## Dildos and Cyborgs: Feminist Body-Politics in Porn from the 1970s to Posthumanism

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## Abstract:

The article examines different – and in particular conflicting – feminist positions with respect to pornography which have been developed from the 1970s until today, focusing on the issue of the construction of sexual and gender identities. An analysis is carried out on how these identities in regards to the pornographic body are negotiated or even shifted within these different feminist discourses and practices. Starting with a brief examination of the discourse about pornography in the phase when the sexual revolution ended, subsequently the PorNO-campaign of the German feminist journal Emma – launched in 1987 – is discussed more precisely. This campaign represented anti-pornographic feminism which had been criticized by sex-positive feminism developing the so-called post-pornographic approach. The second part of the article looks into the post-porn discourse from the early eighties – Annie Sprinkle – until the queer-feminist-posthumanist intervention in the field of sexuality and pornography by Beatriz Preciado. Finally, the political potential of queer-feminist post-porn in subverting the existing regime of sexuality is considered.

- Why should we deal with pornography from a feminist perspective?<sup>1</sup> The answer to this question is straightforward. Pornography is the key mass media genre in which sexuality is made visible and performed. Sexuality, on the other hand, is one of the main areas where gender and gender relations are negotiated. In this article, I will examine different and in particular conflicting feminist positions with respect to pornography which have been developed from the 1970s until today. The focus will be on the issue of the construction of sexual and gender identities. I will analyze how these identities in regards to the pornographic body are negotiated or even shifted within these different feminist discourses and practices. Dildos and cyborgs will be discussed in the final part of this article, which deals with current queer-feminist debates in the field of so called post-porn.
- At the beginning of the seventies, in a phase of almost complete legalization of pornography in most of the western countries, the pornographic movie left the underground and was allowed into new public spheres. Pornography as a film genre developed into a mass

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> This article is based on a talk I gave at the conference Radikal, Sexy, Aktuell: Feminismus in historischer Perspektive on 4. February 2012 (http://aaa.phil-fak.uni-koeln.de/femsem.html?&L=1). The conference dealt with the different feminist movements from the 19th century to present day. It was organized by the students and teachers of the advanced seminar Geschichte des Feminismus which took place at the University of Cologne (Institute of Anglo-American History) in the winter semester 2011/12. I wish to thank our teachers Dr. Muriel Gonzales, Dr. Christiane König and Dr. Massimo Perinelli – their commitment made this conference possible. Furthermore, I would like to thank them for their valuable advices and the constructive discussions we had. I also want to say thank you to my fellow students Indira Kaffer, Silke Steiml, Nora Vollmond and Eva Willems who helped me investigating the issue of pornography and feminism. Last but not least, I wish to thank Johannes Duncker, Mirjam Hachem, Marvin Muller and Frank Thonemann for their careful reading of the translation of the article.

product and was increasingly available even in cinemas (Williams, *Lust* 109; Wolf 169-183). It was during that period that the sexual revolution came to an end, or rather began to transform itself into something new. Its leading idea was formulated in the early sixties. The protagonists of the sexual revolution claimed to position the supposedly natural human drives against a likewise supposedly dusty and repressive sexual-political regime. It was argued that the release of desires should serve the liberation of the individual. In the specific context of the transforming sexual revolution, an emancipatory effect was attributed to pornography for a short period of time because it was seen as taboo-breaking. The visualization of naked copulating bodies in the public sphere of cinema was a political act of rebellion (Bovenschen 50-52; Heineman 290-312). The American movie *Deep Throat*, first released in 1972, is often considered the archetype of the emerging pornographic feature film (Williams, Lust 109). However, this movie is characterized by ambivalence between being perceived as an expression and representation of sexual liberation on the one hand and the combination of patriarchal submission and commodification of sex on the other hand.<sup>2</sup> Hence, *Deep Throat*'s ambivalent reception rather already testified to a turning point of the dominant discourses surrounding pornography. A part of the new feminist movement, which emerged at the same time as the pornographic feature film from the rebellious period of the sixties, radically criticized the ideas of the sexual revolution. In a certain manner, the prevailing pattern of submission and liberation was borrowed, merely with redefined positions. According to the assumption of this section of the new feminist movement, the sexual revolution first and foremost was catering to the interests and liberation of male sexuality, which now took the position of the force of repression of female sexuality. In this line of thought, the patriarchal, oppressive forces on an objectified and repressed female sexuality even increased. Thus, it was regarded as necessary to liberate female sexuality from the grasp of patriarchy, in order to make the liberation of the woman as an individual possible (Bovenschen 50-53; Schwarzer, Unterschied 177-185, 200-205). Consistent with this presumption, many feminists developed a radically rejecting attitude towards pornography. They argued that this apparently male dominated discourse served the submission of women and their sexuality. In 1975, the first feminist anti-pornographic association – named Women against Violence in Pornography and

