Pornography and the Erotic Phantasmagoria

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Abstract
Susan Sontag, in her classic 1967 essay, “The Pornographic Imagination,” argued: “Tamed as it may be, sexuality remains one of the demonic forces in human consciousness …. “In the last half-century, Sontag’s demonic force of sexuality has transformed pornography and the “pornographic imagination”—let along social relations between women and men. In this essay, I adopt Walter Benjamin’s concept of phantasmagoria—a magic-lantern show of optical illusions, rapidly changing size and blending into one another—as the metaphoric commodity form of post-modern capitalist society, fetishism-on-display. I examine the evolution of technological forms of pornographic representation over the last two centuries, including the magic-lantern, daguerreotype, photography, stereoscope and film as well as the internet, erotic toys, electronic devises, VR and sex robots. These developments are set against a background of equally profound legal and cultural developments that have recast the sexuality of postmodern America. I argue that these (and other) developments have recast patriarchy and, in some important ways, the sexual relations between “consenting” adults. I conclude reflecting on the current intellectual and political debate about pornography between “pro-sex” and “anti-sex” feminists. With the enormous increase in the production and availability of pornography, I ask, perhaps “quantity” can give way to improved “quality”? I ask whether today’s sexual phantasmagoria can fashion a “new” feminist sexuality—and a more humane pornography?

Keywords Pornography · Erotic representation · Susan Sontag · Phantasmagoria
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Introduction

The U.S. is an electrically mediated culture and has been so for more than a century. Postmodern media technologies are completing the conversion from an “analog” to a “digital” communications culture, from modulating wave signals to one of an endless streaming series of 1 s and 0 s. Where the telegraph and telephone distinguished nineteenth and early-twentieth century electronic culture, the electronic digital signal—whether distribute over a wire, wirelessly or on a disc—distinguish postmodern, twenty-first century society. Claudia Springer, in Electronic Eros: Bodies and Desire in the Postindustrial Age, identifies perhaps the strongest appeal of the electronic media. Electronic technology, she argues, “is erotic because it makes possible escape from both the confines of the body and the boundaries that separated organic from inorganic matter.”

Over the last few decades, sex became a mainstream business and technological innovations were increasingly applied to this unique commodity, be it in terms of porn, erotic toys, fetish wear, prosthetic devices or body augmentation to say nothing of fashion and advertising. Each sector came to embody the latest developments in computer technology as well as the creative capabilities of IT pros, be they filmmakers, videogame makers, computer programmers, product engineers, artists, fashion designers or plastic surgeons. A new postmodern sexual culture was forged.

Digital interactive technologies spawn new, nonlinear forms of erotic media experiences, profoundly transforming personal engagement whether it be private or social (with one or more others). Today, a relatively anonymous internet with near-instantaneous connectivity increasingly facilitates historically new forms of erotic engagement. Sophisticated computer graphics are being enhanced with voice-recognition, eye-tracking and natural-language processing, along with machine-learning artificial intelligence (AI), to radical transform story structure by, for example, offering multiple plot lines and perspectives as well as varied—nearly innumerable—erotic experiences.

Virtual Reality [VR] porn and sex robots are but two popular postmodern porn media experiences. VR technology, especially immersive porn, seeks to merge the body and fantasy, physicality with imagination, thus fashioning a sexuality that reduces—if not eliminates—the need, let alone desire, for a true sexual partner, an actual living other. Sex robots are replacing their old-fashion blow-up counterparts with a silicon skin that is warm to the touch, customized eye color and nipple shape, AI responses like shyness and the ability to speak. Like some bad sci-fi flick, the “real” sexual-other may become an artistic memory of a world that was once but never more. Welcome to the twenty-first century’s erotic phantasmagoria.

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1 Springer (1996).
A half-century ago, Herbert Marcuse identified future-sex as a form of “repressive desublimation.” The more sex is integrated into the market economy, the less it functions as a subversive force of personal and social change. In his 1964 reflection, One-Dimensional Man, he worried, “in this society, the productive apparatus tends to become totalitarian to the extent to which it determines not only the socially needed occupations, skills, and attitudes, but also individual needs and aspirations.” He goes on to identify an inherent tendency of capitalism, “it thus obliterates the opposition between the private and public existence, between individual and social needs. Technology serves to institute new, more effective, and more pleasant forms of social control and social cohesion.” And nothing achieves this more that postmodern erotic technologies.

In a 1967 Partisan Review essay, Susan Sontag introduced the concept, “the pornographic imagination.” She wrote, “Tamed as it may be, sexuality remains one of the demonic forces in human consciousness ….” One of the ways this demonic force is realized in Western society is through what is categorized as pornography. While speaking mostly of literature, she distinguished pornography from conventional literature in that it seeks to sexual arouse the reader. “Some certified masterpieces (from Chaucer to Lawrence),” she observed, “contain passages that do properly excite readers sexually.”

Sontag’s article appeared 3 years after Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart famously declared, in Jacobellis v. Ohio (1964), “I know it when I see it,” to distinguish “hard” from “soft” core pornography, obscenity from art. In the half-century since Marcuse’s and Sontag’s essays appeared—and Justice Stewart made his declaration—pornography has come to saturate popular culture, redefining sexual life.

The Erotic Phantasmagoria

According to the OED, the term “phantasmagoria” emerged in the “[e]arly nineteenth century (originally the name of a London exhibition (1802) of optical illusions produced chiefly by magic lantern): probably from French fantasmagorie, from fantasme ’phantasm’ + a fanciful suffix.” The notion of the phantasmagoria, however, took on its modern, if not postmodern, meaning as it was adapted, first, by Karl Marx and, then, by Walter Benjamin. As Susan Buck-Morss discusses in The Dialectics of Seeing, “Marx had used the term ‘phantasmagoria’ to refer to the deceptive appearances of commodities as ‘fetishes’ in the marketplace.” She then notes, “Benjamin describes the spectacle of Paris as a ‘phantasmagoria’—a magic-lantern show of optical illusions, rapidly changing size and blending into one another.” She adds:

2 Marcuse (1964; reprinted, 2002).
3 Jacobellis v. Ohio (1964).
4 Oxford English Dictionary; http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/phantasmagoria.
5 Buck-Morss (1989).
But for Benjamin, whose point of departure was a philosophy of historical experience rather than an economic analysis of capital, the key to the new urban phantasmagoria was not so much the commodity-in-the-market as a commodity-on-display, where exchange value no less than use value lost practical meaning, and purely representational value came to the fore.

“Everything desirable,” Buck-Morss argues, “from sex to social status, could be transformed into commodities as fetishes-on-display, that held the crowd enthralled even when personal possessions was far beyond their reach.” Such is the dialectic phantasmagoria uniting the pornographic representation with the object of desire.

