

American Pornographies: Consumerism, Sensationalism, and Voyeurism in a Global Context

Veranstalter: Institut für Amerikanistik, Universität Leipzig

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On April 1 and 2, 2011, the University of Leipzig hosted the second annual MA-level graduate conference at American Studies Leipzig. The conference focused on the topic „American Pornographies: Consumerism, Sensationalism, and Voyeurism in a Global Context.“ More than fifty participants - presenters and guests - from seventeen universities gathered to present their research and exchange thoughts and ideas.

Participants came from Romania, Poland, Slovenia, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, and various regions of Germany to investigate pornography both on literal and on broader levels: The sixteen presenters discussed aspects such as gender, sexuality, and pleasure in pornographic films and other texts, but they also traced elements of the 'pornographic' in contemporary and historical contexts that are ostensibly non-pornographic, such as social media, popular culture, and politics. Due to this approach, the conference revealed that the 'pornographic' elements of pornography are not necessarily of a sexual nature, but often refer to notions of commodification, voyeurism, and sensationalism. The individual presentations were grouped in seven sessions: 'Pornographic' Strategies in the Media, Notions of 'Pleasure' in Porn, Popular Culture and 'Pornography,' Shaping Identities via Porn, Political 'Pornographies,' 'Pornographic' Pleasures and Aesthetics, and Bodies in 'Pornography.'

Overall, the conference served three distinct purposes. First and foremost, it brought together MA students from all over Europe to present and discuss their latest research. The large response the organizers received in the form of proposals - only about a third of which could be accepted in the end due to time limitations - underscored the demand (and thus the need) for academic conferences already below the PhD-level. Furthermore,

the conference provided a venue for students to gain professional experience early in their careers, and it served as an effective networking platform - generally a rare opportunity on the MA level in Europe. Secondly, the conference theme stressed core trends in contemporary research in the field of American studies, approaching the topic from transnational and interdisciplinary angles: Presenters came from various national and disciplinary backgrounds (such as literary studies, cultural studies, cultural history, and political science), incorporating their specific knowledge and experiences into their research and thus demonstrating the value of scholarship on the MA level. Finally, by focusing explicitly on pornography and looking for the 'pornographic,' the conference dared to closely investigate an often silenced subject that is too rarely taken seriously in academia, and it simultaneously opened it up and demonstrated that the 'pornographic' - and hence pornography - can be found in many other aspects of everyday life, speaking to its ubiquity.

The presentations focusing on pornography in sexual contexts primarily investigated notions of pleasure, gender, and identity in pornographic texts. They made apparent how much the study of pornography has been influenced by the so-called 'sex wars' in feminist academia, with scholars such as Andrea Dworkin prominently condemning pornography for its exploitation of and violence against women. Throughout the 1990s, 'sex-positive' feminists such as Linda Williams became more outspoken and presented more nuanced readings of pornographic texts, potentially seeing liberating and empowering elements in them. Against this historical background and legacy, presenters stressed that pornography today is a very multifaceted phenomenon, for instance since 'queer' pornography or non-mainstream pornography such as 'pornoterrorism' question many of the normative assumptions of earlier scholars and exhibit different understandings of pleasure and patterns of consumption. By emphasizing the prominence of the Internet in today's production and consumption of pornography, presenters focused their attention on how these changes have led to an increase in pornography's commercialization and commodifica-

tion. At the same time, and in part because of these developments, the consumption and the study of pornography have become normalized throughout the decades, and pornography has thus been crucial, among others, in the formation of (e.g. gay) identities and communities.

As the presentations stressed core aspects such as pleasure, consumption, and commodification in pornographic texts, they also revealed links to presentations of the conference that focused on seemingly non-pornographic and desexualized contexts. In this sense, an underlying theme of the overall conference was to detach pornography from sexuality in order to explore the elements that indeed make pornography and other phenomena 'pornographic.' As was suggested in the conference's opening speech, the frequent use of terms such as 'food porn' (to describe the visual pleasure derived from looking at depictions of food) or 'torture porn' (to refer to excessively graphic and gory scenes in horror movies) in American media, advertising, and other texts suggests that sexuality is not necessarily the primary element making up pornography. Instead, the conference approached pornography from a multitude of perspectives and, while realizing that no singular definition can ever be found for such an elusive concept, tried to partly investigate pornography as the commodified and often sensationalist depiction of individual acts and features that deliberately aims at arousing an intense emotional reaction.

