

# FEMINISM AND PORNOGRAPHY: FROM MAINSTREAM PORNOGRAPHY (HETERO-PATRIARCHAL) TO POST-PORN (NON BINARY)\*

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**Abstract:** Along with prostitution, and more recently surrogate motherhood, pornography has been a contentious issue within the feminist movement ever since the 1970s. Perceived by abolitionists as the prelude to rape, for pro-Sex feminists it represents an ideal vehicle for expressing desire for women and minority sexual identities, and has a considerable transformative capacity. The latter school of thought proposes a paradigm shift and has aligned itself with Queer Theory, which advocates a non-binary approach to sexual identities through Post-porn. This study critically analyses the main arguments put forward by feminism in the field of pornography: women's rights and the principle of no-harm.

**Keywords:** Abolitionist feminism, pro-sex feminism, mainstream pornography, queer theory, post-porn.

**Summary:** 1. INTRODUCTION: THE DEBATE ABOUT PORNOGRAPHY WITHIN THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT. 2. THE ABOLITIONIST FEMINIST ARGUMENT: PORNOGRAPHY "HARMS" ALL WOMEN. 2.1. The arguments by Dworkin and MacKinnon. 3. PRO-SEX FEMINISM: IF MAINSTREAM PORN IS SEXIST, LET'S MAKE BETTER PORN. 3.1. Brief notes about Queer Theory. 4. FEMINIST PORN AND POST-PORN. 5. CONCLUSIONS.

## 1. INTRODUCTION: THE DEBATE ABOUT PORNOGRAPHY WITHIN THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT

Arguably, from a legal point of view, feminism has never been very interested in studying the scope and limits of freedom of expression, compared with the attention it has paid to other issues of legal-constitutional relevance such as rights to equality, privacy or reproductive freedoms. A significant exception to this can be found in the fields of sexual "speech" and pornography.

Although sexual expression has always been present in art, it was not until the late 1970s that the production and distribution of pornographic films developed on a large scale. These were the times of "sexual liberation" and the so-called "Golden Age of Porn" (1969-1984), and there is no doubt that films such as Gerard Damiano's *Deep Throat* or the Mitchell brothers' *Behind the Green Door* (1972) played a remarkable counter-cultural and therefore political role in their particular representation of explicit sex and female pleasure.

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\*Article published as part of the Grant I+D+i (PID2019-107025RB-I00) Sexed citizenship and non-binary identities: from non discrimination to citizenship integration (Binasex), funded by MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033.

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From the mid-1980s onwards, the emergence of video consolidated porn as a mass phenomenon and gave rise to a heated debate within the feminist movement which is still going on today (Prada 2010: 7-26). It created a schism which has not yet been resolved and, if anything, has worsened in recent decades, since the mainstream pornographic dialogue has evolved to encompass increasingly degrading and violent narratives about women.

This divide pits the irreconcilable positions of so-called abolitionist feminists against those who espouse a pro-sex or sex-positive approach. While for the former pornography is nothing more than the visual embodiment of patriarchy and violence against women, the latter see it as a potential vehicle for channeling the erotic expression of women and sexual minorities, and thus as a mechanism for their sexual liberation.

This study offers a critical analysis of the arguments used by the two main feminist philosophies in relation to pornography: the rights of women and sexual minorities, and the no-harm principle.

## **2. THE ABOLITIONIST FEMINIST ARGUMENT: PORNOGRAPHY “HARMS” ALL WOMEN**

The feminist anti-pornography movement emerged during the second half of the 1970s with feminists such as Catharine MacKinnon, Andrea Dworkin, Robin Morgan, Susan Brownmiller, Gloria Steinem and Kathleen Barry, amongst others. Mainly identifying with so-called “radical feminism”, they operated under an umbrella organisation known as *Women Against Pornography* (WAP), founded in the United States in 1979.

Radical feminism is a perspective within the broader feminist movement which argues that the root cause of social inequality is patriarchy, defined as the system of male oppression of women. It calls for a radical reordering of society in which male supremacy is eliminated in all social and economic contexts, whilst recognising that women’s experiences are also affected by other social divisions such as race, class and sexual orientation (Álvarez, Sánchez, Beltrán, Maquieira 2001: 22).

In contrast to more conservative political points of view, which have always based their rejection of pornography on its intrinsic immorality, anti-pornography feminists frame the issue in terms of “harm to women”. From their perspective, there is nothing objectionable about the fact that sexual expression pursues and/or produces sexual arousal, or that it is offensive to communal morality: it is harmful because it is a potent mechanism for perpetuating sexism and violence against women through the stereotyping of bodies, the sexual objectification of women, and the androcentric construction of sex. Furthermore, it plays a clear role in maintaining a socio-political system in which women are second-class citizens.

