Beyond the Male Gaze: A Third-Wave Case Study in Candida Royalle's Pornography

Jennifer Sider

In the 1970s, a rupture in the second-wave feminist movement emerged out of opposing responses to pornography. Around this time, the developing field of feminist film theory, influenced by psychoanalysis, was critical of problematic images of women onscreen. However, as filmmakers sought to make porn films from a female perspective in the 1980s, the assumption that pornography, like Hollywood cinema, is always already male-oriented due to the male gaze was called into question. Some believe that both the feminist anti-porn argument and its uncomfortable link with Laura Mulvey's discredited psychoanalytic theory of spectatorship have since become outdated. The problem with their generalized readings of gendered spectatorship in effect limited both the possibilities of these forms of visual media as well as the potential for the viewer to participate in creating meaning. Both arguments were followed by a backlash by pro-sex feminists, and by other feminist film theorists after Mulvey, who insisted on a cultural rather than psychoanalytic approach to spectatorship. Candida Royalle's Sensual Escape (1988) participates in this reconsideration of screen sex, challenging the feminist anti-porn
Jennifer Sider

claim that pornography necessarily objectifies women through the male gaze as it encourages multiple levels of simultaneous identification for viewers of both sexes. The film thus opens up agency on the part of spectators beyond sexual difference, and more broadly contributes to the lifting of societal stigma from pornography.

The position of anti-porn feminists, led by Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon, was similar to that initiated by Mulvey’s psychoanalytic approach to feminist film theory, since both groups relied on films solely as texts in their methodology to understand spectatorship. By looking to porn and Hollywood films, they sought to explain how contentious representations of women negatively influence spectators. Like Dworkin and MacKinnon, who believed that pornography is inherently sexist, Mulvey, in her famous essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), described Hollywood films as a direct extension of patriarchy. It was here Mulvey first put forth the influential idea of the male gaze to explain how sexism is even built into the apparatus itself. By reading the film shot as gendered toward serving masculine desires, she stated that the male spectator identifies with the male protagonist whose point-of-view is privileged because the camera aligns with his gaze, which is in turn fixed on the female character. Therefore, the male spectator, male character, and feminized camera are all complicit in looking, which is associated with control and mastery. The female figure, by contrast—and the female spectator, by extension—is objectified. She merely exists “as a
Beyond the Male Gaze

signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker of, meaning” (Mulvey 15).

The concept of the male gaze also resonated with the feminist anti-porn argument about the aesthetic and stylistic choices in pornography. One of the reasons that feminist critics offered for why, statistically, men consume vastly more porn than women do, is that the majority of pornographic images degrade women based on misogynistic tropes and conventions like lesbian sex scenes and the facial cum shot (Allison, Beggan 303). These instances can be traced back to Mulvey’s theory that the male gaze structures the way visual media is presented as hierarchically gendered and positions spectators according to their sex. Since the pornography industry, like Hollywood, is overwhelmingly male-dominated—where “women directors are typically seen as anomalies” (Kearny 193)—it is clear to see how a male gaze is in fact at work in its films. Moreover, the male gaze is inextricably linked with a level of power that results from the choices by male directors and afforded to male spectators, while denied from female characters and spectators. However, we can only read images as giving insight into human psychology and only compare represented worlds to our own impressions of reality to a limited extent. A fundamental shortcoming in the arguments made by Mulvey and anti-porn feminists was made glaring by the fact that they neglected to acknowledge the spectator’s role in the meaning-making process—or even
divorced the spectator from it. Both Mulvey and anti-porn feminists already anticipated what they believed to be inevitable gendered responses to representations of women in the areas of pornography and classical Hollywood cinema, leaving no room for variation between spectators.

By isolating sexual difference as the primary factor of influence on spectatorship, Mulvey and anti-porn feminists’ complete investment in the text also failed to recognize the impact of cultural forces as well as the intersections among different categories of identity. In a rebuttal to Mulvey, other feminist film theorists contributed to the growing debate on the topic of precarious female spectatorship as the field became divided, like the second-wave movement. Linda Williams, now a leading scholar in porn studies, was one of the first to challenge the idea that there was no pleasure to be derived by female spectators, as Mulvey further lamented their dire situation in “Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’” (1981). Mulvey explained that female viewers have only two debilitating choices of identification: either sadistically with the male character or masochistically with the female character. In opposition, Williams argued that female pleasure could be obtained from the female viewer’s capacity “to occupy all the existing positions of identification (male as well as female, from the periphery as well as the protagonist)” (Aaron 40). Royalle’s Sensual Escape encourages this latter approach to viewer identification for both sexes, and even towards transgressive cross-gender identification.
Beyond the Male Gaze