Today’s postmodern erotica was foreshadowed during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries by the “magic lantern” show. The lantern was a pre-electric device employing candlelight and a series of lenses and mirrors to project an image from a painted glass slide onto a screen. Its invention is attributed to two early media pioneers, the German Jesuit scholar, Athanasius Kircher, and the Dutch scientist, Christiaan Huygens. The media historian Tom Gunning notes that early magic lantern performances “took place in darkness—a radical difference from most theatrical entertainments of the era.” Traditionally, a public performance took place in a well-lit auditorium before a live audience. The magic lantern sought to invoke a different sensibility, one performed in a dark theatre and without a live performer. It sought to invoke the phantasy of magic that merged the rituals of mystical religion and what would come to be called “science fiction.” These were the days in which secular rationality—scientific reasoning—finally tipped the scale against religious doctrine. Nevertheless, as Mervyn Heard, a leading magic lantern scholar and practitioner, observed, “Science is behind all magic.”

Photography was invented during the magic-lantern era and extended the experience of the fantastic to still images be they in photos, magazines and other printed material. Perhaps most consequential, it extended the phantasmagoric from a public engagement to a private experience. Nearly all early-modern-era media—e.g., sculpture, painting, drawing, lithography, printed cards and books—long offered erotic representations. Benjamin noted that engraving and lithography were the first mechanical means of image capture and display, but they were techniques applied to natural substances like leather, wood and stone. He recognized that the photography engendered the aesthetic sensibility of the modern age, extending image reproduction from the natural to “man-made” or manufactured substances, specifically chemical-based processes. Photography introduced a new way to capture and display an—initially stationary—image, thus creating a new category of art … and artist, the photographer. It fashioned the modern aesthetic sensibility that John Berger called “ways of seeing” and, over the following two centuries, shaped the pornographic imagination.

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6 T. Gunning, “Illusions Past and Future: The Phantasmagoria and its Specters,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c526W9YONDQ.
7 Benjamin (1969).
8 “History of Virtual Reality,” Virtual Reality Site; http://www.vrs.org.uk/virtual-reality/history.html.
Steven Lubin speculates that "the first person to take a photograph was Joseph-Nicéphore Niepce, in 1824." In 1832, Louis Daguerre announced his innovative photographic process to the French Academy of Science and, in 1837 (after forming a partnership with Niepce), introduced an improved process using a copper plate coated with silver iodide. Another scholar, Steven Marcus, author of *The Other Victorians*, points out that "shortly thereafter [1832] a lively business in photographs of a sexual nature got under way." This launched the age of analog pornography. Joseph Slade believes that the first erotic photograph was introduced in 1846, "depicting a rather solemn man inserting his penis into the vagina of an equally solemn middle-aged woman."

The "vitascope" was a late-nineteenth century advanced technology, one of the earliest moving-image projection systems. William Heise’s classic vitascope film, *The Kiss*, which runs 16 to 51 s (depending on version), depicts a close-up of John Rice and May Irwin passionately kissing. It was first shown, projected onto a large screen, in 1896 at the Koster and Bials Music Hall in New York, at Broadway and 34th Street. The display of a larger-than-life sexual intimacy must have been thrilling, even overwhelming. Early movies must have felt like a cascade of images reinforcing the complexity, confusion and rawness of modern urban life. A newspaper critic of the day exclaimed: "Magnified to gargantuan proportions, it is absolutely disgusting. … Such things call for police intervention."

During the fin-de-siècle era, one of the earliest picture shows was *How Girls Undress*; it was displayed on a "mutoscope" system at a Chicago penny arcade and attracted many young boys. Movie theatres at that time were one of the few acceptable social spaces in which white men and women, often unchaperoned strangers, could share an intimate proximity and an exciting visual experience; African Americans were barred from early New York movie houses. Other than the saloon, the dance hall or church-sanctioned gathering, young men and women (excluding prostitutes) had few public venues in which to socialize let alone flirt, touch or kiss. "The very darkness of the room," warned the social reformer Jane Addams, "is an added attraction to many young people, for whom the space is filled with the glamour of love making."

In 1923, Kodak targeted a new market for its moving-image equipment, the amateur filmmaker, and introduced comparatively lower-cost 16 mm film equipment. Early porn film producers adopted the new technology and used it to circumvent federal Comstock laws prohibiting "obscene" materials from the U.S. mail. Amateur and semi-commercial pornographers screened "stag" films in noncommercial, semi-private venues operating throughout the country, at evening "smokers" or, as film historian Linda Williams calls them, "primitive genital shows." Often smuggled
into small towns by travelling salesmen, stags were shown at a variety of private venues where groups of men gathered, including Elk’s clubs, college fraternities, bachelor parties, military events and brothels.

In the post-WW-II era of the 1950s through 70s, a network of “adult” filmmakers flourished, seeding the ground for today’s porn culture. The initial group included Irving Klaw and Doris Wishman in New York and Russ Meyer in Los Angeles. The new sensibility they articulated was most notably expressed in Roger Vadim’s And God Created Woman released in 1956 that starred his wife, Brigitte Bardot; the opening shot displays Bardot’s eroticized derrière.\(^{17}\) The era reached its zenith with the opening of Gerard Damiano’s Deep Throat in June 1972 at the New World Theater in Times Square. It was a porn flick that one reviewer characterized as having “a plot …, and a coherent one to boot, with the actions of characters more or less plausibly motivated.”\(^{18}\) Another scrupulous critic noted, Deep Throat displayed “fifteen nonsimulated sexual acts, including seven of fellatio, four of cunnilingus … and others requiring more imagination.”\(^{19}\)

The opening of telephone voice services to commercial porn (i.e., #900 numbers) added an often-unappreciated dimension to the pornographic imagination—the human voice, live and/or prerecorded. In 1988, the Information Industry Bulletin estimated annual revenues for the dial-a-porn industry at $54 million; $129 million in 2021 dollars.\(^{20}\) That same year, the Associated Press (AP) reported that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) imposed a $50,000 fine on a Mill Valley, CA, firm for permitting underage youths to use its telephone porn service.\(^ {21}\)

The adoption of digital computer technologies in the ‘80s further transformed porn production and distribution. The digital camera and computer-based editing and graphics programs (e.g., Commodore’s Amiga for nongraphic edited used Andy Warhol in the 1980s) remade video production; the compact disc, the Internet and wireless communications revolutionized distribution. A new media culture was born and, with it, a new generation of the pornographic imagination.

The early adoption of a nongraphic internet led to the establishment of numerous online discussion groups, including Usenet and innumerable “alternative” groups, the most notorious was alt.sex. Usenet also hosted a wide variety of sex-related groups, including alt.sex.pictures, alt.sex.movies, alt.sex.voyeurism and alt. sex.masturbation. In the late-80s, the graphic artist Mike Saenz introduced “Virtual Valerie,” an interactive erotic computer game on a floppy disk and then a CD-ROM; it allowed the (male) user to repeatedly insert a dildo into Valerie’s vagina. In 1995, Danni Ashe, a former stripper and nude model, started “Danni’s Hard Drive,” one of the earliest online porn sites; CNN reported it had revenues of $6.5 million in 2000.\(^{22}\) Online and stored commercial porn as well as amateur sites like YouPorn

\(^{17}\) Rosen (2016).