The position of anti-porn feminism postulates a direct correlation between pornography consumption and the increase in violence against women, based on the

*monkey see-monkey do* thesis, according to which pornography inevitably engenders a violent and degrading attitude towards women. The essential premise of these authors is that “pornography is not representative but performative” (Fernández Gonzalo 2014: 25). This points directly to the socio-cultural functionality of porn, which acts as a guarantor of gender differences and a “hetero-patriarchal” and “hetero-normative” system. Its role is therefore not to show a reality, but to construct and monetize it (Calles Hidalgo 2018).

In her famous 1988 work *The Sexual Contract*, the British political theorist Carole Pateman offered a gendered interpretation of the Rousseauian “Social Contract” theory, arguing that there is a sexual contract prior to the social contract, as a result of which the sexual rights of men supercede those of women. Pateman analyses the principle of universal freedom, which supposedly forms the basis of the social contract, and questions precisely its universal character. She argues that it is only men who enjoy this freedom while women are deprived of it and are thus subject to male will. According to her, pornography is one of the instruments of perpetuation of this contract because it is a political practice of domination. Pornography is the theory, she says, and men learn from it, putting it into practice in rape and other forms of aggression against women.

In the same vein, in her book *Female Sexual Slavery*, the American author Kathleen Barry, another renowned anti-pornography sociologist, developed the theory of “sexual slavery”, according to which pornography is the graphic description of what men demand from women, a political act of domination and subordination (1988: 174). Between masters and slaves there can be no common ground for sexual play and pleasure. Domination equals violence; violence equals sex. Therefore, the most extreme consequence of pornography is rape. Barry speaks of an “ideology of cultural sadism”, with pornography playing an important role in reinforcing practices which encourage and support sexual violence, thereby normalising it as an activity (1988: 215).

The connection between pornography and rape was also examined by the American journalist Susan Brownmiller in her book *Against our Will: Men, Women and Rape*. In it, she characterises rape not as an irrational or passionate act, but as an expression of power, which is essentially political in nature and is used to control women through fear and as a “weapon of war”. Pornography could incite men to move from latent intimidation to actual aggression, and represents the pure essence of propaganda against women: “Pornography, like rape, is a male invention, designed to dehumanize women, to reduce the female to an object of sexual access, not to free sensuality from moralistic or parental inhibition” (Brownmiller 1975: 394).

More recently, Prada has argued that pornography shapes sexual behaviour and preferences to the extent that it can construct sexual reality and actual sexual desire by portraying male power over women, and thereby perpetuating this relationship. He suggests that “pornography offers female humiliation as a key element of arousal, exalting this model as desirable and turning the inequality between men and women into something sexually exciting” (2010: 11).

In Spain, traditional feminist theorists such as Valcárcel and De Quirós, have also positioned themselves against pornography, characterising it as a representation which degrades women (1991). More recently the sociologist and abolitionist feminist theorist Rosa Cobo has argued that the core of the pornographic ethos lies in the fact that men understand sexual relations in terms violence, whereas women end up being the recipients of this aggression and accept it as if it were part of men's sexual nature. She also emphasises the socialising role of pornography, equating it with advertising (2020).

In short, feminist anti-pornographic theorists perceive pornography as inherently oppressive and degrading to women, and any form of use or representation of their bodies as objectification at the hands of male desire.

### **2.1. The arguments by Dworkin and MacKinnon**

Undoubtedly, the two most prominent authors of anti-pornography feminism are the activist Andrea Dworkin and the lawyer Catharine MacKinnon. They are both indispensable references in the feminist debate on the prohibition of pornography. These authors go a step further than their fellow writers: if for example Langton's thesis is that pornography is a form of expression which represents or depicts the subordination of women, MacKinnon and Dworkin argue that pornography actually causes the subordination of women.

Dworkin, a radical feminist American writer and activist, believes that men are essentially violent beings, so their sexuality is bound to be violent too. In the existing patriarchal social order we live in they learn from childhood to dehumanise and objectify women through violence. In contrast, female sexuality is non-aggressive, sensitive and based on bonds of solidarity and mutual support.

In *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1981), her key work on the subject, Dworkin outlines the principles of power attributed to the male gender which perpetuate present-day sexual dynamics, chronically violating the dignity of women and thereby dehumanising them. Men's aggressive sexual tendencies form the basis for the imposition of power, perceived as an innate masculine characteristic, which justifies and indeed demands their dominance and leads to women's submission. The phenomenon which demonstrates the male position of natural dominance par excellence is "coitus", a form of possession in which the man inhabits or rather "conquers" the woman's body through penetration. In the same vein, other radical feminists have argued that what men call sex is in fact a mixture, to varying degrees, of antagonism and violence, so there is no difference between mutually consensual intercourse and rape. From this perspective the two terms are synonymous (Carter 1981).

