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Pornography appears frequently in public debate and academic discussion, but despite the development of porn studies (with its own journal established in 2014) it is usually presented as a problem, emblematic of the terrifying power of media and of sex. This presentation is evident in a wide range of writings, across political debate, in many popular settings and in academia. In *The Right to Sex: Feminism in the Twenty-first Century*, her highly acclaimed bestselling book, the philosopher, Amia Srinivasan, argues that «porn does not inform, or persuade, or debate. Porn trains. It etches deep grooves in the psyche, forming powerful associations between arousal and selected stimuli bypassing that part of us which pauses, considers, thinks. Those associations, strengthened through repetition, reinforce and reproduce the social meaning assigned by patriarchy to sexual difference».¹ Assuming that porn always comes in cinematic form, she argues that it needs «nothing from us – no input, no elaboration [...] only our enthralled attention, which we are compelled to give, and give willingly. In front of the porn film, the imagination halts and gives way, overtaken by its simulacrum of reality».²

In this kind of account, pornography is envisaged, not as a form, but as an abstract force, with no particularity. It turns people into things. It is “not real”, replacing real relations with something that is inauthentic, spoiling relationships, resulting in people being disconnected from each other and from their own imaginations. In Srinivasan’s account, human beings become a kind of medium through which porn plays, simply responding to its stimulation, devoid of thought or complexity of emotion. Neither does porn appear to exist in any kind of human world; the spectator and their life is simply presented as a blank.

It is much less common to encounter discussions of porn that focus on its ordinary, material, everyday dimensions or on people’s diverse engagements with it. As Susanna Paasonen and her colleagues note, introducing their own study of Finnish people’s memories of pornography, the study of porn is one «of the most obvious knowledge gaps in studies of media history» with little known «of people’s everyday encounters with pornography as these have taken shape over the decades, in a range of media».³ Work like this, in contrast to the abstractions and generalizations of writers such as Srinivasan, is concerned with

1 A. Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex*, Bloomsbury, London-Dublin 2021 (2022), p. 64.

2 Ibid.

3 S. Paasonen, K. Kyrölä, K. Nikunen, L. Saarenmaa, “*We hid porn magazines in the nearby woods*”: *Memory-work and Pornography Consumption in Finland*, “Sexualities”, 18(4), pp. 394-412 (p. 395).

pornography's relation to the material and to different forms of culture – media, popular, sexual – consumption, with thinking about porn in terms of its various forms and formats, as grounded in particular spaces, places and times, as part of the connections and relations with other people or as part of a relation to or with the self.

Over ten years ago we began a project that was take up many hours – and then years – of our time.⁴ We wanted to find out what would happen if we asked about people's ordinary everyday engagements with porn, what they accessed and why, where they were and who they were with when they did it, what motivated them, how it connected to their feelings about themselves, their bodies, and about sex. We wanted to know how people found their porn, how they searched for it, what patterns of use there might be, how their relationship with it might change over time. We used an online questionnaire to ask our questions and we received replies from 5490 people. What we gathered is still highly unusual, all these years later, as a collection of ordinary people's words on the subject of pornography.

In the following discussion, I draw on some of those responses, focusing on people's first experiences with porn, how they search for porn, and the idea of what we termed a porn "career" or history with porn. My object here is not to develop a strong argument about what porn "is" or "does", but to follow our participants' accounts in order to sketch out something of their engagement with a range of pornographies and to see where this might lead us in developing a view of porn as located in the material world.

In our project we adopted the idea of the porn "career" as a way of thinking about how people might first encounter porn, how their relationship with it had developed over time, and how their engagements might have related to the various contexts of their lives. We asked people to use the sentence beginning «I first came to porn...» as a way into this, to give an account of their history with porn, ending with a sentence that started «Most recently I have...». Looking at people's descriptions of their first time with pornography, it's striking that what our participants counted as porn is very diverse, unlike the monolithic "pornography" that Srinivasan assumes, and even going far beyond the usual range of pornographic sub-genres that academics have written about. For example, participants listed software magazines, publications aimed at teenage girls, tabloid newspaper "sexy" imagery such as the UK's "page 3" models, lingerie adverts, forbidden books such as *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and *Portnoy's Complaint*,⁵ Japanese graphic novels, self-help books like

4 For discussions see: M. Barker, *The "Problem" of Sexual Fantasies*, "Porn Studies", 1(1-2), 2014, pp.143-160; C. Smith, M. Barker, F. Attwood, *Why Do People Watch Porn: Results from PornResearch.Org*, in L. Comella, S. Tarrant (eds.), *New Views on Pornography: Sexuality, Politics, and the Law*, Praeger, Santa Barbara 2015, pp. 277-296; C. Smith, F. Attwood, M. Barker, *Queering Porn Audiences*, in M. Laing, K. Pilcher, N. Smith (eds.), *Queer Sex Work*, Routledge, Abingdon-New York 2015, pp. 177-188; F. Attwood, C. Smith, M. Barker, *Porn Audiences Online*, in P. Messaris, L. Humphreys (eds.), *Digital Media 2: Transformations in Human Communication*, Peter Lang, New York 2017, pp. 235-244; F. Attwood, C. Smith, M. Barker, "I'm just curious and still exploring myself": *Young People and Pornography*, "New Media & Society", 20(10), 2018, pp. 3738-3759; F. Attwood, C. Smith, M. Barker, *Engaging with Pornography: An Examination of Women aged 18-26 as Porn Consumers*, "Feminist Media Studies", 21(2), 2021, pp. 173-188.

