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24

# Generation P?

Youth, Gender and Pornography

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Editors: Susanne V. Knudsen, Lotta Löfgren Mårtenson and Sven-Axel Månsson

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*Susanne V. Knudsen, Lotta Löfgren-Mårtenson and Sven-Axel Månsson*  
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## 'Porno-chic'

– sex and mainstreaming of pornography  
in mass culture

*By Anette Dina Sørensen*

We give you adventurous days filled with sun, sand and real excitement as well as wild nights with j... (censored; read: juicy soda pop) score and sweaty hours (from an insertion on the front page of a catalogue put out by the Danish travel agency Øster Lindet in 2003).

Under the name Young Fun Tour, the Danish travel agency Øster Lindet (Eastern Lindet) arranges chartered trips to the south of Spain for adolescents. By studying the agency's brochure, one gains an interesting picture of what the agency promotes as high-quality experiences for young people. As the quotation above suggests, there is to be a sufficient amount of alcohol, and high-quality travelling experiences are first and foremost about sex. The pictures in the catalogue conjure up unbridled excesses for those who have an urge to travel, and suggest how, where and with whom the sex drive can be satiated. The gender roles are obvious: while men are depicted as barflies who scan the surroundings and occasionally respond to 'the goods', the women are pictured as willing, enticing sirens with voluminous breasts and bulging nipples under wet, body-hugging T-shirts.

The women, presented as sexual offerings, apparently incarnate the alleviation that the travel agency implies will take place at the holiday destination. For potential male tourists, the women in the catalogue are presented as 'a free choice' guaranteed providers of sexual satisfaction. For the women who consider going to the south of Spain with Young Fun Tours, the catalogue's holiday promise is that they are guaranteed to be selected – if they tend to their appearance and styling and, in addition, are willing to make themselves available.

The use of sex by mass culture to attract attention when targeting specified groups, (i.e., the aforementioned catalogue) is not a new phenomenon. In Denmark

sexuality has legally been present in the public sphere since the relaxation of restraints on illustrated pornography in 1969. It was also possible to find mass cultural references to sex earlier, even though the regulations in § 234 in the Danish penal code about production and distribution of 'indecent publications, illustrations or objects' often had the legal authorities screaming out loud (Thing 1999).

But although the phenomenon is not new, it has been commonly recognised in recent years that references to sex are now pervasive in the public sphere. Hence it is common – especially in public debate – to use the phrase 'sexualisation of the public space' (Cawood & Sørensen 2002, Krogh-Meyer 2002). While it is important to talk about the increasing extent to which mass culture refers to sexuality, what is new and more important is the imprint that pornography makes in mass culture and the way that sexualised mass culture portrays gender.

While in the 1990s, commercial illustrations, for example, depicted the post-modern decomposition of the traditional meanings of gender, there is today an increasing backslide toward quite traditional representations of gender. This is to be seen not only in commercial sales promotions, but also more generally as a common feature of fashion journalism, of youth magazines, of television programmes, of music videos and quite often in the campaigns the adolescents themselves initiate. These phenomena are related: the resurrection of stereotyped gender representations is closely connected to the onset of mass cultural pornography.

## Mainstreaming of pornography – 'porno-chic'

The term that best describes the current position of pornography in our culture is 'mainstreaming'. In his books, the English media researcher Brian McNair has frequently examined a related phenomenon which is referred to as 'porno-chic' in media research (McNair 1996, 2002). The term 'mainstreaming' denotes the cultural process whereby pornography imperceptibly becomes part of our everyday life, as a generally accepted and often idealised cultural element. Three phenomena work together in this process. The first is the increasing *volume*, which pertains to the increasing quantity of pornography, its more frequent display, and its ease of access. Thus, to find pornography, one no longer needs to sneak into particular cinemas or specialty shops; one can watch porn on late-night TV (even on non-commercial channels) and find pictures or watch web-cam transmitted porn on the internet all day. If one wants to consume pornography, one is no

longer limited to particular times or places. Nor is one subjected to the shaming and scornful gazes of the public, since the consumption may take place anonymously. Simultaneous with these changes is the process of *clean-up*, which means that genuine pornography is slowly becoming acceptable. This is taking place because of the mass media's growing interest in this field and is to be seen in different genres and media, such as documentaries on TV, popular magazines that make references to web sites on the internet, reviews of 'porn magazines' and articles that cover a wide range of pornographic topics, from life as a stripper or a customer of prostitution to reviews from the SM-clubs. A recent example of this phenomenon in Denmark is Danish ex-porn star Katja Kean's autobiography about her life in the international porn business (Kean & List 2002).