Moreover, abolitionist feminists consider all sexual relations within a patriarchal society to be inevitably degrading to women and tantamount to sexual violence. As Strossen points out (2005),

“the equivalence of all heterosexual relations and rape, which characterises feminist analyses against pornography, is exposed in particularly dramatic terms by Dworkin in her book *Intercourse* (1987, 13), where she affirms that the meaning expressed by sexual relations is that women are made psychologically inferior. Dworkin wants to show that physical invasions of a woman’s body, a physiological essential aspect of heterosexual genital coitus, inevitably implies the same type of submission and loss of freedom that happens when a country’s Armed Forces invade and occupy another. The political meaning attached to sexual relations for women is the fundamental question for feminism and freedom: can an occupied people, a physically occupied and internally invaded people, be free?”

It is evident that Dworkin takes the idea of violence being a key aspect of male sexuality to its logical conclusion. In her rendition, it is not only the lack of consent which characterises rape, but every heterosexual relationship is a form of rape, even if the woman believes she is participating in it voluntarily, because her will is conditioned by the systemic oppression to which she has been subjected. As such, consent is only apparently voluntary. In this respect, the American activist also argues that for men there is an inseparable link between violence and sexuality, which finds its cultural expression in pornography, where a woman’s “no” is merely an excuse for them to force and abuse her (1981: 89).

In this context, pornography is revealed as a portrayal of sexual politics, which by always reproducing the hierarchical roles of dominance and subordination is intrinsically a manifestation of gender inequality. Consequently, pornography is not merely a metaphor, nor simply an expression; it is a form of sexual reality in itself. It not only represents women in the role of objects for male sexual use, it actually turns them into such objects.

In the same vein, Catherine MacKinnon, an American legal scholar and radical feminist activist, argues that pornography is not an expression, but rather, an act of male supremacy (1993: 56). It is not simply something which represents the subordination of women but is the practice of subordination itself.

“Pornography is the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women, whether in pictures or in words, that also includes one or more of the following: (i) women are presented dehumanized as sexual objects, things or commodities; or (ii) women are presented as sexual objects who enjoy pain or humiliation; or (iii) women are presented as sexual objects who experience sexual pleasure in being raped; or (iv) women are presented as sexual objects tied up or cut up or mutilated or bruised or physically hurt; or (v) women are presented in postures of sexual submission, servility or display; or (vi) women’s body parts - including but not limited to vaginas, breasts, and buttocks- -are exhibited, such that women are reduced to those parts; or (vii) women are presented as whores by nature; or (viii) women

are presented being penetrated by objects or animals; or (ix) women are presented in scenarios of degradation, injury, torture, shown as filthy or inferior, bleeding, bruised, or hurt in a context that makes these conditions sexual” (MacKinnon and Posner 1996: 71-72).

Her attack on pornography is “part of a larger project that attempts to account for gender inequality in the socially constructed relationship between power -the political- on the one hand and knowledge of truth and reality - the epistemological- on the other” (1984: 325). Unlike traditional conservatives, who base their rejection on questions of morality, she attempts to justify the regulation of pornography on the basis of her own unique interpretation of the no-harm principle. For her, as the title of one of her articles clearly states, pornography “is not a moral issue” (1984). As such, she tries to move the debate on pornography from a question of morality into the realm of sexual politics.

MacKinnon is right to point out that obscenity laws understand pornography as a sin rather than a crime. She adds that it is morality which motivates state intrusion into the issue of pornography. This concept of morality however, based on the distinction between “good” and “evil”, does not respond to the gender inequality which pornography produces, but merely prohibits what the male worldview considers immoral. According to the author, obscenity laws deal with morality from the point of view of male dominance, while the feminist critique of pornography is based on the harm it causes to women.

Thus, she asserts that pornography causes two forms of harm. The first is that which happens to women who directly participate in the making of pornography; the second is the result of the fact that the subjects of violence are in fact all women in society, who are harmed as a direct consequence of the distribution of pornographic material. But MacKinnon also adds another reason to justify the legal prohibition of pornography, which is perhaps the most debatable of the three: pornography, she claims, actually “constructs” reality.