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> It is the gesture of the deep throat-fellatio itself that constitutes the ambivalence. On the one hand, it represents – within the diegesis – a heightened appreciation of the clitoris as essential element of female sexuality, that had been marginalized before. On the other hand, the invisible orgasm of the porn actress performing the deep throat is identified with the visible orgasm of the porn actor. Thereby, the movie constructs a phallocentric desire economy. In addition to this it is worth mentioning here that the leading actress Linda Lovelace later joined the Anti-Pornography movement and became its chief witness for male violence against women in the porn industry. She claimed to have been forced at gunpoint by her husband Chuck Traynor to "practice" for the eponymous sexual act.

Media (since 1979 simply Women against Pornography) – was founded in the USA. Important protagonists of the anti-pornographic feminism were the lawyer Cathrine MacKinnon and the sociologist Andrea Dworkin, the latter being the author of *Pornography – Men Possessing Women*, published in 1979 (Rückert 15-17).

Almost a decade later, Dworkin's book served as the theoretical background for the 3 PorNO-campaign of the German journal EMMA in 1987. Essentially, the PorNO-campaign was a cultural import from the USA. This becomes apparent by the fact that Dworkin's book was translated to German in the same year as the campaign started. It was published by EMMA titled *Pornographie – Männer beherrschen Frauen* and prefaced with a foreword by Alice Schwarzer. The core of the campaign was the definition of pornography as "downplaying or glorifying a clearly humiliating portrayal of women or girls by pictures and/or words" (Anonymous, my translation). The force of humiliation was male sexuality which – according to Dworkin – was defined by exactly that: Through the humiliation of the woman it fulfilled itself. Dworkin paints a truly bleak and frightening picture of male sexuality that, in its essence, cannot do anything but subject women. She regards pornography as constantly iterating this kind of sexual power relation between both genders and thereby stabilizing the analogue power relation prevailing in reality. Hence, PorNO established an immediate causal connection between real, everyday violence against women and pornographic representations. The campaign's slogan "Pornography is theory, rape is practice" clearly expressed the belief in the immediate impact of pornographic images as an instruction for action (Bovenschen 55-59, 62f.; Koch 118, 126f.; Schwarzer, Vorwort 9). This specific assessment was fundamental for the formulation of the draft bill by the EMMA journal. The draft did not aim to immediately prohibit the production and distribution of pornography. Rather, PorNO sought to create an instrument rooted in civil law which would enable lawsuits against pictures and words which humiliated and – according to the authors – harmed the constitutionally protected dignity of women. By law the producers of pornography should be forced to pay compensation. There was the implicit hope that the porn industry would become overthrown by the massive wave of crippling punitive suits, leading to its complete breakdown (Anonymous; Bovenschen 55; Schwarzer, Begründung).

