practices*, Hall defines representation as 'the process by which members of a culture use language.'⁴⁵ He operates with an understanding of meaning constructed in and through language or signs. Hall states: 'Visual signs and images, even when they bear a close resemblance to the things to which they refer, are still signs; they carry meaning and thus have to be interpreted.'⁴⁶ His main point is that representation is a system, which deploys signs, and that therefore meaning is not inherent, but constructed.⁴⁷ By explaining this, he examines two models of the constructionist approach: the semiotic approach and the discursive approach.⁴⁸ The semiotic approach argues that words, images and objects can function as signifiers in the production of meaning. Since cultural objects convey meaning, they must act as language works, which means that the cultural object acts as a signifier to convey a message/meaning, which would then be the signified.⁴⁹ For this they must make use of signs, with underlying rules and codes. To undertake this kind of work in this thesis, this would mean that the visuals in a pornographic film are treated as

⁴⁵ Hall, *Representation* 45

⁴⁶ Hall, *Representation* 5

⁴⁷ Hall, *Representation*, 1, 7-10, 15

⁴⁸ Hall, *Representation*, 22-29

⁴⁹ Hall, *Representation* 16-23



signifiers, and the genre is being viewed as a code, to discover how each image on the screen makes use of these rules to ‘say something’ (signifies) which the reader could ‘read’ or interpret within the formal framework of porn as a narrative.⁵⁰ Moreover, in *The Sexual Self: The Construction of Sexual Scripts*, Michael S. Kimmel argues that the mise-en-scene in an erotic film integrates the film’s visual vocabulary, the implicit or explicit narrative, and the film’s sexual action.⁵¹ According to Kimmel, the directors’ mise-en-scene ultimately establishes the overarching visual/fantasy vocabulary of the movie – ‘the erotic gestalt of the porn movie’. Because of this, I will approach the film as a medium that acquires meaning largely through its visual aspects. It is also for the reasons mentioned by Kimmel that I will approach the film *Sweet but Psycho* in means of the auteur theory. The auteur theory is a way of looking at films that state that the director is the “author” and primary creative force of a film.⁵²

In the semiotic approach, representation is understood based on the way words function as signs within the language. However, in this way semiotics seem to limit the representation process to language and treat it as a closed, rather static system.⁵³ According to Hall, “in a culture, meaning often depends on larger units of analysis – narratives, statements, groups of images, whole discourses which operate across a variety of texts, areas of knowledge about a subject which have acquired widespread authority.”⁵⁴ This is why he introduces the second model of a constructionist approach: Foucault’s discursive approach to representation. Three major ideas by Foucault are of importance in this specific case study: his concept of discourse, the issue of power and knowledge and the question of the subject. I will discuss these three consecutively.

Foucault's approach to representation is engaged the production of knowledge (rather than just meaning) through what he called discourse (rather than

⁵⁰ Hall, *Representation* 22

⁵¹ Michael Kimmel, *The sexual self: The construction of sexual scripts*. (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2007): 77

⁵² David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, en Jeff Smith. *Film Art An Introduction*. New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2017: 480

⁵³ Hall, *Representation*, 27

⁵⁴ Hall, *Representation*, 27



just language).⁵⁵ As Hall puts it: ‘Foucault is always much more historically specific, seeing forms of power/ knowledge as always rooted in particular contexts and histories.’⁵⁶ Above all, for Foucault, the production of knowledge is always crossed with questions of power and the body; and this greatly expands the scope of what is involved in representation.⁵⁷ This becomes very clear when Foucault references several pornographic works by authors in the nineteenth century as part of the production of sexual discourse in his work *The History of Sexuality*.⁵⁸ As such, pornography serves the purpose of illustrating the rules and practices that produced meaningful statements and regulated discourse in different historical periods.⁵⁹

The discursive approach not only considers discursive formations, it also considers the way the discourse produces the subject and defines the subject positions from which knowledge arises. To tell how the image works as a discourse and what it means, I need to follow the orchestration of the looking - who is looking at what or whom. For Foucault, a picture only means something in relation to the spectator who is looking at it. What relationships of looking - as represented to us, the spectators - do we follow? Foucault’s notions about spectatorship can be traced back in Mulvey’s work. According to Mulvey, cinema incorporates permutations of the look into its very structure, predetermining how the woman is to be looked at, and thus placing all spectators in the ‘masculinized’ position of looking at her.⁶⁰ She observes that in this process, there are three sets of looks involved: (1) the ^{[[]]}_{SEP}camera’s look at the pro-filmic reality, (2) the audience’s look at ^{[[]]}_{SEP}the final film product, and (3) the characters’ looks at each other.⁶¹ For my analysis, I will take all of these three sets of looks into account; in order to achieve a wide understanding of the way spectatorship and the politics of looking is constructed within the film.