When the mass media handle pornographic material, they operate – often unconsciously – in a schismatic field between 'shy modesty' and 'liberated matter of course'. The motives given for covering such topics were initially formulated as a sort of public service to satisfy the public's demand for information on and documentation of the shady sides of society. More recently, however, it seems that the motives have more to do with an eagerness to challenge and relocate boundaries. The argument that it is acceptable to express and show certain things that may be conceived as transgressions is present both explicitly and implicitly, and it is implied that one's acceptance is an indication of broad-mindedness and a liberal attitude.

The Danish youth magazine *Tjeck*, which targets both genders, is financed by the labour movement and is distributed free to all young members of trade unions, has been part of the porno-chic movement since the late 1990s. In February 2002 the magazine published the article "Snoop Doggy Dogg – I have fucked one million ho's" which is a significant example in support of the statement above. At first, it seems to thematise the ethical dilemmas associated with pornography by telling the story of a young man's moral agony connected to buying a hardcore pornographic video produced by Snoop Doggy Dogg. Quite soon, however, one discovers that the topic instead concerns the 'fascination of porn' and that the purpose of the article is to legitimize and normalize the consumption of pornography. This is done by explicit ridicule of the main arguments of the critics of pornography and is underscored by detailed information about places where the video is for sale.

The article is crammed with pictures from the pornographic film, and some of the captions, which are quotations from the film, are: "Way to go. Come closer, then we'll pull down our knickers and show daddy parts of the pink!" "Does it

tickle you? Do you like it? What do you say? Would you rather have a taste of daddy's pounding organ? So, help yourself". (*Tjeck Magazine* 2002/123).

A third phenomenon associated with the so-called 'porno-chic' or 'the mainstreaming of pornography' is that *fragments* of pornography gradually become parts of the mass culture. Commercial posters, music videos, TV-documentaries, fashion reviews, and magazines (particularly youth magazines) increasingly use signs, symbols, aesthetic features or verbal statements which themselves are not pornography, but clear references to pornography. Examples are the poses fashion models adopt in fashion reportage, their clothing, their movements, their surroundings, or the statements they make. Thus the autumn 2001 catalogue from the Benetton-owned clothing company Sisley featured a series of pictures inspired by the theme in the hay with animals. The pictures are strongly sexual with obvious references both to sexual preferences such as animal-sex, and to classic pornographic scenarios. In one of the illustrations, the caption refers "the money shot" or the "cum shot" in pornographic terminology. The fashion catalogue rephrases the cum-shot in the image of a young woman who squirts milk from a cow's udder in her mouth. The milk runs out of her mouth and downward on the ground while she stares at the viewer in concordance with the look that the porn model directs to the imagined viewer in a classic porn production.

## Stereotypical representations of gender

A problem that is related to the mainstreaming of pornography in mass culture involves the ways the genders are being portrayed. A large part of what is real pornography – especially as far as hardcore porn is concerned – makes use of gender stereotypes that gradually seep into mass culture when mass culture refers to pornographic elements. This is especially true for advertising media, but it is also true for more general fashion reports in magazines, as well as Danish youth magazines that target both genders. Here pornographic signs are connected to scenarios that are quite gender stereotypical. To underscore the distinction it can be stated that the role pattern in mainstream hardcore pornography is the classic one: The women are on display, attracting men by acting sensually, with the implication that they will thereafter serve them sexually. The men are teased and finally accept to be caught. Of course this presentation of gender is not applicable to all pornography, but the point is, that this is increasing when commercial illustrations and fashion features copy pornography.