‘Sex-positive’ feminists also disagreed with the way that anti-porn feminists neglected to contextualize porn within interconnected societal forces, criticizing them for being “racist, indifferent to class privilege and for showing no concern for sex workers” (Ciclitira 283). Moreover, this attack was laid on Mulvey’s argument, which did not acknowledge differences either for male or for female viewers. The second-wave feminist movement as a whole became defined by anti-porn organizing, but other women who felt excluded because they were not white and middle-class also disparaged the movement itself. Second-wave feminism had not acknowledged an intersection between gender and other categories of identity like race and class, an approach that is fundamental to current “third-wave” feminism. Therefore, arguments by both Mulvey and anti-porn feminists that hinge on the idea of the male gaze had to be reconciled with cultural influences and individual differences that are also crucial to understanding spectatorship, especially in light of major changes in feminist theory.

In problematizing the notion of a male or even female gaze, Williams’ suggestion of the fluidity of male gazes, female gazes, and diverse identifications leads to a far more intricate understanding of the nature of spectatorship than was once considered. The idea that all men or women are alike in their viewing practices risks relying on the sex/gender binary system that undergirds Western society by seeking to classify and impose ideals of masculinity on men and femininity on women, without overlap. This rigid system, like the idea of the male gaze
Jennifer Sider

itself, prevents people from self-representation and self-definition outside of these constricting gender categories. The anti-porn feminists and Mulvey’s call for attention to the societal consequences of gender difference, while important, was made to the exclusion of other categories that shape identity. The result was that anti-porn feminists and Mulvey threatened to undermine their own projects by essentializing and ultimately universalizing gender differences, despite their efforts to illuminate the problems that arise from these differences in the first place.

In reassessing screen sex, there must also be a change in the way the term ‘pornography’ often contains “a negatively valenced judgmental tone and implies immoral motive or intent” (Allison, Beggan 301). Working within a more open-minded framework that allows for multiple gender identifications and recognizes individual and cultural differences—as well as the important roles that spectators hold—is a constructive starting point in studying pornography fairly, especially in light of the diverse industry it has become since the ’80s, when the video explosion allowed more people to create their own porn films. It was then that it became more accessible for marginalized groups, including women, people of colour, and LGBTQ people, among others, and it became more possible for them to express themselves as sexual beings through pornography. Royalle is an exemplary product of the mindset of this era. In order to question the typically negative connotations of the term ‘pornography,’ a common explanation has been proposed: that
critics impose the question of morality, rather than the more pressing question of ethics. In their analysis of porn films, anti-porn feminists used a morality-based method that dealt in the binaries of good and evil. However, an ethics-based model more closely resembles a cultural approach to spectatorship that acknowledges viewer difference and agency, and allows insight into “what the production, consumption and distribution of porn might mean to different stakeholders, and how these meanings came into being and changed over time” (Albury 648).

Candida Royalle is a noteworthy pioneer in the creation of an ethical kind of pornography that may be unknown to the many who think of porn monolithically. An adult film star in the ’70s, Royalle started Femme Productions in 1981 in order to show, in her words, that “it was possible to produce porn that had integrity ... could be non-sexist, and ... life-enriching.” Over her career she became increasingly concerned with ethically made porn: she now has an age policy of using actors over 22, maintains higher production costs than most porn movies but with an egalitarian payment system, and upholds fair working conditions for actors with no more than one sex scene per day. Her philosophy is about making people feel good about their sexuality and that “women, especially, have a right to our own pleasure” (Royalle 23). As if directly addressing Mulvey’s notion of the male gaze and the idea that women can only be the bearers of meaning, she has said, “To tell [women] continually it is unsafe for us to explore our own fantasies is to keep us out of power. We have to control our own images and our own power.”
Jennifer Sider

With this liberating outlook in mind, an examination of her film *Sensual Escape* will highlight the way that her approach to pornography frees both the spectator from fixed gendered readings and the notion of pornography itself from its reputation of equaling female objectification, when it is in fact a source of often-untapped pleasure.