5 D.H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, The Modern Library, New York 1959 (1928); P. Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint*, Random House, New York 1969.

The Joy of Sex,⁶ library books on human sexuality, the work of Nancy Friday, feminist theory addressing porn, and fantasy novels such as Terry Goodkind's *Wizard's First Rule*.⁷ While there are a number of conclusions we might draw from this, what I think is most important to notice here is the gulf between the kind of account presented by Srinivasan and the very wide range of sexual materials that become important to individuals in their own everyday lives, belonging to different cultural fields and with very varied aesthetics and modes of address.

The distance travelled, between first and most recent encounter can be glimpsed in many participants' accounts; from a brother's bootleg VHS copy of *New Wave Hookers* (Gregory Dark, 1985) to later searches for «midget porn, group/gangbang scenarios, costume play», from «Playboy» where women looked like «living art» to «amateur porn that was just raw, low/no production sex», from smuggled copies of «Mayfair» at school to «photos I took of my lover». Tastes often change throughout the porn career, though sometimes it is the resonance of a particular kind of content and the continuity it provides that gives it its value – one participant notes: «Pornographic fanfiction and fanart has continued to be one of my main sources of entertainment and socialization, leading to many lasting friendships». For this participant, porn is also a focal point for relationships and connections with others, and not just sexual partners.

Whether it is shared like this or consumed alone in private as a shameful secret or a treasured source of solitary pleasure, porn is rooted in the material world. It is encountered in particular places and spaces. Encounters with pornography take a variety of forms, and this variety can be glimpsed within the accounts of individual participants. Here is one describing a range of formats, genres, and aesthetics, and telling us something not only about the content of the porn they have sought out, but the states of sensation and emotion that they desire:

I first came to porn in 6th grade where I would masturbate to still images and *literotica*. I eventually began searching for galleries instead of using Google. As I got a better internet connection I discovered videos and would watch the previews for pay porn. Eventually the topics of the video went from softcore to lesbian to hardcore, and very occasionally I would find myself watching things like gangbangs and bestiality. Sometimes I like porn that makes me angry or insecure, such as cheating girlfriends or wifesharing.

Another is more specific about their current interests and the important particularity of an unfolding type of scene:

Most recently I realized I like amateur and teen porn the best, but it has to meet certain criteria: hot girl, doggystyle among other positions, very hot if she keeps some clothes on and

6 A. Comfort, *The Joy of Sex*, Crown, New York 1972.

7 Terry Goodkind, *Wizard's First Rule*, TOR, New York 1994.

gradually removes more and more during intercourse, no panning to the guys [sic] face for his reaction, and no cumshot, or at least I can exit as the cumshot starts.

At the beginning of a porn career, individuals often make do with whatever is at hand, but after this, porn is found through active searches using a variety of routes; «my boyfriend's search history», friends and partners, sex review sites, Twitter tips, rss feeds, the writings of sexual health professionals and sex advice columnists, email newsgroups or dating sites. Participants describe how, as with other forms of cultural engagement, searching for media is improvised and then finessed – for example, through the use of specific search engines, sites, image boards, text fragments, keywords, focused on specific authors, performers or directors. Some also develop practices and skills of collection, curation, tagging, storing and organizing their materials, and others go on to write or make their own pornography.

People's relationships with porn may vary over time; it might be used regularly, becoming an important part of the routines of life, or only sometimes, occasionally, rarely. Interest in pornography may wax and wane, wane and then wax again, and not always in ways that we might expect. Sometimes it is fascinating and compelling, at other times it becomes dull and tiresome. It may resonate particularly strongly when it is novel, but equally the familiarity of a particular scene or a relationship with a particular performer or director may become central to its importance. Participants describe how they have used it all the time, for a few seconds or minutes, saved it for particular occasions, lost interest. Their relations with porn shift according to the conditions of their changing lives; to age, relationships, what they can and can't do, to their developing sexual identities, desires and fantasies. In this account, a participant suggests how porn may provide a way of engaging with the specific conditions of their body, desire, access and opportunity for sex, and how it may be generative of a range of thoughts, feelings and actions that cannot be reduced to the kind of enthrallment that Srinivasan describes in her account:

As a male with a disability, porn allows me to indulge in some fantasies and helps relieve some level of sexual frustration. I did not get to enjoy high school and college as some people do. I first came to porn as way of dealing with this. Seeing and hearing the act of sex on screen helped to an extent. I saw certain fetishes, such as pegging, depicted and began to explore that facet of my sexuality. And most recently, I have started to wonder if porn with people with disabilities could be made.

There is an enormous amount to say about people's engagement with porn and while we might find patterns within and across their accounts of that engagement, we might usefully resist the pressure to draw firm or sweeping conclusions about pornography until we know much more about the materialities and particularities of people's engagement with porn and its significance in their lives.