4The specific manner in which the law was formulated reveals the powerful identity politics that were strongly inscribed into the new feminist movement: the construction of a homogenous and universal identity category *woman*. Within this category, differences among women were accepted. Yet, in relation to the likewise homogenous category *man*, these

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> This sentence had been formulated originally by Susan Brownmiller in her book Against our Will: Men, Women and Rape and was adopted by the PorNO-campaign.

differences were not acknowledged (Scott 45f.). Every woman was to be given the opportunity to file a lawsuit, since the women humiliated in pornography represented all women. Men's violence towards the pornographic actress was thus simultaneously committed to every woman (Schwarzer, *Begründung*). Although since the publication and following translations of Simone de Beauvoir's highly influential book *Le Deuxième Sexe* it became a common belief that gender is a cultural construction – a woman is not born as a woman but becomes a woman – a majority of the new movement resorted to refer to the woman (Beauvoir, *Geschlecht*).<sup>4</sup> Without oversimplifying, it can be assessed that the hegemonial feminist discourse during the seventies in Europe as well as in the USA was clearly structured by the binary logic of dichotomies. The supposedly solid and natural reference ensuring the binary identity categories *man/woman* was located in the gendered body. This concept was deconstructed for the first time by feminist theorists in the second half of the eighties known as queer intervention. In particular Judith Butler had come to the understanding that a natural, distinctly gendered body does not exist. On the contrary, every body is merely discursively marked as natural – thereby, it becomes naturalized (Butler, *Unbehagen*; Butler, *Körper*).

- With respect to the approach to pornography, the differential-feminist identity politics had problematic consequences because PorNO assigned certain oppositional features and behaviors to the categories *woman* and *man*. *The* man became the unequivocally ascertainable evildoer and *the* woman a poor victim of his violence and oppression. This is the central characteristic of the PorNO-discourse: Women were completely excluded from the subject position. They were merely conceived as available passive objects of male desire. Thereby, a gender order was sustained and strengthened that PorNO effectively wanted to abolish. Although this order was evaluated differently, its rigorous binary identity attributions remained in force (Degele 215; Rückert 24; Vincken, *Cover up* 12f.).<sup>5</sup>
- This fundamental contradiction inherent in anti-pornographic feminism became the central point of criticism of a sex-positive feminism that did not abhor and demonize pornography altogether but subverted its phallocentric and patriarchal capitalist structures from within. An important figure in this context was Annie Sprinkle. The US-American has been working as porn actress and sex worker since the eighties and is considered to be the first post-porn activist. Why? In her performances and movies, she developed and practiced a critical and self-reflexive approach to pornographic image-production. Thus, sexual and

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> The German translation was used.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Vincken, *Cover up* 12f. emphasizes that MacKinnons book Only Words and PorNO speak the same discourse. Thus, Vincken's analysis of the book applies also to EMMA's campaign. Furthermore, in Vincken, weibliches Subjekt 156 she relates the anti-pornographic discourse, that identifies the woman with the role of the object and victim, with a short genealogy of the subject-concept the bourgeois society developed.

gender identities were no longer perceived as given and natural but their reiterated attributions became exhibited, commented on and even parodied. Hence, it is adequate to speak of a paradigm shift from porn to post-porn (Stüttgen, *Orgasm* 11). This paradigm shift involved a fundamental change of feminist strategies in dealing with pornography.

7 In the first volume of his ground-breaking *History of Sexuality*, a critical revision of the repression- and liberation-discourse of the sexual revolution, Michel Foucault in 1976 emphasized that power and sexuality can never be located in an exterior relationship to each other (Foucault, Wille). Instead, sexuality is produced by historically mutating technologies of power in the first place – and indeed is not grounded in the supposed nature of two sexes. The powerfully dichotomous ordering of sex, gender and sexuality merely has become naturalized and sustained through its reiterated attribution to men and women respectively. It follows that a strategy of resisting a certain regime of sexuality does not work by means of establishing an oppositional, domination-free sphere of natural sexuality, as there is no outside to its culturally produced conception and thus sexuality can never be untainted by the societal regulations of desire. However, precisely the assumption of discovering natural and therefore authentic sexual identities provided the starting point for many utopias of the sexual revolution. Their protagonists believed to be able to position themselves outside of all social distortions and to establish something entirely different and new from there. Although voices critical of porn pointed to the failure of many of these utopias, PorNO appeared as the feminist heir of such utopian ideas because this position likewise took the notion of a good and natural sexuality as its starting point. A woman's sexuality was meant to be protected against an exterior grasp of power which manifested itself this time in form of a male dominated and misogynist market. It was not taken into consideration that any manifestations of sexuality – however they might be valued – are the result of social processes regulating sexual desire men and women partake in. PorNO did not assume that it was the inseparable interconnection of male and female sexual desire and the discourses and practices surrounding them that produced the regime of sexuality in the first place. This assumption implies that any concept of sexuality as the basis of resistance cannot be exterior to the regime of sexuality being fought, due to the fact that this basis is always already a vital component of the regime. Taking this kind of analytics as starting point, all strategies of critique, resistance and subversion have to start from within the discourse or the practice meant to be attacked. Regarding the question how these counter-measures can be put into practice, the concept of performativity – in the sense of Judith Butler – becomes essential (Butler, Körper 35-41;