⁵⁵ Hall, *Representation*, 35

⁵⁶ Hall, *Representation*, 36

⁵⁷ Hall, *Representation*, 35

⁵⁸ Michel Foucault.. *The History of Sexuality*. Vol. 1: *An Introduction*, (OKS Print. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 30

⁵⁹ Hall, *Representation*, 29

⁶⁰ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure”, 3

⁶¹ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16.3 (1975)



5. Method

As mentioned above, I aim to analyse the way gender and sexuality are represented, and the way the spectator is positioned in the adult film *Sweet but Psycho*, using a semiotic as well as a discursive approach. I am aware that due to the scope of this thesis, I have to make a selection regarding the scenes of choice. Roughly, the film can be sectioned into two parts. The first part is mainly an introduction of the story. It contains a lot of dialogue and aims to familiarize the viewer with the story, the setting and performers. In the second part the tension rises, the foreplay between the four character starts (kissing and touching) and the intercourse is performed. For the analysis I will select two scenes, one in the first half of the film and one in the second half of the film.

In order to keep my analyses organized and easy to follow, I will outline in this section how I have organized the analytical part of my thesis. First, I will briefly summarize each scene. Thereafter, I will divide each scene into two sections. In the first section I will elaborate on the construction of the representation of gender and sexuality. Representation in pornographic films operates on the level of the narrative and the visual. I will discuss how the female body and female sexuality are envisioned and represented. I want to stress here that in this part I will not discuss sound or music; I will mostly focus on narrative strategies brought in a visual way. However, in some parts the dialogue will be discussed as it may be of relevance for the construction of representation of gender and sexuality. In the second section, I will elaborate on the construction of spectatorship. I aim to find out what narrative strategies are being used to tell the story; from whose perspective, and how the how is the gaze constituted. The three looks mentioned by Mulvey (the camera's, the audience's and the characters' looks at each other)⁶² Furthermore, both of these scenes are discussed in terms of and in relation to notions of sex, gender, and power. As the chosen scenes do not differ much in the case of performers and setting, it will be inevitable that there will be some overlap or repetition. However, it seems important to discuss both of these

⁶² Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Screen 16.3 (1975)



Universiteit Utrecht

levels, as it will give me a broad but also layered view of the construction of the politics of representation and the politics of looking in this specific film.



6. Analysis

Before I begin my analysis I want to offer a short synopsis of the film *Sweet but Psycho*.

Synopsis

Following excellent ratings on the Trip Advisor website, the couple Amarna (female) and Mickey (male) book a room in a guesthouse in the mountains of Spain. When they arrive however, it appears that they are the only guests in the hotel, along with their attractive yet disconcertingly friendly hosts – Vex (female) and Owen (male). Mickey and Amarna head down to have an awkward and tension filled meal with their hosts. After a great lunch and several glasses of wine, the guests start to loosen up, and are seduced into a skinny dip in the pool. The couples switch partners and a foursome at the poolside follows.

Fragment 1 Foreplay in the pool: 06:00 – 09:11

Amarna and Micky have just arrived at the AirBnB. Their hosts, Vex and Owen, invite them for a lunch at the poolside. After lunch, Owen asks Amarna to go for a dance. She hesitates and looks at her partner Mickey first. He nods as a sign of consent and Amarna decides to go dance with Owen. Once the lunch is over, Vex decides to go swim nakedly in the pool. Owen follows. Mickey takes off his clothes and jumps in the pool. After hesitating a little, Amarna is the last one to go in. The atmosphere gets comfortable, and the couples decide to switch partners. Mickey starts kissing Vex and Owen starts kissing Amarna.