This especially gives one reason to wonder if one studies the sales promotion industry. The industry is generally known for being 'streetwise', exploiting social trends and adopting cultural changes as soon as they appear. The changing relations between genders is no exception. Through the last five decades the advertising media have functioned as a seismograph for the fluctuations of gender relations. Any expansion of the gender role repertoires or shifting of power is registered and implemented quicker than lightening – out of bitter necessity. If the merchandise is to sell, its advertisements must convince consumers to identify with the product. In commercial illustrations from the 1950s women were therefore in charge of the hygienic standards of the home, and the family members' interaction with soap and water. Products for cleaning were marketed by house wives who with a raised forefinger reminded the child, the husband or other women of the importance of being hygienic. In those days, a considerable part of Denmark's female population were not yet part of the labour force but took care of the home, and thus such images were accepted as portrayals of 'real' femininity. The commercial illustrations were quick to transmit that the private sphere was a female domain – a place where men (breadwinners) did not belong during office hours.

In the 1960s and 1970s, however, the women swarmed to the labour market. For many of these women this resulted in double workload; when they were not at work, the laundry and house cleaning were waiting for them at home. The commercials were influenced by this change, and the dyspeptic remedy 'Samarin' not only reflected the new female role, but also promised women that the powder could remove the bubbling symptoms of double-work stress from their stomach.

Despite the fact that women had entered the labour market, it was still their responsibility that the house was tidy – both in reality, and in the commercial illustrations as well. However, when men at all were represented in the commercial illustrations at the time, it was exclusively in work related settings. But even this was changing over the years, not only in a social perspective, but also in the advertising media's reflection of the social transitions.

Looking back, the 1990s were the decade where the advertising industry really dissolved the traditional meaning of gender – completely in accordance with the social reality, and also in accordance with the post-modern ideas about the cultural construction of gender and its possible changeability. The women took their place in the public sphere, conquered the car and broke down the doors to the male lodges. Their definitive departure from home and entry into the top

career positions were reflected in the commercials for hair shampoo, where women with long, thick hair, perfect make-up and a self confident manner chaired the board meeting.

Interestingly, the men went in the opposite direction. They turned up at home, started to do the laundry and took days off for child care. And Marc O'Polo illustrated both these social trends by pointing out that it was a matter of course that the father was home with the children when the mother was at work, because: "The male swan will watch over the offspring while his mate searches for food". Through the 1990s fatherhood and caring fathers became the objects of considerable social awareness, and in the advertising industry there was a general eagerness to picture the father while he was carrying, hugging and caressing his children, and by so participating responsibly in his offspring's activities.

However, this was not the only change in mass culture's illustrations of the turnabout in men's lives. After years of insisting that the prototype of a real male was connected with 'offices' and 'leading positions', Hugo Boss brought a corrective to their former commercials by presenting the choreographer Kevan Allen while 'dancing for a living'. So no longer was dance as a man's profession considered 'sissy stuff'. Homophobia was also challenged in other ways in the 1990s. Men gradually came to be staged as sex objects. Calvin Klein's commercials for 'Obsession', Eau de Toilette for men, kick-started the trend in the late 1980s, but it spread rapidly to the marketing of other products. Now not only the female body, but the male body as well was capable of promoting products that had no relation to body care, for example feather beds, jeans and cameras. For the first time in the history of mass culture, the traditional gender roles were in transition; men were not only sexually objects to the female gaze, but also to their own. The mass cultural representations of men as sexualised and as sex objects made it possible for men to look at pictures of naked men without fear of being suspected for being homosexuals. Nikon gives an impressive illustration of this phenomenon in their commercial "Expose yourself and your camera", where the male body is introduced for the masculine consumer's eye: "Stuart McIntyre uses a Nikon F3 to photograph Søren Sundby with a Nikon Nuvis 125". In the picture Søren Sundby is immortalised in the middle of a jump. Stark naked he is hanging in the air while noticing that he is being observed by another man.

It can be argued that to sexualise the male body and turn it into a sex object is exactly as problematic as it is with the female body. And it is of course relevant to be critical of the tendency to market products by relating them to sexuality. But if we have to live with the sexualisation of the public sphere and 'porno-chic'

trend – and things do point in that direction – then making the male body a sex object is a democratization of the public eye because it challenges the accepted notion that by definition it is only the female body that can become a sex object.

In this perspective it is quite unfortunate that the phenomenon of sexualising the male body proved to be short-lived. Not that it has vanished. But sexualising the female body is still the overall dominating feature in mass culture. This condition was recently underscored by the hysteria it created when Yves Saint Laurent launched the new fragrance for men, 'M7', in 2002. The advertisement for the new fragrance showed a frontal picture of a naked man with his penis exposed. Most fashion magazines, including the semi-erotic magazines *GQ* and *Out*, which also are occupied with design, fashion and art, found this to be so groundbreaking and offensive that they refused to publish this advertisement, unless the picture was cropped so that only the model's torso was visible. In spite of 30 years of sexual liberation, it is still provocative to expose a naked person in a full frontal picture unless the person is a female model. In mass culture's sexualisation of gender and body the exposure of the penis remains one of the most tenacious taboos.