In terms of her first point, MacKinnon states that: “Women are known to be brutally coerced into pornographic performances” (1984: 339). The experiences documented during the filming of *Deep Throat* is the most cited example. As is well known, the actress in the film, Linda Lovelace, whom MacKinnon represented legally, published an autobiography, *Ordeal*, in 1980, in which she spoke of beatings and coercion, and revealed that she had not received a single dollar from the profits of the film, going so far as to say that “when you see *Deep Throat*, you are watching me being raped” (1980: 47). Actresses in porn films however are not the main focus of MacKinnon’s analysis.

The author is more deeply concerned with the second type of victim: literally each and every woman in society. MacKinnon argues that all women suffer direct sexual subjugation as a result of the distribution of sexually explicit books and films. She supports this thesis by referencing different studies which indicate changes in men’s attitudes as a consequence of pornography consumption, leading to an increase in the intention



to assault and even rape women. Thus, she criticises the fact that, unlike blackmail, bribery, conspiracy or sexual harassment, which in themselves constitute a crime, when it comes to pornography, the law limits itself to understanding such images as a mere “representation”, from which no causal relationship to harm inflicted on women can be established. From her perspective, the harm that pornography causes is a group harm, a harm to the collective of women, which it disempowers and dehumanizes. It defines them as subjects to be dominated, and as such, harms women, not one by one, but as members of the “group of women” as a whole (1995: 377).

In relation to her third argument, for MacKinnon, pornography becomes the truth about sex: “women bound, women battered, women tortured, women humiliated, women degraded and defiled, women killed” (1995: 138). Pornography transforms the inequality between men and women into something sexually exciting and portrays female humiliation as a key aspect of arousal. It does not distinguish between eroticism and subordination of women, but makes them appear as one and the same thing. Since everything which sexually excites men is considered to be sex, in pornography violence is sex, inequality is sex, humiliation is sex (1995: 384). As such, sexuality, and thus pornography as a representation of sexuality, is not only an area permeated by the gender structure, but is also the instrument through which gender is socially constructed.

Finally, the author maintains that the liberal argument for the protection of pornography in the private sphere, based on the grounds of free speech as established in the First Amendment of the American Constitution, actually protects men’s right to impose pornography on women in the private sphere (1995: 372). The implication is that men’s freedom of speech silences and censors women’s voices.

To sum up, feminist abolitionist theory understands pornography as representing a form of sexual subordination and violence which is implicit in patriarchal ideology. Both Dworkin and MacKinnon consider that apart from promoting a sexist interpretation of sexuality for women based on unthinking patriarchal ideology, pornographic material also justifies this through the myth of consent, according to which women would ask to be raped (MacKinnon 1995: 249-250). As a result, in their efforts to stop the proliferation of misogynistic and violent images in the mass media, both authors unwittingly aligned themselves with the most conservative sectors of society, by calling for the prohibition of porn through legal means (Malem Seña 1992). As opposed to traditional conservatives, however, abolitionist feminists argue that their criticism of pornography is not moral but political in nature, since pornography is the source of violent and discriminatory attitudes and behaviour which define the treatment and social position of half the population.

### **3. PRO-SEX FEMINISM: IF MAINSTREAM PORN IS SEXIST, LET’S MAKE BETTER PORN**

As is well known, the rise of pornography as a mass cultural phenomenon at the end of the 1970s coincided with a period of political struggle and protest against pre-existing

sexual and gender models. In contrast to the abolitionist positions of more traditional feminism, the pro-sex feminist movement, also known as sex-positive, sex-radical or sexually liberal feminism, emerged in the United States in the early 1980s as a movement which fought for free sexuality as an essential component of women's liberation and led to the formation of the *Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce* (FACT). If the abolitionist *Women Against Pornography* (WAP) had associated itself with conservative forces to try to push through its initiatives, FACT approached the issue differently, allying itself with groups of publishers, the media, artists and civil rights advocates, with a view to ensuring that abolitionist arguments did not become part of legislation.

From their perspective, anti-pornography feminism is “hetero-normative” and “hetero-sexist”, because it treats heterosexuality as the normative standard by which all sexuality is judged. In contrast, pro-sex feminist activists understand pornography as an instrument which potentially has a significant transformative and empowering capacity for both women and minority sexual identities.

In their view, the position of the anti-pornography movement has sought to reduce the question of female pleasure to the exclusive analysis of women as victims. As Vance points out:

“Sexuality is simultaneously a domain of restriction, repression, and danger as well as a domain of exploration, pleasure, and agency. To focus only on pleasure and gratification ignores the patriarchal structure in which women act, yet to speak only of sexual violence and oppression ignores women's experience with sexual agency and choice and unwittingly increases the sexual terror and despair in which women live” (Vance 1982: 38).