Representation

When Mickey gets into the pool, Amarna looks a little hesitated still. She sits down on the side of the pool. Owen comes closer and teases her by dropping some water on her knees. At this time, the camera has come closer but continues to leave every performer involved in the frame. However, the attention is focused on Amarna and Owen's interaction, while Vex and Mickey kiss in the background. The camera continues to follow Amarna. She is still sitting on the side of the pool, in her



underwear, nervous to go in. Mickey kisses her and helps her in. Here I want to put forward a quote by Andrea Dworkin, a front woman in the radical feminist movement. She states that “[p]ornography is made of the raw materials of women’s bodies, [it’s] production and use designed to control, dehumanize, humiliate, injure and subordinate (...).”⁶³ It could be argued that the film *Sweet but Psycho* is not made from ‘the raw material of women’s bodies.’ First, the story is constructed accurately and there is a character development recognizable. Lust shows Amarna’s sexual development as a product of explorations of her fantasies and desires, but not unimportantly, takes the time for this. She focuses on the intimate interaction between Amarna and Owen for a couple minutes and gives Amarna more time to take off her clothes compared to the rest of the performers. She also leaves the more confident characters Mickey and Vex to appear in the background, and with a smaller storyline. Lust thus creates a positive view on Amarna’s sexual exploration. Thereby, Lust makes use of both visual and narrative tactics to put her female characters center stage. The female characters are not marginalized, objectified and powerless, but rather the conscious explorer of their own desires and pleasure. It is through their exploration that they are empowered, not only in a sexual sense, but also in a deeper, personal sense. This is emphasized in the film later on, when Amarna and her partner Mickey are lying on a sunbed after their foursome, and Mickey asks, “I didn’t know you love girls that much.” and Amarna replies, with a great smile: “Yes, there are many things about me that you don’t know. Yet.”

⁶³ Andrea Dworkin, “Suffering and Speech” in Dworkin, Andrea and Catherine A. MacKinnon: *In Harm’s Way: The Pornography Civil Rights Hearings*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts/London: Harvard U.P., 1997), 35^[1]_[SEP]



Spectatorship

While Mickey and Amarna are dancing in the background during lunch, Vex shares a look with Mickey. In a brief moment her face is shown in a close-up. It is clear that Vex is seducing Mickey as she smiles at him cheekily in front of his partner. Because the close-ups emphasize the facial expression of both characters, it could be stated that this use of camera highlights the intimacy and tension between the two. However, this could be an adequate moment to make use of a subjective perspective, emphasizing Vex nor Mickey's focus ore domination on the other. Instead, the camera captures a shot-reverse-shot between Vex and Mickey. Thereby there is not one character favoured for the spectator and a more balanced power relationship is accentuated.

In the following shot, the camera is positioned in an establishing shot. Vex steps into the frame from the left side. The attention is on her, as she is the first naked body that the audience sees. She looks completely comfortable with the situation, acting enthusiastic because she is about to dive into the pool. She invites the rest into the pool. The performers engage within the situation consecutively, reacting to her enthusiasm. Owen takes of his apron and Mickey gets up from the table. He walks towards Amarna and decides to take his clothes off as well. At this point, the camera comes closer but maintains an establishing shot, allowing the spectator to observe the situation, while maintaining a respectful distance. This kind of camera position denies the audience the luxury of engaging in the pleasures of voyeurism, focusing on one person or in specifically one woman at the time. The camerawork throughout this scene continues this tendency to observe from a distance, as if the spectator is a fifth person, but not in the form of a voyeur, more as an observer.

Once the two couples are swimming and kissing in the pool, the camera switches to a bird-eye shot. Again, this set up allows little space for the operations of a male gaze as theorized by Mulvey. The act of seeing is at the heart of observing, suggesting that it is okay to look at the pleasure of others from a somewhat distant and neutral 'lens', rather than favouring one (female) character or introducing the camera as a subjective voyeuristic narrator.



Fragment 2 Performing a foursome 11:29 – 15:00

In this fragment, Amarna, Mickey, Vex and Owen get out of the pool, and position themselves naked on the sunbeds.

