Elusive intensities, fleeting seductions, affective voices

Susanna Paasonen, University of Turku

Scholarship on pornography involves gradations of proximity and distance towards the phenomena studied. Underpinned by disciplinary notions of appropriate expression, language is the medium through which these labours are crafted and played out. Even if this may not always be obvious to readers struggling with convoluted sentence structures and densely layered ideas, scholarly writing is basically a communicative act. Consequently, most guidelines on good academic writing emphasize clarity and precision of expression over stylistic experimentation with the general of communicating one's argument as lucidly as possible. The notion of good writing is nevertheless slippery while the criteria used for evaluating it go well beyond aspects such as grammar and syntax toward affective and aesthetic characteristics such as the flow, feel and pleasure of text. Writing may aim to seduce the reader or to firmly hold her at an arm's length; it may strive to evoke sharp affective shivers or manage to bore its readers into distraction. The author's voice in all this may be markedly present or seemingly effaced.

In what follows, I explore the affective and political underpinnings of the modes of writing about pornography in the framework of feminist cultural studies. More specifically, I examine the role and function of proximities where the intensities of text set the bodies of readers and writers into motion. Such proximities may be painstakingly designed or emerge as fleeting and unintended seductions. Through that which Melissa Gregg (2006) identifies as the writer's affective voice, such encounters break against the norm of sober, detached reader engagement with scholarly prose.

The matter of writing

Writing is under constant scrutiny during peer-review and editorial processes, from corrections to remove all sorts of grammatical slips and slides to propositions for a different tone or style of expression. Given the political passions connected to the pornography in institutional and activist settings, the appropriateness of the stylistic decisions can be more acute a concern in porn studies than in other fields of cultural inquiry. Suggestions for the preferred feel, touch and distance of text propose desirable points of entrance to the topic examined, preferred modes for articulating one's arguments, views and experiences, as well as the promotion of certain forms of reader engagement over others.

To illustrate the issue with examples from my own work on pornography, some peer reviewers have proposed the use of humorous turns of phrases for a lighter feel. An ample reservoir of puns and innuendos – from the diverse uses of the verb 'penetrate' to all kinds of play with the stiffness or lubrication of things – is certainly available for such an enterprise, yet resorting to them implies degrees of discomfort with the topic at hand that require ironic detachment and distancing laughter. Other reviewers have found my exercises in personal writing and accounts of bodily affectations involved in the research process unnecessary in the proximities they address, and something best removed. While this latter critique is methodological in its focus, its key point concerns the manner of writing. As different as these responses are in their proposals for textual release and distance, they both point to the affective weight of writing and reading about porn.

The gradations of proximity involved or allowed vis-à-vis the materials studied vary according to publishing platforms and their preferred, discipline-based styles of communication. Stylistic preferences, or indeed norms of writing are firmly rooted in scholarly traditions and their respective notions of objectivity and authorial agency. While an

art studies scholar may be encouraged to develop poetic expression in aesthetic analyses of pornography, experimental styles of writing are less likely to be fostered in behavioural sciences. The matter of writing therefore broadens into epistemological concerns over the role and performative force of language in knowledge creation. Language can be perceived as an instrumental medium for unpacking the research process, analysing the data and presenting the findings, and authors may even wish to distance their investigation from the very notion of pornography – for example, by resorting to euphemisms such as 'sexually explicit materials' (SEMs) or 'sexual stimuli' (SS), instead (e.g. Hald et al. 2015; Tseng et al. 2016; Prause and Pfaus 2015). In stark contrast, other strands of academic prose may aim to move the reader and, by doing so, to communicate how the author herself has been moved by that which she studies (Gregg 2006, 13). Here, language plays a key role in conveying the specific textures, rhythms and hues of the materials examined and the sensations they evoke.