And, as Lucía Egaña explains in *Trincheras de carne. Una visión localizada de las prácticas post-pornográficas en Barcelona* (2015, 86):

“These tendencies find echoes in the Reagan administration of the 1980s, and in fact complicate the status of pornography by considering it to be a rape in itself, rather than a consequence of a male-dominated system in which pornography is just one of thousands of representations with which it seeks to perpetuate itself. Therefore, along with the outright renunciation of pornography, the abolitionist feminist perspective refutes the idea that female desire can be represented. At no point is there any question of appropriating the means of representation, but simply of censoring it”.

Just as they still do today, the pro-sex feminists of the 1980s argued for the right to experiment with porn to discover forbidden avenues for female sexuality, emphasising the need for a fundamental change of approach. Gayle Rubin, Carol Vance, Alice Echols and Patrick Califia were some of its main proponents (Burstyn 1985), and they were joined by queer theorists such as June Fernández, Paul B. Preciado and Judith Butler. In Spain, as from 1983, anti-censorship feminism was embodied by authors such as



Raquel Osborne (1981), who denounced the New Right's appropriation of some of the approaches and initiatives of the anti-pornography movement, which had resulted in women as a whole losing some of the ground they had fought so hard for during many years of struggle.

It is important to bear in mind that the so-called *PornYes* movement does not deny that mainstream pornography depicts sexual activities and gender roles in a sexist way, and that it ignores and devalues women's experiences and desires. It believes, however, that this reality does not justify the rejection of pornography *per se*. In the words of Rubin: "The sex industry is hardly a feminist utopia. It reflects the sexism that exists in the society as a whole. We need to analyse and oppose the manifestations of gender inequality specific to the sex industry. But this is not the same as attempting to wipe out commercial sex" (1989: 14).

As porn actress and activist Annie Sprinkle famously commented, "the answer to bad porn is not to ban porn altogether, but to make better porn" so as to break down typical stereotypes and prejudices associated with both porn and the traditional view of sexuality itself. Therefore, "the best way to fight the dominant, hetero-patriarchal, phallogocentric model of pornography which subscribes to a binary concept of the body, is to create our own porn - Do It Yourself: DIY Porn -" (Salanova 2015: 215). As such, these authors propose constructing a theory of sexuality not simply focusing on danger and guilt, but also on pleasure. Thus, for them, sexual liberation continues to be the key goal of the feminist movement, and they dispute the idea that pornography is the overriding cause of violence against women.

### 3.1. Brief notes about Queer Theory

The term "queer theory" was coined by Teresa de Lauretis in an article published in the summer of 1991 in the journal *Differences*. It was entitled "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities", and in it the author put forward the argument that gay and lesbian studies were in need of critical reflection in order to address the existing differences within the gay and feminist communities (Ortega Ruíz 2009: 42).

In the interview by Gallagher and Wilson entitled "Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity" (1982), Michel Foucault says:

"Well, if identity is only a game, if it is only a procedure to have relations, social and sexual-pleasure relationships that create new friendships, it is useful. But if identity becomes the problem of sexual existence, and if people think that they have to "uncover" their "own identity," and that their own identity has to become the law, the principle, the code of their existence; if the perennial question they ask is "Does this thing conform to my identity?" then, I think, they will turn back to a kind of ethics very close to the old heterosexual virility. If we are asked to relate to the question of identity, it must be an identity to our unique selves. But the relationships we have to have

with ourselves are not ones of identity, rather, they must be relationships of differentiation, of creation, of innovation. To be the same is really boring. We must not exclude identity if people find their pleasure through this identity, but we must not think of this identity as an ethical universal rule”.

One of the most influential feminists in the field of Queer Theory is Judith Butler, who together with other authors such as Donna Haraway and Teresa de Lauretis caused a serious epistemological upheaval on the notion of gender, sexuality and sexual diversity.

Butler questions the essence of identity categories and suggests that they are a culturally produced concept, both politically and theoretically. Her main thesis is based on considering gender and identity in terms of performativity: she proposes the definition of gender as performance. In *Gender Trouble*, the author builds on Foucault’s idea that there is no such thing as biological sex and recognizable gender, because bodies are a cultural construct; there is no such thing as “natural” sex, because approaches to sex are always mediated by culture and language. By arguing this she questions the whole system of sex/gender (Butler 1990). As such, gender is produced as a ritualised repetition of conventions which are socially imposed thanks to prescriptive and hegemonic heterosexuality (Nazareno Saxe 2015).