Representation

In *Grains of Resonance: Affect, Pornography and Visual Sensation* feminist scholar Susanna Paasonen writes that in mainstream pornography, close-ups and zooms are being used to routinely present bodies.⁶⁴ In her essay 'What Do We See When We See Woman/Woman Sex in Pornographic Movies' Deborah Swedberg points out that in woman-centered pornography (with this she means pornography starring two lesbian women having a sexual relationship), more camera angles are pulled back (or zoomed out). Because the whole female body is involved in the scene, the representations of women's bodies are not as fragmented as in the more mainstream mixed-gender sex movies. By zooming out, all of the women or people can be seen, keeping the sexual acts performed in context with the people performing them.⁶⁵ In the group setting in *Sweet but Psycho*, the spectator generally sees all the performers in the frame during interplay. However, the women are usually in control of the acts. Rather than being caught in the masculine gaze of a male see-er, those seen control the scene. This is specifically visible when Amarna is almost about to come. She is being penetrated by Micky, while Vex and Owen are behind her and Vex is stimulating her clitoris with her hands. At this moment she screams "No, I don't want to come yet!" This way, Lust not only shows the graphic representation of sexual acts on the screen, she tends to give a visual as well as audible proof of female pleasure, by putting attention to Amarna's orgasm and showing her partly smiling, partly breathing, and the tension in her body. Amarna does not experience an orgasm yet, and her exclusion from the climax as a sign of orgasmic pleasure, focusing instead on close-ups of facial

⁶⁴ Susanna Paasonen "Grains of Resonance: Affect, Pornography and Visual Sensation". *Somatechnics*. (2013): p. 352

⁶⁵ Deborah Swedberg. "What Do We See When We See Woman/Woman Sex in Pornographic Movies." *NWSA Journal* 1, no. 4 (1989): p. 602-16.



expressions and muscle tension, emphasizes the pleasure the performer experiences in a whole.

Another part in the fragment contains Amarna performing oral sex on Owen, while Mickey is performing oral sex on Vex. The shots alternate focusing on the interplay between Vex and Mickey and Owen and Amarna. This figures the women and men as equal partners; their bodies are equally shot and equally available for the viewer; Amarna consensually performs the oral sex. As the camera shifts to Mickey and Vex, rather than focusing on what's going on in the genital area, thereby fragmenting the body, the camera is positioned above and behind Vex's head, simultaneously showing both her face and the men between her legs. This schema also refuses to establish an emblem of sexual pleasure as a substitute for the phallus or fellatio. Instead, it favours a more relational approach to pleasure involving the body as a whole, as well as the different but related pleasures of multiple partners.

In this fragment, Vex and Amarna also perform oral stimulation to Owen. By doing so, Lust does not completely avoid traditional stereotypes, as the women kiss each other during. However, her take on this representation is embedded in a storyline that gives both women more agency and consent than in mainstream porn. In addition to this, the camera does not focus on Owen or the women, but again, leaves all the performers in the frame. While Vex is performing oral stimulation on Owen, Mickey is stimulating Vex's clitoris with his hands, leaving a more balanced relationship of control between the men and women.



Spectatorship

Before elaborating on the construction of spectatorship in this specific fragment, I want to amplify two genres in mainstream pornography that are often recognized. A 'gonzo' is a pornography genre where the camera has been put right into the action, with one or more of the participants filming and performing sexual acts. It has similarities to point-of-view pornography, though this is to create *the effect* of giving the viewer the sense that they are experiencing the sex itself. In this complete fragment of *Sweet but Psycho*, the performers do not acknowledge the camera as an involved subject. There is a clear separation between camera and performer, as the performers never look into the camera directly. Instead, the performers look at each other constantly when performing the sexual acts and no interaction between the performers and spectators is facilitated. This way, the pleasure in looking has not been split between the male (looking at the female actively) and the female (being looked at, passively), but forms a balanced relational interaction between both genders. I want to add to this that I argue that this way, the film subverts its own capability to transform the pornographic into a spectacle. It does not create an illusionary realm, by blurring the line between reality and fantasy. For the reason that the desired effect of porn is to arouse, pornography requires a level of 'realism'. This realism is being undermined because the audience is denied a form of authenticity, illusion and thereby involvement; instead the spectator takes the form of a witness rather than a participant.



7. Conclusion

After offering my analyses of *Sweet but Psycho*, in this chapter I will organize my findings with regard to my research question ‘How are the politics of looking and the politics of representation in the feminist pornographic film *Sweet But Psycho* constituted and to what extent does this differ from conventions of mainstream pornography?’ I will conclude how I think these analyses provide answers. More to this, I will argue how Lust's work ties in with the pornographic debates in a feminist discourse and how Lust's work can be read as a contribution to and intervention in these debates, by stressing to what extent the narrative and visual strategies and the construction of spectatorship differ from conventional strategies in mainstream porn. Lastly, I will offer further considerations and suggestions for research, related to feminist pornography in terms of my original research goals.