Gregg (2006, 6) situates the particularity of cultural studies inquiry in its 'distinctive combination of an affective address and critical rigour'. By breaking against the conventions of disengaged academic prose, cultural studies has created 'the possibility of a mobilising and contagious discourse, one which sustains existing intellectual peers but also spreads the insights of scholarly work to new audiences' (Gregg 2006, 6). All this revolves around what Gregg identifies as *the affective voice*, namely a particularly located, identifiable performative authorial style. Following the literary scholar Roland Barthes, affective voice can be understood as a specific grain, 'the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue' (Barthes 1977, 182). In the grain of a textual voice, the author's characteristic style of writing meets the dynamics and intensities of the phenomena studied and facilitate affective encounters with readers. Textual voices may have less immediacy than spoken ones, yet they are no less material in their reverberations.

Affective voice then entails ‘a distinct manner in the tone’ of the writer – an inflection to voice that lends urgency to her vocation and ‘aspires to touch the reader with words’ (Gregg 2006, 7, 8); ‘the particular timbre and cadence of a writer’s voice’ that can ‘stimulate, arouse and thrill’ (Gregg 2006, 11). This is a question of the craft of writing but equally one of political and intellectual investments. In foregrounding the formations and conjunctures of gender, race, class and sexuality, cultural studies aims at social engagement – and social justice – trough mobilizing and contagious forms of address. In the context of pornography, the political investments have long revolved around the material dynamics of gender and sexuality, the norms, hierarchies and relations of power and forms of labour that they tap into and fuel. Authorial voice, always resonating from a particularly located speaking body, can be a means of making evident the different avenues and implications that encounters with and experiences of pornography entail. If pornography involves depictions of bodies moving the bodies of its audiences, then it matters as to which are the bodies are moving and being moved, and in what kinds of ways (see Paasonen 2011).

In order to account for such affectations, cultural theory, and feminist scholarship in particular, has experimented with forms of personal writing that aim to remain open to surprises and uncertainties in processes of knowledge creation (e.g. Miller 1991, Sedgwick 1999; also Gregg 2006, 23–25). Rather than resorting to positions of objective exteriority, such approaches call for inventiveness and enjoyment in academic writing (also Massumi 2002, 12–13). Feminist scholarship informed by the epistemological stances of ‘thinking through the body’ (Rich 1995; Gallop 1988) and ‘situated knowledges’ (Haraway 1988) involves sensing, self-reflexive and autobiographical authorial bodies. It builds on an understanding of the performativity of academic language and acts of writing – namely, how to write ‘is to make oneself the center of the action of the speech, it is to effect writing by affecting oneself, to make action and affection coincide’ (Barthes 1989, 18). While refuted in

some disciplines, the first person emerges as a strategic position where the agent of writing is accountable for the knowledge she generates and the arguments she poses.

Getting up close

For Barthes, reading and criticism are animated by different dynamics of desire: 'to read is to desire the work, to want to be the work, to refuse to echo the work using any discourse other than that of the work' (Barthes 2007, 40). Reading, for Barthes, is an intimate relationship where the reader attaches herself to the text and surrenders to its rhythms and styles. In the case of pornography, close forms of reading, watching and listening would be oriented by a desire for bodily affectation. Doing scholarship within such modes of affectation means carefully describing and mediating the particularities of the materials studied: the textual outcome may even approximate their style and feel. Writing on pornography with close proximity is therefore to agree also an act of writing pornography, no matter how modest the end results may be in the titillations they have to offer.

Following Barthes (2007, 40), pastiche is the only response that a so-called 'pure reader' might produce, being too embedded in the text's reverberations to take distance from them. In criticism, the writer is not in love with the texts she studies – in fact she can be notably disenchanted – inasmuch as attached to the pleasures that surface in acts of writing. As tends to be the case with academic work, it is the latter of the two, namely the critic's point of entry that tends to dominate in porn studies. The reader's approach, animated by the specific dynamics of text, may involve disturbing closeness that threatens to suture the sense of distance deemed necessary for critical practice. It should nevertheless be noted that even stronger hues of viscera do not foreclose conceptualisation or critique, and that careful analysis of representational forms need not to efface a sense of their fleshy force, should the

platform of publication so allow. In practice, the two approaches, or interests of writing identified by Barthes can be uncoupled only with difficulty in work closely examining images, sounds, texts or combinations thereof. In other words, they are far from mutually exclusive.