\(^{19}\) Randall (1985).

\(^{20}\) CPI Inflation Calculator; https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm.

\(^{21}\) Mower (1988).

\(^{22}\) Springer (see note 2), pp. 53–54 and see also K. Flynn, “Danni’s Hard Drive to Adult Content Success,” CNN, https://edition.cnn.com/2001/TECH/computing/01/20/ashe.update/cover.ashe/index.html.
and PornTube expanded the porn market. Sites like SuicideGirls and eroticBPM helped turn soft-core porn into a feature of internet-driven goth and punk aesthetics, further integrating porn into popular culture. Most recently, the online porn site OnlyFans banned sexually explicit content on its main platform.23

No one knows the true size of the early-twenty-first century porn industry. Kas-sia Wosick, a New Mexico State University sociologist, estimates the globally porn market at $97 billion in 2015, with the U.S. revenues at $10 and $12 billion; IBIS-World projected that by the pre-Covid 2020 total revenues should reach $3.3 billion.24 A study by Joshua Grubbs and associates, “Porndemic?: A longitudinal study of pornography use before and during the COVID-19 pandemic in a nationally representative sample of Americans,” reports that popular pornography websites made some previously premium content available for free, spurring dramatic increases in traffic to these sites. It noted, “this increase in time spent at home and reported increases in traffic to specific pornographic websites led to some speculation that pornography use might generally increase over the course of the pandemic and that problematic use might also increase.”25

According to another estimate, there are nearly 25 million porn sites worldwide making up 12% of all websites. Sebastian Anthony, writing for ExtremeTech, reports that Xvideos is the biggest porn site on the web, receiving 4.4 billion page-views (pvs) and 350 million unique visits per month. He claims porn accounts for 30% of all web traffic. Anthony estimates the average length of time spent on Xvideo at 15 min. From an aesthetic perspective, sadly, he notes that most people receive their digital video feeds using low-resolution streaming services.26

Erotic Representation

"The daguerreotype process flourished in the period between 1840 and 1851," notes historian Gareth S. Jowett, "but it has several severe limitations." It was, to put it kindly, a difficult procedure to produce a photograph. Jowett describes this early procedure as follows:

The apparatus was bulky, a lengthy exposure time was required, and the resulting prints were extremely fragile and had to be kept under glass. The pictures could be difficult to look at because of the metallic glare, and the cost was quite high for quality prints.

23 MacKinnon (2021).
24 Morris (2015); IBISWorld’s Adult and Pornographic Websites, August 2016, http://www.ibisworld.com/industry/adult-pornographic-websites.html, http://internet-filter-review.toptenreviews.com/internet-pornography-statistics-pg2.html, and http://internet-filter-review.toptenreviews.com/internet-pornography-statistics-pg2.html
25 Grubbs et al. (2021).
26 T. Ge, “Going Deep Inside the Adult Entertainment Industry,” Arbitrage Magazine; S. Anthony, “Just how big are porn sites?,” ExtremeTech; https://www.extremetech.com/computing/123929-just-how-big-are-porn-sites.
“But,” Jowett observes, “the major disadvantage was the picture could not be duplicated.27

Nevertheless, as Abigail Solomon-Godeau observed, "almost as soon as there were easily produced daguerreotypes, there were pornographic ones." She notes, daguerreotypes are, of course, “unique images,” representing a unique form of sexual representation:

Daguerreotype pornography is often exquisitely hand-colored, the models are carefully posed and lighted, and the trappings are often luxurious …. [These images were sometimes] concealed inside watch covers, opened by hidden springs, or lining the interior covers of snuff boxes or made into jewelry. By the early years of the [French] Second Empire [the regime of Napoleon III from 1852 to 1870], much daguerreotype pornography was stereoscopic. Possessing a compelling illusion of three-dimensionality and preternatural detail, painstakingly tinted, entirely grainless, the visual effect of the hand-colored daguerreotype stereo is the acme of verisimilitude.28

She reminds readers that before its industrialization in the 1850s, “… photographic pornography appears to have been a luxury item." With very rare exception, especially in France, this indulgence was available only to well-to-do men.

Many early photographers borrowed from still earlier painterly and lithographic visual styles when they approached the portraiture of the nude, especially the female nude. In France, as Solomon-Godeau points out, they borrowed from "a broad spectrum of sexualized and more or less venal feminine identities—the grisette [flirtatious], lorette [coquettish], lionne [lioness], biche [doe], cocotte [fashionable prostitute], and grande horizontale [prostitute to the nobility and grand bourgeoisie]—were initially imagined in the lithographic productions of the 1830s and 1840s…."29 Such imagery served to help forge the basic iconography of female—and, to a lesser extent, male—representations articulated as pornography.

As with all "new" media, a certain degree of inventiveness defines early pornographic photography. According to Solomon-Godeau, the creative breakthrough that distinguishes the medium is the invention of the "beaver shot," the complete exposure of the female genitalia.30 This captivating—if not humiliating—representation often presented a female subject with her face covered, be it by a petticoat or veil. This shot remains not only a principal technique of photography to this day but appears to have been adopted by all subsequent "new media" as a defining form of female (and, to a lesser extent, male homoerotic) representation.

Porn appealed to those who had the yen for something different, more erotic—and could afford it, notably the self-interest of the more well-to-do. The purpose of the appeal varied. Eadweard Muybridge’s studies measured the labor process impact on economic value; police mug shots and photos of Paris Commune corpses

27 Jowett (1976).
28 Solomon-Godeau (Winter, 1986).
29 Ibid, p. 301.
30 Ibid, p. 297.
had social significance; portraits of a person, family and associates with sentimental value; and images dubbed pornography included representations of women (and, to a lesser extent, men) in a variety of “provocative” positions and costumes suggestively enhancing the viewer’s sexual fantasy.\textsuperscript{31} Such an object of representation within erotic context was intended to illicit excitement and expressed a unique iconography of unacceptable pleasure, be it labeled immoral, obscene or perverse.

Following photography, the stereoscope was the principal medium of visual representation during the nineteenth century. As Jonathan Crary reminds us: "It is easily forgotten now how pervasive was the experience of the stereoscope and how for decades it defined a major mode of experiencing photographically produced images."\textsuperscript{32} This technology was developed by two pioneering optical-media innovators, Charles Wheatstone and Sir David Brewster. It exploited a particular physiological dis-functionality of human sight, "binocular disparity" (by which each eye sees slightly differently), in order to suggest a fundamentally different, and in many ways more powerful, experience than that offered through the two-dimensional photography. Crary identifies this appeal as follows:

The stereoscope … provided a form in which "vividness" of effect increased with the apparent proximity of the object to the viewer, and the impression of three-dimensional solidity became greater as the optic axes of each diverged. Thus the desired effect of the stereoscope was not simply likeness, but immediate tangibility.