## The self-directed gaze and self-discipline

The advertising industry's construction of gender is not only related to mass culture's general porn chic tendencies, but is also concurrent with an era where local business organisations all over Denmark are arranging 'wannabee' and 'look-alike' competitions in the commercial centres of towns. In the middle of a Saturday's shopping hell you can find rest in front of a stage where little girls with edgy hips try to copy the latest music videos of Kylie Minogue or Britney Spears. Although it might be advertised differently, the competition on the stage in the town centre is not about dancing and pop idols, but about the girls' ability to act like mature women. It is about copying women's attitudes and transmitting the same sex appeal to the public in the same way as women with sexual experience can do it. If the girls do not succeed at the town centre, there are lots of other competitions they may enter. Both Danish national TV channels have 'auditions' that are transmitted nationally. And in the Christmas Catalogue from Magasin (a shopping centre in Copenhagen) in 2001 girls between 4 and 12 years could win a "princess day", which consisted of first being styled like a princess at Estée Lauder Skincare Centre then having breakfast in Magasin's Café, riding a limou-

sine around in Copenhagen, and finally watching the ballet in the Tivoli's Concert Hall. In Magasin's logic the girls experience the world by being seen by the world. The self-directed gaze and the self-discipline that automatically follow are being activated early for little girls.

One possible objection could go like this: Why would boys' and girls' conception of gender be affected by what mass culture exposes them to? The answer must be that when the gender representations that mass culture offers become increasingly one-dimensional in their portrayal of feminine and masculine sexuality, the role models from whom boys and girls can select fragments of identity become fewer. From media research we have learnt that there is a relation between reality and the descriptions mass culture reports. Real life does influence illustrations and narratives. However, influence also goes in opposite direction. Real life is shaped by the illustrations mass culture produces. Hence, the illustrations are not only a reflection of reality, but a co-producer of it. Recent observations in Denmark of primary school girls indicate that their experiences while growing up teach them to be painfully aware of not appearing 'cheap' (Görllich & Kirkegaard 2000). After adopting the sexualised expressions of femininity in order to be recognized as 'female' they must then, every day, walk the fine line between the whore/Madonna dichotomy, and in order to be able to navigate in this grey zone they need to carefully use the self-directed gaze that mass media have equipped them with since early childhood.

## The failure of sexual education

Since the liberalisation of laws pertaining to pornographic pictures, sexual education has done a lot to teach children and adolescents about pornography and not least how to differentiate between fantasy and reality. As one of the first to discuss this topic in Denmark, Preben Hertoft, professor of sexology, wrote in his book of sex education *Du og det andet køn* (You and the opposite gender) from 1973:

In pornography sexual activities are described as rather isolated from life as a whole and they therefore appear with a very mechanical and demonstrative imprint. Thus, pornography becomes quite detached from reality. It certainly pretends to describe sexual relations as 'they really are', but the result is usually portrayals that

have little in common with reality. It is necessary to notice this quality of unreality (...) in order not to believe that pornographic descriptions can be used as manuals for how to live life itself (My translation).

In his book *Køn, krop og kærlighed* (Sex, body and love) twenty years later (1992) Preben Hertoft repeats his point of view (Hertoft 1992). As in many other sex education books from the early 1990s Hertoft includes whole sections that exclusively deal with pornography. This is also the case in Alex Nyborg Madsen's formidable *Tænd lyset* (Turn on the light) from 1995. However, very few writers include a gender perspective or strive to make boys and girls aware of how gender is portrayed in pornography.

In the most recent Danish sex education literature for children and adolescents pornography as a specific topic has undergone a tremendous change. However, the new role that pornography plays in our culture is not discussed. Generally, pornography is mentioned in an isolated sentence here and there in connection with other topics, if mentioned at all. In those cases where the authors give pornography priority, they do so with the 'Hertoftian' endorsement, that 'pornography must not be mistaken with reality'. This is for example the case with Janne Hejgaard's latest publication *Kys og bolle* (Kisses and cuddling) from the year 2000, in which she gives advice on, among other issues, what to do when one is 'uncertain and fumbling':

First of all you have to gain knowledge. Read books, talk with someone, watch a film (an educational film that is, not a porn video, they do not deal with reality, but is more like sexual fairytales) (My translation).