Extensive close analysis that tries to capture and mediate the essential of that which it describes by no means necessitates love or desire for the object. The contrary can well be the case, as in anti-pornography writing detailing pornographic representation and women's experiences of sexual violence in painstaking detail. This has been an influential strategy of writing ever since Andrea Dworkin's multi-page summaries of pornographic images and texts in *Pornography* (see Dworkin 1989). Dworkin's affective voice is blunt, passionate and angry. By zooming in on the violence and discomfort of pornographic imageries, it aims to account for and verify their harmful social impact. Her affective voice amplifies some of the materials' affective register in order to animate the readers into disgust, alarm, fury, rage and feminist activism.

Scholarly projects addressing the affective underpinnings of porn vary greatly in their aims and stakes, from hermeneutic tendencies to strident critique. Despite their possibly mutually opposing motivations, such projects are united precisely in their attempts to mediate some of the contagious affective intensity that the genre entails. My own investigations into pornography have been driven by an interest in how its images, sounds and texts work in and through bodies and media technologies and, by doing so, to theorize its carnal force and appeal. Rather than aiming to engage the reader for general arguments either for or against the genre, my key pursuit has been to unpack some of its intensities, as registered in my own body, in order to conceptualize pornography in more general terms.

Bodily intensities do not generally prosper in academic prose, yet grasping some of their hue is elementary in unpacking the embodied forms of address through which pornography operates. Since studies of image and sound unfold through language, they involve translations between the modes and modalities of expression connected to the five senses. A gap always remains between different forms of sensing and making sense, one that is further amplified by attempts to capture some of the intensity of pornographic scenes in order to convey them to the reader. Close description aims to retain some of the pornography's resonance, yet textual production unavoidably transforms the objects it addresses: that which emerges is a different sort of beast.

Individual research projects may involve movement closer to and further away from the materials examined in ways that correspond with analytical attempts to retain a tangibly somatic sense of pornographic images and sounds, as well as to contextualise them in broader frameworks of genre, cultures of production, distribution and consumption, local and global flows of technologies and capital (Paasonen 2011; Schaschek 2013). Such 'discomforting commute' (Pearce 1997, 23) between positions and strategies of interpretation involves acknowledging the particularities of different forms of knowledge production, yet it does not necessitate foregrounding one form or position over another. With different approaches come different affordances, different forms of writing and, hopefully, different insights into the phenomena studied.

Unruly readers

Independent of the specific project's agenda or stylistic choices, there are no guarantees as to how the readers will grasp, interpret and apply its outcomes. As readers, we are unruly creatures and the reverberations that the texts evoke are impossible for those composing them

to control, master or foresee. This became evident when a reader responded to a report summarising the findings of our porn memory-work project with a dic pick accompanied by a note on his sexual arousal. I found this form of feedback surprising, given the matter-of-fact descriptive tone of the report that made markedly little effort to affectively engage the reader. Considering the issue more closely, it should not have been too surprising as in the study itself, people reported being turned on by select passages from the Bible, narrative fiction and feminist literature available through the public library (Paasonen et al. 2015). As one respondent further explained: 'These books weren't porn but my way of reading was that of a porn consumer. I was looking for sexual arousal' (female, born 1975).

Readers orient themselves towards texts with certain interests in mind while shifts in the orientations and modes of reading invite varying somatic intensities, ways of sensing and making sense. Readers set out to discover sources of sexual arousal in texts coined with clearly distinct purposes in mind, and the one and the same reader can engage with the same text for the goals of critique, diversion and masturbation alike. In addition to intentional reading oriented by libidinal intensities, affectations of the sexual kind occur unsuspected as something resonates and possibly grabs us. Images, texts and sounds can seduce us in passing but we may also position ourselves as willing to be seduced. As readers, we touch texts but are also touched by them in return – in ways that can be titillating, disturbing, surprising and ambivalent.