He strongly warns of a very simple but all-important fact: "We will never really know what the stereoscope looked like to a nineteenth-century viewer or recover a stance from which it could seem an equivalent for a 'natural vision'."\textsuperscript{33} Such a warning can be applied to contemporary or postmodern erotic communications media.

The tension between "likeness" and "tangibility" has come to define the historical development of modern media technologies. It has repeatedly manifest itself in the battles between the requirements of rendering ever-more exact reproductions and the demands for intensifying the feeling of a media experience. As Catherine Zuromskis argues, “the function of the film is to bring the viewer as close as possible to the sexual act itself.”\textsuperscript{34} In other words, achieving the goals of each dictate leads to a fundamentally different outcome: for the former, it culminates in achieving an indistinguishable correspondence between the original and a copy; for the later, it culminates in the merging of the subject and the object. Within terms of today’s digital media, this disparity is evident in the difference between High Definition (HDTV) or “4K” resolution and the appeal of VR or immersive simulation programs popular among video-game players.

\textsuperscript{31} “Indecent exposure: Eadweard Muybridge’s early nudes—in picture,” \textit{The Guardian}, October 9, 2015; https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2015/oct/09/indecent-exposures-eadweard-muybridge-early-nudes-in-pictures.
\textsuperscript{32} Crary (1992).
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., pp. 123–124.
\textsuperscript{34} Zuromskis (2007).
The tension between "likeness" and "tangibility" was articulated as part of new sexuality that took shape during the mid-nineteenth century, the era of "modern" or industrial phase of capitalist development in the West. Williams noted that "...mid- to late-nineteenth century was a period in which a new porno-erotics of corporealized observation began."35 During the decades of the emerging new medium of photography, a host of different techniques competed with one another for popular acceptance and many (if not all) were used to depict sexual imagery of female nudes. Besides the daguerreotype process and the stereoscopic photos, other techniques included stereoscope glass prints, stereoscope cards (on salt paper or viewed by transparency), large-scale prints, carte de visite prints (i.e., very small prints mounted on cardboard supports) and ambrotypes (i.e., prints rendered through the wet-glass collodion process and sealed onto a cardboard shield).36

Such "new" new media of erotic display contributed to an historically new sensibility seeking to simulate tactile experiences. Williams (drawing upon the work of Crary) proposes that the photography engendered not simply psychic stimulation, but actual physical stimulation as well. She sees this to be similar in development to other late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century media technologies, including flip books, picture puzzles, Muybridge’s zoopraxiscope and Edison’s mutoscope. These media helped to heighten the erotic experience of the pornographic image.37

Photography underwent the first phase of becoming a mass-market art form as refinements in the photographic procedure were introduced, including shorter exposure time, more accurate lenses, faster development processes and the significant decrease in the costs of cameras and other equipment. Perhaps no single person was more essential to this process than Fox Talbot, an Englishman sometimes credited with the invention of photography. In 1835, he developed a method of sensitizing paper for image capture and, in 1840, pioneered the use of silver nitrate and gallic acid for development of the latent image (i.e., calotype). According to Jowett, "Talbot’s process was the direct ancestor of all modern photographic techniques."38

By the early-1850s, new techniques were introduced that speeded-up the photographic reproduction process from the then-current several minutes to 2 to 20 s. This helped to significantly expand the market for photographic images. In the U.S. during this period, the costs for a commercially-produced daguerreotype photograph dropped from 50 to 25 cents to 12–1/2 cents; $0.50 equal $17.70 in 2021 dollars.39 So popular had they become that it was estimated that, in 1853, three million prints were produced and that over one hundred commercial studios operated in New York City alone.40 It is not known how many of these images were "pornographic" or how many studios produced such representations.

35 Williams (see note 14), p. 34.
36 Nazarieff (2002).
37 Williams (see note 14), p. 17.
38 Jowett (see note 28), p. 188.
39 https://www.officialdata.org/us/inflation/1850?amount=1.
40 Jowett (see note 28), p. 190.
George Eastman’s introduction of the relatively inexpensive Kodak camera, which took advantage of the then-breakthrough nitro-cellulose roll film, in the 1880s–1890s, propelled photography into the second phase of market expansion. This effort involved not only a further lowering of the cost of the medium but provided the user with greater control over the photographic as well as the reproduction/duplication processes. This effort culminated in the medium’s third phase of development—the introduction of the self-printing Polaroid instant camera in 1946 and, in the late-90s, the introduction of digital photography.41 As Williams notes:

… as the technologies producing these images became cheaper later in the [19th] century and erotic and pornographic images circulated widely though most often illicitly, it seems quite likely that a wider range of classes of both sexes had an opportunity to observe such images.42

One result, which could have been expected, was that pornographic photography became increasingly available and a major public morals issue.

Numerous early photographers were arrested and even jailed for their "art". For example, Felix Jacques-Antoine Muolin has been described as "the first [French] photographer in the history of photography whose work exudes seductiveness." He was part of an unofficial group of early photographic "artists" who specialized in depicting female nudes. Besides Muolin, this group included August Belloc, Bruno Braquehais, Philippe Derussy, Louis Jules Duboscq-Soleil and Alex Gouin. According to Serge Nazarieff, Muolin ran a studio in Paris during the late-1840s and produced a series of "plate daguerreotype nudes using non-professional models from 14 to 16 years of age. …" Going further, Nazarieff notes: "In 1851 he had a little trouble with the law: a number of licentious images done by Moulin had been seized by the police at Malacrida’s place." Malacrida was an optician and sold images that—the police report—were "so obscene that even to pronounce the titles … would be to commit an indecency." He was sentenced to a fine and a year in prison; "the widow Rene, manufacturer of the daguerreotype," was sentenced to a fine and 2 months in prison; and the artist, Moulin, was also sentenced to a fine and a month in jail.43

But perhaps the most celebrated nineteenth century case of censorship of this new medium involved one Henry Hayler, an English photographer who enjoyed a European-wide reputation. Hayler was the subject of a major raid in the spring of 1874 during which the police descended on two houses in London in which he conducted his operations. While Hayler escaped to Germany, according to Henry Spencer Ashbee, "no less than 130,248 obscene photographs, and 5000 slides were seized and destroyed. …"44 These two incidents suggest the scale of the flourishing photographic pornography business in France and England and, one suspects, in other parts of Europe and North America during the latter-half of the century.