Accordingly, topics that were prominently discussed in pornographic texts were taken up in other presentations as well, for instance in investigations of gazes, voyeurism, and aesthetic pleasure in movies and novels. Overall, the wide range of subjects and approaches served to demonstrate the great variety of what one can call 'pornographic,' and the ubiquitous (but often unnoticed) presence of pornography in society. Presenters especially demonstrated this presence in contemporary media, popular culture, and politics. In the end, in addition to the many noteworthy points raised in the individual presentations, the overall conference effectively demonstrated how productive and omnipresent pornography and the 'porno-

graphic' are, and to which elements and aspects these terms actually refer to. As such, what became equally apparent is the need for further study of this often neglected connection and the still somewhat marginalized subject of pornography - understood both literally and figuratively - in academia.

The conference also attracted a large crowd of students and other guests from Leipzig and the rest of Germany. The event was opened by greetings from Joachim Schwend (Leipzig), Dean of Students at the university's philological faculty. Further greetings came from Crister Garrett (Leipzig), executive director of American Studies Leipzig, and James Seward, the Consul for Public Affairs at the Consulate of the United States Leipzig. The US Consulate was one of the conference's main sponsors, along with the Institute for American Studies, the American Studies Alumni Association, the ASL Event Committee, and Shake'n'Donate. JOHN PATRICK LEARY (Detroit), assistant professor at Wayne State University, and MICHAEL ARCHER, co-founder and editor in chief of the magazine *Guernica*, further contributed to the conference with speeches focusing on 'ruin porn' and 'pornographic' and sensationalist strategies in journalism, respectively, during the keynote session at the end of the first conference day. They spoke to participants from Detroit and New York City via teleconference.

Organizing the conference was part of American Studies Leipzig's MA program and the institute's commitment to project-driven learning. During the module iDEWEY in the third semester, MA students planned, organized, and finally hosted the conference independently. The 2010/11 organizing committee consisted of seven MA students in their second year: Ines Krug, Andreas Mooser, Julia Neugebauer, Eleonora Ravizza, Stefan Schubert, Franziska Wenk, and Maria Zywiets. They were supervised and guided throughout the semester by the module's coordinator, Crister Garrett. Further information can also be found on the conference website at <http://americanstudies.uni-leipzig.de/asl-gradconference2011>.

Conference Overview:

Opening Speech (Maria Zywiets) and Greet-

ings (Joachim Schwend, James Seward, Crister Garrett)

Panel 1: 'Pornographic' Strategies in the Media

Jana G. Toppe (Berlin). „You Can Follow Me on Twitter“: Celebrity Fetishization in the New Media

Justyna Cugowska (Poznań). Nudity in American Fashion Photography

Panel 2: Notions of 'Pleasure' in Porn

Jiann-Chyng Tu (Berlin). Economies of Pleasure: The Commodification of the Money Shot

Pax Chmara (Berlin). P is for Porno

Panel 3: Popular Culture and 'Pornography'

Tanja Lange (Rostock). „Wherever You Go, Whatever You Slash - 'No' Means No and 'Yes' Means Yes!“ The Concept of Sexual Consent in *Xena: Warrior Princess Femslash*

Diana Petrescu (Bucharest). With Great Power Comes Great Angst: The Advent of Superhero Tragedy Porn

Annelies Véronique Kleinherenbrink (Utrecht). „Let's Shoot This Shit!“ Lil' Kim's *OneWorld* Cover, 'Burqa Porn,' and Hip-Hop

Keynote Session with Michael Archer and John Patrick Leary

Panel 4: Shaping Identities via Porn

José L. Ramos-Rebollo (Alcalá de Henares). Gay Porn: Building the Gay Community

Olivia Badoi (Wrocław). Off or *On Our Backs*? Visual Negotiations of Lesbian Sexuality in Post-70s America

Milorad Kapetanović (Ljubljana). Porn: The Change of Perception, Production of Image, and Commodification

Panel 5: Political 'Pornographies'

Costel Coroban (Constanța). „Recent Developments“ in American Political Pornography

Ambrogio Morrone (Rome). Pornography and Political Silence

Panel 6: 'Pornographic' Pleasures and Aes-

thetics

Stefanie John (Hannover). Performing Victimhood: Sexualized Power Plays in the Serial-Queen Melodrama

Alexandra Hähnert (Berlin). Towards the Slaughter: A Hedonistic Reading of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*

Panel 7: Bodies in 'Pornography'

Roxana Elena Ghiță (Timisoara). Redefining Pornography in a Dystopic Future in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

Katharina Zilles (Gießen). Real-Life 'Torture Porn': The Relation Between Representation and Reality

Closing Speech (Stefan Schubert)

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