It is in an attempt to break with the binary idea of gender that the new identities, known as “queer”, emerge, and they question the hetero-normative law of sexuality. These ideas have led to the *Countersexual Manifesto*, a groundbreaking ideological position which locates biological sex itself as the main instrument of domination, and therefore constrains the possibilities offered by gender subjectivities:

“The sexual organ is not a precise biological site, nor is the practice of sex a natural drive. Sex is a mechanism of hetero-social domination which reduces the body to erogenous zones according to an asymmetrical distribution of power between the genders (feminine/masculine), in which certain emotions coincide with certain organs and certain sensations with certain physical reactions”. (Preciado 2011: 17).

For her part De Lauretis (1987: 1-165), defines the concept of gender as the social construct of women and men and the semiotic production of subjectivity. Gender is shaped by history, practices and the interweaving of meaning and experience, that is, by the mutually constitutive semiotic interaction of the external world of social reality with the internal world of subjectivity.

In general terms, queer theory proposes the need to de-naturalise gender, identity and even sex, as all social identities are equally anomalous, whilst at the same time rejecting the classification of individuals into universal categories such as “man”, “woman”, “homosexual”, or “heterosexual”, since these hide a huge number of cultural variations, none of which would be more fundamental or natural than another (Herrera 2011). It considers, therefore, that diverse identities can be strategically adopted and should be

conceived as being changeable, under continuous construction, and without limitations. In short, the queer movement rejects standardisation and any notion of identity which is articulated in essentialist terms. Proponents suggest that binary differences of gender or sex do not exist because there are a multitude of differences.

#### 4. FEMINIST PORN AND POST-PORN

On this basis, the debate around pornography has gradually changed in recent decades. Although the pornographic industry which advocates the patriarchal model of sexuality continues to be hegemonic –mainstream pornography–, other approaches to porn which go against the norm and offer alternative models such as “feminist porn” or “post-porn” are increasingly evident. The precedent for both can be found as long ago as 1984, when Candida Royalle founded *Femme Productions*, the first film production company which tried to create pornography from a “feminine” point of view, focusing on women’s pleasure, and paying more attention to the quality of scripts and production values (Taormino et al 2016). This was the birth of so-called “porn for women”, the aim of which was twofold: first, to make female sexual desire visible and, second, to recognise a space for women as consumers of pornography.

Spanish filmmaker Erika Lust works in this genre. As head of the production company *Lust Films*, she is an advocate for, and producer of, pornography which aims to offer a dialogue based on non-violence and equality, where women also have a role as active consumers. According to Lust: “Pornography, like all artistic and cultural expression, has a discourse. In the case of pornography, this discourse can be approached from a feminist perspective. If women do not participate in the discourse of pornography as creators, porn will only express what men think about sex. We must participate to explain what we are like, what our sexuality is like and how we experience sex. If we only let men do it, we will always continue to be represented in porn as their male fantasy sees us: whores, Lolitas, nymphomaniacs, etc.” “It is necessary to be part of porn in order to create a space where all sexualities and gender identities are represented. (2008: 49).

However, this model soon came to be criticised for perpetuating gender clichés. In the words of María Llopis, “the category ‘porn for women’ has tended to be associated with softcore, tenderness and romanticism, reproducing sexist stereotypes which typify and restrict women’s sexuality” (2010: 72). Or, as Romina Smiraglia says: “Upholding the category of ‘porn for women’ is problematic, because it inevitably reinforces – consciously or unconsciously – a stereotype of what should give women pleasure as opposed to men”. (2012:16).

Consequently, during the 1990s, new approaches began to appear which were more clearly detached from the conventional canons of the pornographic industry. It was with the turn of the century that these new voices made evident their identification with feminism and began to categorise their productions by using the term “feminist porn”. According to the theoretical conceptualisation of authors such as Taormino, Penley, Shimizu and

Miller-Young, in their book *Porno feminista. Las políticas de producir placer*, a feminist pornographic artefact is one that “uses sexually-explicit images to question dominant representations of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, ability, age, body type and other markers of identity. It is a form of pornography which offers a true plurality of sexualities, and which translates into portraying a variety of bodies, desires, practices and sexual identities beyond those defined by hetero-normativity, homo-normativity, aesthetic norms and gendered sexual roles” (2016: 10).