41 Lubar (2017).
42 Williams (see note 14), p. 25.
43 Nazarieff (see note 37), pp. 110–111.
44 Marcus (1985).
Erotic Toys

People have long played with sex toys. Archeologists date the first known dildo from the Paleolithic era, some 2.6 million years ago. This is a period of early human civilization defined by the most primitive forms of technology, the first use of stone tools. Surviving dildos were carved of stone and bone. For example, in 2005, researchers discovered a 28,000-year-old stone phallus in the Hohle Fels Cave near Ulm, Germany.\(^4\) An antler bone phallus dating at 4000–6000 years old was discovered in Motala, Sweden. In China’s Xinjiang Uyghur region, a 4000-year-old female mummy was discovered clutching a ritual dildo carving measuring 4 cm long and (mostly) painted red.

Early phalluses were made from stone, wood, leather and even camel dung. In Turkey, during the sixth century BC, ancient Anatolians used sculptures of sex organs that, they believed, contained special power to ward off evil and bad luck.\(^4\) While some attribute ancient Rome as the creator of the double dildo, archeologists have found double dildos in Japan dating from the tenth through the thirteenth centuries and made of jade as well as a strap-on wood dildo. Bronze and wearable dildos as well as jade butt plugs were common in China during the Han dynasty (206 BCE to 220 CE). The dildo played a ceremonial role among people as diverse as African tribespeople, South American Inca and Aztec people, Australian Aboriginal people and North American Native people.

Medical doctors are credited with inventing the modern vibrator, originally an instrument to treat women suffering from that age-old “female” disorder, “hysteria”; hysteria is the Greek word for “womb.”\(^4\) Galen of Pergamon, the ancient Greek physician, prescribed "genital massage" with cloth-covered fingers and hands of the clitoris of their female patients diagnosed suffering from hysteria. Many doctors did not wish to engage in such an intimate practice and sought a mechanical means to provide the procedure. In the eighteenth century, a French physician invented the Tremousoir, a handheld, wind-up device, to deal with the problem; it made its U.S. appearance in the 1750s. A century later, in 1869, George Taylor, MD, patented the first steam-powered massage and vibratory apparatus. While costly and bulky, it was used by physicians and in health spas. In London in 1883, Dr. J. Mortimer Granville patented the first hand-held electro-mechanical vibrator powered by a battery that some said was the size of a suitcase. Dubbed the "Hammer of Granville," it was basically a drill with a small ball on the end and, when turned on, hummed.

Two decades later, in 1902, Hamilton Beach patented the first electric vibrator, about a decade before it introduced the electric iron and vacuum cleaner. In 1906, the American Vibrator Company of St. Louis, MO, advertised that the "American Vibrator … can be used by yourself in the privacy of dressing room or boudoir, and furnish every woman with the essence of perpetual youth." During the early

\(^4\) “South-Western Germany, Masculine Paleolithic,” World Archaeology, September 5, 2005; https://www.world-archaeology.com/world/europe/germany/south-western-germany-masculine-palaeolithic/.
\(^4\) Woollaston (2015).
\(^4\) Maines (2001).
part of the twentieth century, popular magazines like *Modern Woman* and *Woman’s Home Companion* promoted vibrators that could be purchased through mail order. Over the last 9 decades, technology has remade the vibrator: in the 1930s, it was the Oster Stim-U-Lax (1937); in the ‘40s, the Gyro-Lator (1945); and the ‘50s, the *Niagara* Hand Unit Model No 1 (1952). In the ‘70s, the Hitachi Magic Wand was introduced and—ever new-and-improved—versions are still being sold in the twenty-first century.

The dildo’s postmodern era begins when the “Rabbit,” a vibrator that made its guest appearance on HBO’s series, *Sex and the City*, a show popular among young, sophisticated women. One of the show’s characters, Miranda, lends her Rabbit to Charlotte—and Charlotte gets hooked! The show propelled the vibrator from the TV screen into the bedrooms of many hip, young women throughout the country. The folks at HBO discovered the Rabbit at New York’s Pleasure Chest, a Greenwich Village sex-toy emporium serving mostly gay men and women. Charlotte and her Rabbit helped legitimize sex toys and female masturbation. The appearance of the Rabbit on a cable series was part of a profound shift in American sexual culture, including the rebranding of sex toys from “adult novelties” to “sexual wellness” products. And more than rebranding was involved. Sex play was no longer limited to X-rated or porn shows. Most important, the mainstreaming of the dildo helped many—especially women—achieve a fuller experience of sexual pleasure.

One of the popular venues to acquire a dildo, vibrator or other erotic product is a “passion party,” a women-only get-together often held at a suburban home. Like a Tupperware party, the host acquires products from a sex-toy provider like Athena’s Home Novelties, Fantasia Home Parties, For Ladies Only, Party Gals, Temptations Parties and Pure Romance; the industry even has a trade association, Certified Adult Home Party Association. A surprise to many, some of the moralists waging today’s culture war against abortion and gay rights, including fundamentalist Christian women, attend such get-togethers. For such moralists, sex toys can enhance a wholesome marriage. In the twenty-first century, sex toys have been rebranded “sexual wellness” products designed to meet every fantasy. Amazon, the nation’s biggest retailer, offered in 2005 an estimated 40,000 products; no data for 2021 appears available.

**Eros Electric**

Each historical era is uniquely distinguished by its technologies of erotic representation and sexual practice, its phantasmagoria. Prior to wide-scale adoption of electricity for manufacturing and lighting, early electricity was used to power devices for conspicuous personal apparel and sexual experience. According to Carolyn Marvin, “flash” jewelry from Paris was all the rage when exhibited in New York in 1884. It

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48 Hsieh and Burton (2020).
49 Rabbit White (2012); see also Christianbed, [http://christianbed.com/](http://christianbed.com/).
50 Birchall (2005).
Pornography and the Erotic Phantasmagoria

“included hatpins and brooches studded with tiny, glittering electric lights mounted like jewelry.”51 Also available were electrical neckties, walking canes, watch chains and scarf pins.52 Electrified jewelry sought to stimulate the body erotically in a way not dissimilar to that of immersive VR a century later. By 1900, many innovators were making claims that the new electrical technology could improve an individual’s health, including sexual prowess. The fledgling branch of electro-medicine was garnering enthusiastic support among the middle- and upper-classes. A wide assortment of products were introduced, including the “Medico Electric Jar” that claimed to cure neuralgia and asthma, and “Ohio Electric Insoles” that claimed to revitalize the blood—more than 3,750,000 devices were claimed to have been sold. This high-tech “medical” culture is wonderfully mocked by T. C. Boyle in his hilarious parody of the Kellogg sanitarium, The Road to Wellville.53

The era achieved its most peculiar realization in its wide range of electronic consumer technologies promising improved sexual experience. The venerable Sears, Roebuck catalog offered electrical belts to restore men’s potency: there were also a host of competing belts available, including the “Ohio Electric Belt,” the “Heiderberg Electric Belt” and “Harness Electric Belt and Suspenders” manufactured by the Medical Battery Company of England (its ads promised “to restore impaired vigor”). In addition, electric corsets promoted by a “Dr. Scott” and others were marketed to women. But as Marvin notes, these devices were designed to control female sexuality: “If one of these articles is pressed by a lover’s arm it at once admits a shriek like the whistle of a railway engine.”54 Most remarkable, these developments took place against a background of Christian moral sanction and Comstock obscenity campaigns.