While feminist film theory points towards the idea that pleasure in film depends on the objectification of a female character and the deployment of a sadistic male gaze, Lust resists such strategies in her film. Instead, she plays with the notions of looking and showing, while constantly insisting, both narratively and visually, on the performative nature of pornography. By twisting around the conventions of mainstream pornography, her film forces the see-er and what is seen to take up radically different positions than they do in mainstream pornography. Lust's goal with this film is to uncover the individuality of each recorded person, presenting the body as a whole, while also emphasizing that while they are shown in a practice meant to excite, they experience feelings and pleasure themselves, resulting in a presentation of subjects, not objects. She shows the naturalness, the truthfulness and the beauty of sexual female exploration to challenge the counterfeiting that is generally featured in mainstream pornography. This film by Lust is an investment in the representation of the sexuality of women. Her work bears witness to the difficulty in bringing women's sexuality to the fore in the context of the dominant, phallogentric thinking about sexuality, as is also the way feminist debates around pornography and feminist film theory are constructed. Lust shows that it is difficult to find the space to talk about women's sexuality in the language of the



patriarchal sexual discourse, but it can rather can be accomplished by seeing and showing. It is the stakes of Lust's guts that take a critical approach to the oversimplified representations of sexuality based on gender in mainstream pornography, by offering alternative representation of the female body, female pleasure and sexual interaction.

In terms of the modern pornographic debates, Lust wants to create pornography that is non-sexist, by providing, to a certain extent, a 'powerless' or 'genderless' gaze, while also putting female sexuality at the center stage. Thus, her answer to the problem of sexism in pornography is not to ban pornography, but to make pornography *balanced* in terms of power. However, in terms of spectatorship, to create a balanced subjectivity, she does not apply a gendered subjectivity at all. What this does for the experience of eroticism and the experience of arousal (as is pornography's most desired effect) may be a topic for a further inquiry in media or psychology studies.

I would like to conclude my thesis by stressing out one more aspect. Calling my approach 'feminist', I am aware that gender, sexuality and ethnicity are involved in this discourse. I am in the know about the fact that I formed my analysis around the core concepts of gender and sexuality. The semiotic approach as well as the discursive approach has enabled me to see gender and sexuality as systems of meaning. For this research, I did not discuss race or ethnicity. As I consider pornography a critical visual media in the production of representations of race, gender and sexuality, I find it important to pay attention to the implications of representation at this level. For following research, I thereby suggest to include the exploration of the meaning of race, female blackness in particular, in pornography, and the power relations that are a stake within this.



Bibliography

- Dworkin, Andrea "Suffering and Speech" in Dworkin, Andrea and Catherine A. MacKinnon: *In Harm's Way: The Pornography Civil Rights Hearings*. Cambridge, Massachusetts/London: Harvard U.P. (1997)
- Ferguson, Ann "Sex War: The Debate between Radical and Libertarian Feminists" *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* (1984).
- Taromino, Tristan. "The Feminist Pornographer" Interview by Clark-Flory, Tracy accessed 13 april 2020 https://www.salon.com/test/2013/02/24/the_feminist_pornographer/
- Mulvey, Laura "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16.3 (1975)
- McCabe, Janet *Feminist Film Studies: Writing the Woman into Cinema*. London and New York: Wallflower, 2004.
- Neville, Lucy. "Male gays in the female gaze: women who watch m/m pornography" *Porn Studies*, no. 2 (2015).
- Paasonen, Susanna "Grains of Resonance: Affect, Pornography and Visual Sensation" *Somatechnics*. (2013)
- Swedberg, Deborah. "What Do We See When We See Woman/Woman Sex in Pornographic Movies." *NWSA Journal* 1, no. 4 (1989)
- Michel Foucault.. *The History of Sexuality*. Vol. 1: *An Introduction*, OKS Print. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978
- Kimmel, Michael *The sexual self: The construction of sexual scripts*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2007
- Bordwell, David Thompson, Kristin and Smit, Jeff. *Film Art An Introduction*. New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2017
- Lust, Erika www.erikalust.com accessed August 15, 2020.
- Lust, Erika "XConfessions by you & Erika Lust" accessed August 10, 2020 https://xconfessions.com/?utm_source=erikalust.com&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=top_menu
- Williams, Linda *Hard core: power, pleasure, and the "frenzy of the visible"* Berkeley: University of California Press. 1989
- Freedman, Estelle B and Thorne, Barrie "Introduction to "The Feminist Sexuality Debates"." *Signs* 10, (no. 1), (1984), 103