This genre creates alternative images and develops its own aesthetics and iconographies, incorporating elements of the genres that preceded it – porn for women, for couples or lesbian porn – and opening itself up to the possibility of rethinking and reformulating pornographic content through artistic and experimental creation. As such, feminist porn focuses on: challenging stereotypes about the way pornography is made and consumed, and the creators/consumers themselves; taking control of the production of pornography; making and promoting women’s pleasure-centred pornography; demystifying and de-stigmatising pornography for female consumers; and promoting sex positivity by emphasising the educational uses of pornography. Moreover, as opposed to the ideal of beauty depicted in hegemonic pornography, feminist pornography depicts non-stereotypical female bodies of all ages, which are not only represented but also eroticised. Its productions are also concerned with guaranteeing decent employment conditions for all workers by aiming to create a fair, safe, ethical and fully consensual working environment.

In addition to “feminist porn”, alternative 21<sup>st</sup> century pornography also includes the “post-porn” genre, closely linked to the queer movement and the philosophical theory that underpins it. This approach has its roots in the French post-structuralist philosophy of Foucault and Derrida, and its subsequent adaptation to the North American context by authors such as Butler and her revision of the concept of “performativity”.

It could be said that post-pornography has emerged as a political and artistic movement which seeks to reappropriate the pornographic image so as to make visible other identities, bodies, practices and sexual pleasures, going beyond the male heterosexual spectrum which has historically dominated mass-consumption pornography.

The term post-pornography is considered to have been coined by the photographer Wink van Kempen in the 1980s, who used the expression to refer to sexually explicit creations the aim of which is not masturbatory but parodic or critical (Llopis 2010: 22). The term was adopted and popularised in 1989 by the former mainstream pornographic industry actress Annie Sprinkle, with her *Public Cervix Announcement*, a performance in which she invited spectators to look inside her vagina using a speculum and a torch, with the aim of parodying the myths and mystery which have surrounded women’s genitalia (Romero Baamonde 2019: 423). Between 1989 and 1996 Annie Sprinkle developed her well-known work, *Post Porn Modernist*, which presented her autobiographical evolution through multimedia performances, where she played with pornographic imagery

by mocking clichés and the traditional pornographic aesthetic itself, whilst trying to show how pornography could play a fundamental role in the reconfiguration of sex and sexuality.

Meanwhile, the writings of Paul B. Preciado, Itziar Ziga, Virginie Despentes and María Llopis evoke the insurrection of bodies, the construction of alternative forms of pleasure and the reappropriation of the technologies of production of sexuality and bodily experimentation, whilst proposing an alternative way of constructing desire and pleasure.

*King Kong Theory*, by French writer and filmmaker Virginie Despentes, published by Random House in 2007, is a significant point of reference for the post-porn movement. In it she states that: “in Judeo-Christian morality we have been told more than enough that it is better to be taken by force than to be taken for a slut. There is a feminine predisposition to masochism that does not come from our hormones, or the times of the cave-dwellers, but from a precise cultural system, and that has disturbing implications for the control we can take over our independence. Being voluptuous and exciting is also detrimental: being attracted to what destroys us always keeps us away from power” (2007: 44).

The art critic and independent curator Marisol Salanova, offers the following definition: “post-porn is an artistic movement which aims to generate a different pornography by using sexual imagery in which peripheral and dissident sexualities which are marginalised by hetero-normativity and classic porn have a place”. Post-pornography involves a radical inversion of the subject of pleasure: it is now women and minorities who reappropriate the pornographic dialogue and demand other representations and other pleasures (2015: 51).

For his part, Paul B. Preciado defines post-porn as “the effect of becoming a subject for those bodies and subjectivities that until now have only been contemptible objects of pornographic representation: women, sexual minorities, non-white or disabled bodies, transsexuals, intersexuals and transgender people. In post-porn, those ignored by hegemonic porn or used to represent other people’s fantasies, often in a denigrating way, take the reins, filming or performing themselves to express their sexuality, and becoming protagonists with a script of their own choosing”.

In Spain, post-porn gained momentum at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a key moment being the 2008 Congress entitled *Feminismo Porno Punk*. It was organised by the aforementioned queer theorist Paul B. Preciado (formerly known as Beatriz Preciado), whose 2000 *Countersexual Manifesto* has been a key text for studies on post-pornography, transgender and queerness, and for whom post-pornography is a political platform for sexual dissidence. A number of prominent international figures took part in the Congress. These included the trans photographer Del Lagrace Volcano, the filmmaker Tristan Taormino and Sprinkle herself, all of whom attended alongside Spanish artists and activists such as *las Post-Op*, and *Diana Pornoterrorista*, as well as María Llopis and Águeda Bañón, with their project *Girls who like porno*.



The “performativity” which Judith Butler advocates is embodied in aspects of contemporary art in general, and post-pornographic art in particular. She explores the relationship between body and discourse and the idea of performance and repetition, which she defines as performativity, i.e, as the “reiterated action of materialization of sexed bodies”. She stresses that the presentation of gender through established behaviour, citation and reiteration, shows that bodies do not constitute the boundary of nature and culture as assumed by normative discourse, but that sexual difference is produced through the performativity of gender (1990: 57-58).