“After World War II, new chemicals, new metals, new manufacturing techniques, and new consumer marketing possibilities came together …,” notes Hoag Levins, to create new sexuality products.55 He adds, “[the] armies of military physicians and technicians re-entered the civilian world of the 1950s with a radically changed sense of what was—or might be—possible.” If nothing else, the promise of postwar prosperity, at least as represented by Hugh Hefner’s Playboy, included a good sex life. By the late-80s and early-90s, a series of new inventions were introduced to address basic sex-related problems, especially male impotence. Such high-tech solutions included “a radio-controlled penis construction ring system [with] a tool for stretching the ring when it is put on. A battery-powered, hand-held transmitter releases the ring pressure as the touch of a button.” In addition, one company patented “a penile stiffening sheath apparatus with an unusual pubic plate studded with hard rubber nubs.” Nevertheless, impotence persisted.

The federal government has been tracking sex toys, including dildos, for decades. A 1993 federal study of male sexuality reports that half the men over 40 years

51 Marvin (1988).
52 Nye (1990).
53 Morgan (1939, pp. 336–337); Nye, op. cit., p. 153.
54 Marvin (see note 52), pp. 336, 131–132.
55 Levins (1997, pp. 111, 127–128, 145, 211).
old suffered from intermittent or permanent impotency. In a separate 1994 study of women, 16% of those 18 to 59 years old reported considering the use of a dildo or vibrator “somewhat appealing” while 4% reported having used a dildo or other sex toy within the previous year. Two decades later, in 2014, the National Survey of Sexual Health and Behavior (NSSHB) found that more than half (52.5%) of American women had used a vibrator and three in four (76%) who used vibrators agreed or strongly agreed that their use was part of a healthy sex life; nearly half (44.8%) percent of men had used a vibrator and three-fifths (60%) agreed that vibrators can make sex with a partner more exciting. According to a 2015 study, more than two-thirds (68%) of young men and nearly one-fifth (18%) of young women viewed porn at least once a week and, in the wake of the Covid pandemic, those numbers are growing.\footnote{Davis and Gerl (2014, http://cssc.uscannenberg.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/v3art3.pdf) and Gary (2015).}

**Virtual Porn**

“I think VR porn has the capacity to bring an entirely new side of porn to the masses,” proclaimed Ela Darling, the queen of VR sex. She is the star, creative director and co-owner of VRTube.xxx and Cam4.com, two fledging VR companies. “Porn is my livelihood, it’s my everything,” she blushes, “so when I come across emerging technologies I see it through the lens of porn.” She developed what’s described as “holographic 3D porn” for Facebook’s Oculus Rift system.\footnote{D. Rosen, “Meet Ela Darling,” AlterNet, August 8, 20; http://www.alternet.org/sex-amp-relationships/meet-ela-darling-21st-centurys-first-virtual-reality-porn-star.}

VR porn may be a new technology that could transform twenty-first century sexual culture. The shift from the twentieth century analog waveform to the twenty-first century digital-stream of 1 s and 0 s is reshaping the worlds of communications, media, finance, commerce and medicine, to name but a few of the domains of social life being redefined by this technology transformation. It has also profoundly altered America’s sexual culture—the pornographic imagination as well as sexual practice.

In the twenty-first century, sex paraphernalia and pornography are merging, forging a new erotic imagination. For millennia, dildos and sexual imagery marked out two distinct dimensions of sexual fantasy, often fulfilling the goal of reproduction or pleasure or both. Since the late-twentieth century, a new era of sex-tech culture has been taking shape, one that seeks to enhance the sexual experience with another(s)—and with oneself. However, as with earlier eras of erotic transformation, this one comes with its own risks and challenges. In addition, they were separate sectors of the sexual-commerce industry. Retail outlets for such products still operate through-out the country, but often under very restrictive conditions. However, the universal adoption of the internet, computers and smartphones, the expansion of network bandwidth to support video and the rise of online commerce (including package delivery) helped expand a new sexual culture.
In the 1980s, Jaron Lanier introduced the multisensory DataGlove and goggles; today, VR seeks to combine representation with immersion, merging phantasy with physical experience. It seeks to fashion an historically unique experience, one all-enveloping and sexually fulfilling, thus overcoming the tension between " likeness" and " tangibility. For the last two centuries, Western society has sought to integrate these two distinct dimensions of psycho-physical experience—imagination, the mind; and pleasure, the body—into a singular technologically-mediated experience. The goal of the current VR porn effort is to perfect a computer-generated immersive simulation that is as powerful, fulfilling, as an actual physical, sexual experience.

VR porn queen Darling casts herself as the twenty-first century’s first porn star, recalling Bettie Page of the 1950s. Page was an underground s&m starlet, second to Marilyn Monroe as America’s post-WW-II sex queen. She was photographed and filmed by Irving Klaw, a visual artist of the erotic who was forced to appear before a U.S. Senate committee hearing on pornography, chaired by Sen. Joseph McCarthy; to avoid going to prison, he destroyed much of his collection of original works. Klaw’s representations of Page marked a fundamental shift in the visual presentation of the erotically illicit in two critical—and complementary—ways. First, they mark the transition in pornographic representations from still-image photographs and published images to moving-pictures and publicly screened movies. Second, they testify to the growing (male) popularity of depictions of (female) s&m and other of “illicit” or “perverse” forms of sexual representation involving fetish toys, costumes and practices.

Darling signifies a similar media transition, not simply from analog to digital, but from digital still and streaming images to an immersive, interactive and fully eroticized experience. VR has been around since the 1980s, but its current incarnation—with lighter and more powerful headsets, more sophisticated programming and real-time connectivity—might finally make it a popular entertainment medium, one transforming porn. The ostensible users of the new VR systems are those into videogames and education, but everyone in the know knows that porn is be a major market driver. VR porn seeks to combine representation with immersion, merging the phantasy of imagination with the power of physical pleasure. It seeks to fashion a historically unique pornographic experience, one all-consuming and erotically fulfilling—yet either private, without a live, real other, or mutually agreed to with a real other.

