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Creating an Authentic Fantasy: How Women-Produced Pornography Constructs “Real” Sex

Pornography straddles the line between reality and fantasy. Pornography operates as a fantasy, indeed its primary function is to provide a stimulus for sexual arousal that is outside of the everyday. The scenarios are laden with the fantastical from the setting, to the clothes, to the people. At the same time, pornography must be “real” in the sense that people are “really” having sex. Most porn films go to great lengths to demonstrate that penetration of various sorts is occurring and that in fact orgasm is reached—a male orgasm anyway. For the women I am studying, creating an “authentic” pornographic image is also of great import. Authenticity is achieved through the depiction of the “real”: “real” orgasms, “real” lesbians, “real” couples, and “real” sexuality.

Using ethnographic and interview methods, I have been studying women who make “alternative” pornography—pornography outside of the mainstream industry both geographically as well as in content. The films are predominantly queer, representing a range of gender performances. I interviewed women in all aspects of the industry: producers, directors, actors, crew, and distributors. I talked to women who make films as well as women who run pornographic websites. I have completed 67 in-depth interviews and plan to conduct 10-15 more. In addition, I worked as a production assistant and 1st assistant director on a number of films.

In this talk I will explore how the women I am studying both discuss issues of “realness” and fantasy in their work as well as how this gets done in the making of films. I will talk about the fine line between reality and fantasy in the context of making porn: for instance, there are sometimes tensions between the “real” depictions of lesbian sexuality portrayed in the films with the lived experiences of the queer women making them. I will explore a number of questions related to this: How are authentic representations determined? What makes one lesbian scene more legitimate than another? What is a “real” lesbian? What is the female “money shot?” I will discuss the ways in which these “authentic” representations operate to legitimate working in pornography.

The process of making pornographic films is a negotiated one. Constraints due to producer input, finances, and the marketplace among others force women to make compromises in their vision. I will talk about ways in which this impacts the gendered, raced, and sexualized depictions in the films.

This research represents an analysis still in formation. I am near the end of data collection for my dissertation and I am taking the first steps in exploring these themes. I am interested in getting feedback about relevant literature as well as directions for future analysis.