In terms of perceiving the body as the central axis of performance theory and practice, artists such as Marina Abramovic, Regina Fíz, Diana J. Torres, Valerie Solanas, Angélica Lidell and Catherine Opie question sexual and gender categories by using their own bodies. The person carrying out the performance sees themselves as different from an actress/actor in that they speak, act and move in their own name, rather than embodying a character. They perform their own being as opposed to being an actress/actor who plays the role of another person.

Thus, post-pornographic expression makes use of methods such as performance – or action art–, video, photography, writing and drawing, in a stark exhibition of sexuality. In this way it punctures hegemonic sexual imagery and binary constructions of gender and sex, giving visibility to the exchange of roles, the eroticisation of different parts of the body, and identities and practices which are excluded from conventional and industrial flows of desire. In doing so, post-pornography disrupts what is traditionally considered beautiful, desirable and/or acceptable in a sexual context, just as postmodernism did in its day in the artistic context. Moreover, it transgresses bodily, aesthetic and gender normativities. In Preciado’s words:

“Post porn is not an aesthetic, but a collection of experimental productions which arise from movements supporting the political-visual empowerment of sexual minorities: the outcasts of the pharmaco-pornographic system (bodies working in the sex industry, whores and porn actors and actresses, nonconformist women from the heterosexual system, transgender bodies, lesbians, bodies with functional or psychic diversity...) thus demand the use of audiovisual devices for the portrayal of sexuality (2011: 37).

The search for pleasure, control and possession of one’s own body, together with the obligation to reaffirm one’s own individual identity, become a weapon against a system which uses sex as an instrument of domination and alienation - a weapon which is channelled and expressed through art and perceives bodies as political, as having a purpose: to demystify “moral issues which are strongly rooted in the mentalities of society (such as female sexual submission, the myth of virginity or masturbation)” (Ferré Baldrich 2018: 258). Post-porn distorts traditional power relations and uses pornography both as an essential battlefield to make certain identities and sexualities visible, and as a political platform to fight against existing hegemonies. Post-pornography therefore involves “the application of pro-sex feminism to the visual representation of non-normative sexualities” (Moreno Hernández and Maribel Domènech Ibáñez 2010).

Unlike mainstream porn, post-porn is both artistic and subversive, two essential values traditionally linked to sexually explicit discourse. This is especially relevant from a legal and constitutional perspective because, as well as featuring unquestionably artistic resources in its creations, post-porn has a clear political and countercultural objective: to question the hegemonic perspective of sexuality and sexual expression, and to vindicate the role of minorities. All the above returns explicit sexual discourse –“post pornographic”– to an area of creativity it should never have left, i.e. to the realm of freedom of artistic expression.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The confrontation between abolitionist feminists and so-called pro-sex feminists over the issue of pornography seems to be intensifying. Yet a closer look at it reveals, in my opinion, that it lacks substantive arguments to support it. Among the denunciations and demands of the former, it is common to find phrases such as: “This 8M, feminism has to focus on the barbarism of prostitution and pornography” (Rosa Cobo’s Twitter account of 6 February 2022). Such messages offer but simple reflections, which stem from the assumption that “porn is bad” *per se*, and fail to acknowledge complex issues such as the sexual trafficking of women, the non-consensual dissemination of sexually explicit material, prostitution and pornography in general, due to their lack of distinctions or nuances.

As we have seen, we can divide pornography into two types: mainstream pornography, which represents sexuality from clearly sexist and misogynist narratives, in which violence against women is normalised and eroticised; and pornography which promotes gender equality, intimacy, diversity, express consent, safety, pleasure and free sexual exploration through representations made with ethical values. The opposition to mainstream pornography is not a position exclusive to abolitionists; quite the contrary. What happens is that pro-sex feminists reject abstentionism and prohibition, advocating instead for the active participation of women and new sexual and gender identities in the creation, representation and consumption of pornographic discourses which challenge stereotypes and question the use of sex as an instrument of domination and alienation.

It is in this sense that, in my opinion, feminist confrontations around the issue of pornography are, in and of themselves, groundless. We need to move away from “pro-porn” or “anti-porn” arguments, as we need to move away from confrontations that are essentialising in nature. Instead, we to enable a serious public debate on gender identities that enables the process of gender equalisation. The whole question of pornography must be part of that debate.

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Received: November, 11<sup>th</sup> 2021

Accepted: February, 10<sup>th</sup> 2022