No one knows the future, let alone those most closely involved trying to create it; it’s a crap shoot. Whether VR—particularly VR porn—catches on this time or will be yet another consumer electronics bubble like 3D-TV is anyone’s guess. Some think it might be sex robots. In July 2017, the Netherland’s-based Foundation for Responsible Robotics (FRR) released a revealing study, Our Sexual Future With Robots, that explores what the authors identify as the “significant issues that we may have to deal with in the foreseeable future over the next 5 to 10 years.” The study

58 Faisal (2017).
59 Rosen, Sin, Sex and Subversion, op. cit., pp. 69–97.
60 FRR Report (2017).
warns, “Now companies are developing robots for sexual gratification. But a robot designed for sex may have different impacts when compared with other sex aids. Those currently being developed are essentially pornographic representations of the human body—mostly female.” It argues, “such representations combined with human anthropomorphism may lead many to perceive robots as a new ontological category that exists in a fantasy between the living and the inanimate.”

The current generation of actual or proposed sex robots promote the exaggerated representation of female stereotypes and the endless fulfillment of conventional male sexual fantasy. Sex robots are being featured in innumerable website graphics, whether involving a news story, corporate branding or a product promotional-advertising campaign. These sex robots appear to be overwhelming female, white, young and adhere to conventional hyper-sexed body-image stereotypes. (One manufacturer offers male dolls.)

Over the years, artificial female sex characters have becoming common social figures. They have been cast as cyborgs in movies and TV shows like *Stepford Wives* (1975), *Battlestar Gallactica* (1979), *Blade Runner* (1982), *Austin Powers* (1997), *Ex Machina* (2015) and *Humans* (2015; based on Swedish sci-fi series, *Äkta Mäniskor [Real Humans]*, 2012). The current generation of sex robots are replacing yesterday’s old-fashion blow-up sex dolls. Today’s robots are distinguished by silicon skin that is warm to the touch as well customized eye color, personalized nipple shapes, the ability to speak and AI responses like shyness. More compelling, they offer a variety of quasi-human forms of sex! They provide the creative pallet for today’s high-tech sex-preneurs.

A host of tech companies have jumped onto the sex-robot bandwagon. True Companion, of Wayne, NJ, promotes Roxxxy Gold robots that allow the (male) user to pre-program the (females) robot’s personality, including "Frigid Farrah" (i.e., resistant) and "Wild Wendy" (i.e., adventurous). Silicon Samantha was developed by Sergi Santos, a Barcelona, Spain, engineer. He says his doll is covered in sensors that respond to human touch and can switch between “family” and “sexy” mode; it is reported to have a functional vagina and mouth. Abyss Creations, of San Marcos, CA, offers Realdoll represented by “Harmony.” This female-characterized thing sits attentively, dressed in a suggestive white leotard, her chest thrust forward and her slim thighs expectant. The company offers 18 different female body types and two male figures. Each can be customized with different genitalia and variety of faces. Standard dolls start at $6,500 and, with more specific attributes, can run to $12,000.

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61 Realdoll; https://www.realdoll.com.
62 Kleeman (2017).
63 Truecomapnion; http://www.truecompanion.com/home.html; Dunn (2017), Trout (2017).
Pornographic Phantasmagoria

Sontag offered a two-edged critique of pornography—one social, the other aesthetic. She argued that “pornography is a malady to be diagnosed and an occasion for judgment. It’s something one is for or against.” She noted that “both the libertarians and the would-be censors agree in reducing pornography to pathological symptom and problematic social commodity. A near-unanimous consensus exists as to what pornography is—this being identified with notions about the sources of the impulse to produce and consume these curious goods.” She adds:

In this view, all pornography amounts to is the representation of the fantasies of infantile sexual life, these fantasies having been edited by the more skilled, less innocent consciousness of the masturbatory adolescent, for purchase by so-called adults. As a social phenomenon – for instance, the boom in the production of pornography in the societies of Western Europe and America since the eighteenth century – the approach is no less unequivocally clinical.

She goes further, arguing: “Pornography becomes a group pathology, the disease of a whole culture, about whose cause every-one is pretty well agreed.”

Regarding its aesthetics, Sontag argued that porn relies on a shallow—if artificial—narrative structure, often employing “ready-made conventions of character, setting, and action.” It employs dramatic architypes, most notably “male lewdness” and “female virtue.” It relies on “a small crude vocabulary of feeling,” thus avoiding emotional complexity to heighten voyeuristic titillation. These attributes, while applying to literature, also resonate in contemporary media, including popular movies, media advertising and eroticized clothing (i.e., heightened display of female breasts and buttocks) as well as online, streaming and VR sites. Sontag argued that porn shares some of these conventions with other literary forms, including science fiction and religious tracks.

A quarter-century later, Williams clarified Sontag’s argument, observing, “…[filmed] pornography is not one thing, but sexual fantasy, genre, culture, and erotic visibility all operating together.” This can be applied to newer media and has never been more the case than in the twenty-first century. Following centuries of printed or drawn texts that defined the pre-modern world and analog electronic waves that defined the modern media era, postmodern visual culture is completing the transition to a series of digital formats, of 1 s and 0 s. The digital palette fosters an historically new era of media communications and an unprecedented expansion of pornography, of sexual experience and expression.

Since colonial times, pornographic representations have been politicized, decried as “obscene,” sinful. Once moral suasion could prevent an adult—most often—male from acquiring and consuming allegedly pornographic materials. However, by the nineteenth century the power of the state was being forcefully employed to restrict

64 Sontag (see note 1), pp. 206–207.
65 Ibid, p 228.
66 Williams (see note 14), p. 270; see also Stoller (1991) and Hunt (1993).
the adult acquisition and consumption of allegedly pornographic materials. Anthony Comstock (1844–1915) led a successful anti-obscenity campaign that culminated in the passage of the 1873 federal censorship laws barring obscene materials from the U.S. mail, be they erotica, birth-control information or medical contraceptive devices.

However, the post-World War II “American Century” fostered a social revolution that remade the nation’s sexual culture. Brian McNair argues that pornography “provides an alternative to sex with an actual person, or access to forms of sexual behavior—fetishes and paraphilias, for example—which a real life sexual partner may not be willing to engage in.”67 He observes, “to break a taboo may be defined as a criminal act, or as anti-social behavior, but it may also permit questions as to the legitimacy of or need for the taboo in the first instance.” He adds, “it is precisely the taboo quality of the pornographic which has made its consumption pleasurable, and thus entertaining.”

During this era, the Christian or moral concerns that had traditionally defined obscenity were fundamentally transformed. A series of critical Supreme Court rulings revised the Comstock laws (see Table 1). These decision resulted in what Katherine Sarikakis identifies as “two parallel phenomena in the governance of pornography ….” They are:

- the sociocultural integration of pornographic imagery in everyday life, work and “leisure” through new production, distribution processes and consumption cultures; and the integration of pornography’s economic interests into public life and policy.