Constantly evaluated and uncertain in its outcomes and resonances, scholarly writing is regularly an awkward practice – and hardly only for those of us practicing it in other languages than our first. The affective voice or grain through which an author aims to mediate some of the intensities felt may just as well come across as pretentious or precious: scholarly communication, after all, does not necessarily work. The centrality of finding one's voice as

scholar, as highlighted in career mentoring workshops, should not be understood as a form of academic self-branding but as arriving at a style of expression that fits and, optimally, renders the labour of writing an occasional source of enjoyment. The appeal that an affective voice holds, or fails to hold, bears no direct relationship to the processes of writing, with their joys and pains: an effortless, compelling flow may well emerge from weeks of intricate crafting. But if a text fails to communicate any interest or passion, it may not hold much fascination for its readers. An affectless voice sets the stage for encounters void of intensity. While these at times may be desirable and necessary, scholarly detachment comes with a certain cost.

Writing, as the means of mediating political investments, intellectual discoveries and processes of thought, involves its own pleasures and passions that are much too seldom acknowledged in academic life. An affective voice, or textual grain, communicates such investments, animates processes of knowledge production and exchange. Writing on and with affect means being invested in and infected by the worlds studied and it aims to infect the readers towards engaging with these worlds in productive ways.

References:

Barthes, Roland. 1977. *Image Music Text.* Edited and translated by Stephen Heath. London: Fontana.

Barthes, Roland. 1989. *The Rustle of Language*. Translated by Richard Howard. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Barthes, Roland. 2007. *Criticism and Truth*. Translated and edited by Katrine Pilcher Keuneman. London: Continuum.

Dworkin. Andrea. 1989. *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*. With new introduction. New York: E.P. Dutton.

Gallop, Jane. 1988. *Thinking Through the Body*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Gregg, Melissa. 2006. *Cultural Studies' Affective Voices*. Houndmills: Palgrave.

Hald, Gert Martin, Lisette Kuyper, Philippe C.G. Adam and John B.F. Wit. 2013. 'Does Viewing Explain Doing? Assessing the Association between Sexually Explicit Materials Use and Sexual Behaviors in a Large Sample of Dutch Adolescents and Young Adults.' *The Journal of Sexual Medicine* 10 (12): 2986–2995.

Haraway, Donna J. 1988. 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective.' *Feminist Studies* 14 (3): 575–599.

Massumi, Brian. 2002. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Miller, Nancy K. 1991. *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts*. New York: Routledge.

Paasonen, Susanna. 2011. *Carnal Resonance: Affect and Online Pornography*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Paasonen, Susanna, Kyrölä, Katariina, Nikunen, Kaarina, Saarenmaa, Laura and Välimäki, Teo, 2015. *"Siinä oli hämähäkki väärinpäin" – tutkimusraportti pornografiaa koskevan muistitiedon keruuhankkeesta*. Mediatutkimus, Turun yliopisto, http://www.doria.fi/handle/10024/103688.

Pearce, Lynne. 1997. *Feminism and the Politics of Reading*. London: Arnold.

Prause, Nicole and James Pfaus. 2015. 'Viewing Sexual Stimuli Associated with Greater Sexual Responsiveness, Not Erectile Dysfunction.' *Sexual Medicine* 3 (2): 90–98.

Rich, Adrienne. 1976/1995. O*f Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York: Norton.

Schaschek, Sarah. 2013. *Pornography and Seriality: The Culture of Producing Pleasure*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. 1999. *A Dialogue on Love*. New York: Beacon Press.

Tseng, Ying-Hua, Noreen Esposito, Shih-Hsien Kuo, Fan-Hao Chou and Mei-Li Cheng. 2016. 'Push and Pull: Exposure of Young Taiwanese Women to Sexually Explicit Materials.' *Women & Health*. Published online before print, doi: 10.1080/03630242.2016.1222326.