*Sensual Escape* is a hardcore porn film produced by Royalle that consists of two parts: “Fortune Smiles,” written and directed by Gloria Leonard, and “The Tunnel,” written and directed by Royalle. It is worth noting that Nina Hartley, who plays Jessica in “Fortune Smiles,” is widely known for being a sex educator, porn advocate, and self-proclaimed feminist, in addition to her long career as a porn star. Placing the two stories together, the film effectively subverts the male gaze: initially by what can be read as the alternative of a female gaze at work, since the main characters of each section are women who are active agents able to control the look. However, above and beyond the operation of a female gaze—and considering that the target audience of Femme Productions films consists of couples in addition to women—it is clear that both masculine and feminine points of identification are played with, with the result that viewers can find comparable and mutual levels of visual pleasure regardless of gender. It should be noted that while only white, middle-class, heterosexual couples are represented in the film, this does not mean that viewers outside these categories cannot derive pleasure from the film, since that would be to ignore the ability for viewers to cross their own categories of
identification to blur these distinctions at their own will, as posited by Williams. As the film experiments with the juxtaposition between realism in “Fortune Smiles” and fantasy with “The Tunnel,” the impetus is to probe different aspects of human sexuality, as seen in the excitement of a first date and that of sexual dreams.

“Fortune Smiles” opens with Jessica waiting for her date Chris at a restaurant. Before ordering, their obvious attraction convinces them to leave: they order Chinese food to take out and go back to her apartment. After dinner, as they begin foreplay, shifting voice-over narration reveals each character’s thoughts as both of their subjectivities are explored. Their thoughts range from worries about their bodies to small talk before using a condom, and the accompanying music is upbeat, lending a light-hearted and fun atmosphere to the depiction of the sex act. There is a relatable quality in the way that the characters are portrayed, as if they were on an actual first date where both partners are interested in and respectful of one another. The camera does its part to encourage multiple identifications for viewers of both sexes during intercourse, equally showcasing male and female pleasure in turn, as we see Jessica, Chris, and then both of them together, avoiding the misogynist stylistic conventions of traditional pornography. Rather than a typical “money shot” to end this section, the couple had safely used a condom and they both look satisfied in their post-coital embrace.
Jennifer Sider

“The Tunnel” features a nameless woman who has a recurring dream about a mysterious man dancing topless in an illuminated tunnel. A female gaze is at work, as her look is aligned with the camera at him, and he is in effect dancing for the spectator, whomever they may be. She is obsessed with these fantasies, trying to sketch the man upon awaking from these dreams. While on a date, she cannot take her mind off the man from her dream, as a voice-over narration reveals her thoughts about misunderstanding men in the real world, which allows us to infer that she is turning to her fantasy life for sexual pleasure. Unlike most pornography, it takes a long time to build up to the sex act in this portion of the film. Instead, most screen time consists of artistically composed shots of the woman dancing wildly, with her hair blowing in all directions and spot lit against a purple background. She assumes a liberated persona in this fantasy world, wearing revealing clothing and embodying a demeanor that mirrors the openly sexual nature of the man she keeps seeing in her dreams, although they have yet to make actual contact. Finally, she is able to have sex with the man from her dream when she meets a stranger that looks like him that day. The presentation of the sex act itself is unusual in that intercourse is not the focus; rather, their activity focuses on her pleasure, as he performs oral sex to her satisfaction before she wakes up in the morning. Unlike “Fortune Smiles,” where the camera cuts between shots of both the male and female engaged in the sex act, the gaze in “The Tunnel” shifts between primarily looking at the male figure leading up to the sex scene and on the
Beyond the Male Gaze

female figure during the sex scene. Thus, a person or couple watching the film has many options for identification as they can participate in looking at the character of the same or opposite sex focused on at one moment, or with the same or opposite character on the periphery.

Attesting to the fact that pornography can be used toward positive ends for both sexes by simultaneously allowing multiple levels of gender identification, Candida Royalle’s Sensual Escape is a call for the reclamation of screen sex as having the potential to provide a sexually liberating experience for different viewers. Denounced by sex-positive feminists and feminist film theorists like Williams, the narrow model of spectatorship based on textual analysis—as used by anti-porn feminists like Dworkin, MacKinnon, and Mulvey in drawing on psychoanalytic film theory—does not account for cultural influences and individual differences which shape the various ways that a film can be understood by the viewer. It also leaves no room for viewer agency, since it assumes that all men and women read texts according only to their gender, which reinforces the idea that a film will always harmfully affect a viewer based on sexual difference. In moving towards the idea that spectatorship is a multi-layered exchange between the text and viewer, pornography can be seen as a diverse world that is full of rich possibilities for human sexual expression.
Jennifer Sider

Works Cited


Filmography