Sarikakis notes, “pornography’s presence today cannot be viewed as a simple outcome of changes in culture, economics and politics but rather as a major cultural product and an organised political actor.68

The Supreme Court decisions helped transformed the social and personal experience of erotic representation and the refashioning of the erotic imagination, especially the permissibility of varied or unacceptable notions of sexual fantasy and practice. These decisions occurred as profound advances in media technology—notably cable television, video cassettes and CDs and, ultimately, the internet transformed—improved?—the human experience of pleasure, especially the physicality of erotic life, whether involving another person, representation or a device. As Luke Stadel noted, “sexually explicit programming was a staple of cable television at least as far back as the early 1970s, and not just on pay channels.”69 Changes in media technology facilitated the unprecedented availability and the relatively anonymity of porn acquisition and enjoyment. Since the 1990s and into the new century, women gained unprecedented access to online porn. A 2020 report by Barna Group and

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67 McNair (2017).
68 Sarikakis (2013, https://homepage.univie.ac.at/katherine.sarikakis/wpcontent/uploads/2011/09/Sarikakis.RCMG2013.pdf).
69 Stadel (2014).
Covenant Eyes, an anti-porn research group, claims that “33% of women aged 25 and under search for porn at least once per month.”

Women’s place as active participants in the sexual marketplace underwent unprecedented growth following the publication of E. L. James’ *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Its release, according to a *New York Times* report, “brought hard-core erotica from the fringes to the mainstream.” By October 2017, the *Fifth Shades* trilogy—*Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011), *Fifty Shades Darker* (2021) and *Fifty Shades Freed*

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70 “15 Mind-Blowing Statistics About Pornography and The Church,” *Frontier Mission*, November 1, 2020; [https://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/15-mind-blowing-statistics-about-pornography-and-the-church](https://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/15-mind-blowing-statistics-about-pornography-and-the-church).

71 Alter (2021), see also Parry and Light (2014, [https://www.nrpa.org/globalassets/journals/jlr/2014/volume-46/jlr-volume-46-number-1-pp-38-57.pdf](https://www.nrpa.org/globalassets/journals/jlr/2014/volume-46/jlr-volume-46-number-1-pp-38-57.pdf)).
D. Rosen

(2012)—reportedly sold more than 150 million copies worldwide\(^{72}\); the movie version, released in 2015, generated gross ticket sales of over $1 billion by 2018.\(^{73}\) This exploded the market for what is broadly known as “softcore erotica”—romance novels with a bit of kink (e.g., sadomasochism and fetishism)—targeted principally to women. The *Times* reports that erotica is a $1.5 billion industry.

In the wake of the “second wave” women’s movement of the 1960s and ‘70s, the analysis of pornography was further politicized by a series of fundamental splits among feminists. Ellen Willis lays out the scope of these differences in her critically important 1982 article, “Toward a Feminist Sexual Revolution.”\(^{74}\) Her rigorous analysis was set against a deepening conservative counterrevolution epitomized by Phyllis Schlafly’s successful campaign against the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). Willis focuses on the differences between the early “sex-positive” feminists and the growing “anti-porn” and separatists feminists (both heterosexual and lesbian). It is a split that persists to this day.\(^{75}\)

Among the leading anti-porn feminists were Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon. In 1987, MacKinnon argued, “pornography sexualizes rape, battery, sexual harassment, prostitution, and child sexual abuse; it thereby celebrates, promotes, authorizes, and legitimizes them.” She declared, “It makes hierarchy sexy and calls that ‘the truth about sex’ or just a mirror of reality. Through this process pornography constructs what a woman is as what men want from sex. This is what the pornography means.”\(^{76}\)

A very different understanding is suggested by Fiona Attwood. As she noted, “there is a reasonably long documented history of women’s engagement with pornography.” She identifies a number of popular formats that have helped “domesticate” pornography, noting “sexual self-help books and videos, lingerie catalogues, and adult cable programmes have been much more accessible for women than other kinds of pornography.” She also identifies the increased presence of feminist women in the porn world, including amateur of “femslash” porn, porn comics and “female-friendly’, feminist, lesbian and queer pornographies.” Most insightful, she reports that a 2015 study that found:

Women also reported that they were more likely to engage with porn as a means to reconnect with their bodies, and to use with partners. Men reported that they were more likely to choose to turn to pornography when feeling bored or having nothing better to do.

Drawing upon another study, she noted, “porn played a particular role in relation to the development of sexual interests, desires, fantasies and energies.”\(^{77}\)

\(^{72}\) “Fifty Shade of Grey,” Wikipedia; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fifty_Shades_of_Grey.

\(^{73}\) Lammers (2019).

\(^{74}\) Willis (1982).

\(^{75}\) Srinivasan (2021), C. A. MacKinnon (see note 24), and Goldberg (2021).

\(^{76}\) MacKinnon (1987).

\(^{77}\) Attwood (2018).
Pornography and the Erotic Phantasmagoria

The pornographic imagination has profoundly changed during the half-century since Sontag’s critical reflection of the subject. Advances in media technology transformed the social—and personal!—experience of erotic representation, transforming the erotic imagination and notions of fantasy. It was redefined as erotic imagery of women and girls came to saturate advertising, fashion and public display. It also transformed—improved?—the human experience of pleasure, especially the physicality of erotic life, whether involving oneself, another or a device.

Pornography—however defined, represented and/or experienced—embodies the changing nature of patriarchy. It articulates changing gender relations at an historical unique moment and the historical evolution of the moment. At the heart of the feminist critique of pornography over the last half-century—of the industry and its products—is a critique of the evolving nature of patriarchy as both a social category and personal experience. Pornography—graphically, symbolically—embodies patriarch for all viewers, whether men or women.

At the heart of Willis argument is whether a “new” feminist sexuality—and pornography—is possible? Such a development will depend on to what extent both women and men—but especially men—adopt a radical feminist approach to sex and sexuality as suggested by Willis:

Noting that “liberated” sexuality is often depressingly shallow, exploitative, and joyless, many men as well as women have concluded that sexual liberation has been tried and found wanting, that it is irrelevant or even inimical to a serious program of social change.

With the enormous increase in the production and availability of pornography, perhaps “quantity” can give way to improved “quality”? Can a new erotica, one premised on the equality of all partners and true consent, displace the abusive pornography of rape, pedophilia and racism that defines the sex market? Perhaps the enormously varied digitally erotic online phantasmagoria can contribute to the fostering of a greater sense of social and sexual freedom, responsibility and pleasure, for women and men.

Freud saw technical innovation as a force that helped extend or augment “natural” human capabilities. In Civilization and Its Discontents (1929), he noted, “With every tool man is perfecting his own organs, whether motor or sensory, or is removing the limits of their functioning.” Going further, he reflected on then-modern media:

In the photographic camera he [i.e., humanity] has created an instrument which retains the fleeting visual impressions, just as a gramophone disc retains the equally fleeting auditory ones; both are at bottom materialization of the power he possesses of recollection, his memory. With the help of the telephone he can hear at distances which would be respected as unattainable even in a fairy tale.

For Freud, “Man has, as it were, become a kind of prosthetic God.” 78 A century later, people may have become prosthetic gods.

78 Freud (1962).
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