Janne Hejgaard's material is interesting because it reflects a culture which is accustomed to pornography and expects young people to know of and to watch pornography as a matter of course. The stance that Hejgaard seems to take is that for this reason there is no point in delving deeper into the topic. Her presupposition about access to pornography becomes a symptom of the position porn has in our culture at this time: a liberated, omnipresent factor which is hard to see as a problem. However, in her understanding of pornography as omnipresent and her consequential fear of being didactic Hejgaard's coverage becomes painfully insufficient as well. It may seem legitimate to skim the topic, but more than ever



there is a need for specific prioritization which shines light on and discusses the cultural status of pornography, mass culture's porn chic tendencies and not least the gender representations that are transmitted to our culture. If this is done, it may be possible for children and adolescents to place regular pornography where it belongs, and more importantly to place themselves – their sexual identity and sexual understanding – in relation to the pornographic universe. In this connection it must be mentioned that the Danish organisation Sex & Samfund (Sex & Society) in the spring of 2002 published the book *Parat til sex – om unges seksuelle adfærd* (Ready for sex, about adolescents sexual behaviour) (Aaen et al. 2002). This book is intended to inspire teachers and other educators and furnish them with ideas about how to teach sexual education. It contains an excellent chapter about pornography written by the Danish researcher Rune Gade.

## New ethical directions

The recognition that public spheres have become sexualised, the problematization of this phenomenon, and not least the problematization of pornography's status in our culture, may be seen as a cultural evaluation of the history of sexual liberation in the last three decades. In this sense that process of evaluation has opened a new and rather exceptional field for the cultural negotiation of sexuality and the ethical standards of the sexual culture. It is new and exceptional because these kinds of negotiations have paradoxically been complicated by the ideas of emancipation we inherited, not only after 1969, but (in a Nordic context) also from the cultural radicalism in the 1880s and the 1930s. Through the 'hypothesis of repression' the French philosopher Michel Foucault has described how explicit talk about sexuality in the 1960s was seen as liberating in that it counteracted an idea held previously (especially in the Victorian era) that people should maintain absolute silence on the topic of sexuality (Foucault 1976). However, Foucault's point is that, with regard to sexuality – even in the Victorian era – people were not silent to the extent that has been advocated, but on the contrary a flood of new concepts on the topic of sexuality expanded opening up new possibilities with regard to sexual preferences.

According to Foucault, the idea of a past 'stamped with taboos' created the idea of sexual emancipation through speech. This 'hypothesis of repression', which Foucault then problematises, has established itself as truth to such an extent that even rudimentary criticism of more recent sexual-cultural develop-

ments has been categorised and rejected as moral prudishness, or even as an attempt to reinstate the sexual taboos of the past. Departing from Foucault's viewpoint the Danish philosopher, Peter Thielst, in his recent books criticizes the new sexual culture, created in the name of liberation, for not seeking new ethical standards for sexuality (Thielst 2000, 2002). He calls attention to the paradox that even for liberated sexual speech boundaries still exist with regard to admissible topics. Thus, it has been practically impossible to criticize the sexual emancipation project and the present sexual culture. Thielst is warning us, however, that we betray the cultural changes if we give up being critical in fear of being regarded as prudish and as moralists. In his perspective, we have placed ourselves in a position where we have little influence on the changes within the sexual culture and therefore risk ending up in a situation which "may be characterised more like spineless liberation than a determined conquest of new values and ways of living" (My translation).

Even though I have great respect for Thielst's analyses and agree with him in many respects, I do not agree with his pessimistic conclusions. Actually, I see the present discussion of the sexualisation of the public sphere and the criticism of the status of pornography as well as the porn chic trend precisely as attempts to create the new ethical orientation that Thielst calls for. It is correct that we are unaccustomed, and perhaps even uncomfortable with these discussions, but the fact that we commit ourselves to these discussions does, after all, give evidence to the idea that sexual liberation is constantly being redefined in a continuous cultural process of negotiation.

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