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> The German translation was used.

Krämer 241-260; Wirth 40-42). This notion draws attention to the artificiality of any identity category and therewith challenges the naturalised, heteronormative ordering of sexuality. Performativity describes how the continued reiteration of certain discourses and practices produces the concept of identity in the first place. From this viewpoint, laying bare the constructedness of identities through the creative power of their reflexive, decontextualizing and sometimes even parodist citation constitutes an effective weapon against the status quo. Thus, the significance of the practice or concept being criticized and fought against is undermined and shifted to new possible meanings. This strategy – instead of the preventive, censoring and excluding power of legal regimentation – was and still is the one post-porn furthers. Nevertheless, even post-porn aimed at a critique of and a fight against the hegemonial type of pornography: the heteronormative mainstream porn. This was intended to become subverted by alternative pornographic images (Stüttgen, *Orgasm* 10).

- 8 To perform this strategy, the acquisition of agency is necessary. That was accomplished for instance by Annie Sprinkle through a simple but effective action at the beginning of her movie *Deep Inside Annie Sprinkle* (1982). She looks into the camera, thus reflecting the male gaze of the camera and of the spectator, and announces that the following sex acts will solely be performed according to her will (Sprinkle 01:13-05:15). Even though, mainstream porn actresses in general advocate their own lust aggressively, there is still a crucial difference in comparison with Sprinkle's attitude. She puts *her* body and *her* body's sexual desire in the center and makes it not only the origin but also the organizing principle of the depicted sex. Therefore, her agency is not handed over to the men and women watching to take possession of her body. Instead, she makes herself the subject of her lust precisely by making her body an object of desire (Williams, *Agent* 122-125). Hence, she breaks the order of power in which men always appear as subjects and women as objects by excessively affirming the order and thereby transforming it into something new and different.
- As a result of this technique, Annie Sprinkle raises herself from the role of a supposed victim and pure object to a subject position. From there, she can performatively approach the gesture that has developed into an iconic figure of hardcore porn since its appearance on the public stage in the seventies: the cumshot. According to Linda Williams, the inherent desire of porn in staging the truth of carnal lust in order to evoke the somatic affect of sexual arousal in the spectator, found its satisfaction in the image of the external and visible ejaculation of man (Williams, *Hard Core* 135-164). The cumshot thus has become the ultimate proof that real sex has taken place. Likewise, it has constituted the climax of all sex acts in which according to the critics also a release of violence can be realized. In place of the male

spectator who identifies himself with the porn actor, the penis representing masculine power and possession shoots at the woman and finishes her. Moreover, the action of the sex acts in mainstream porn is oriented towards the cumshot as the narrative closure in which a discharge of sexual energy is guaranteed. On the other hand, porn has not found an appropriate portraval of the female orgasm. Effectively, this genre has been marked as being unable to produce a filmic proof of female lust. Through these asymmetries, the phallocentric desire economy becomes evident (Williams, Hard Core 8f., 143-146; Vincken, Cover up 14). In the 1980's Annie Sprinkle tried to subvert this order of power through her parody of the cumshot. The following scene can be found not only in Deep Inside Annie Sprinkle, but also in other later movies of her. While she is straddling a male co-actor, she begins to ejaculate (Sprinkle 38:37-40:07). Hereby, she at first cites the practice of the cumshot and its established parameters of phallic power. The scene's framing switches then into a parodist mode when her ejaculation exceeds the duration of a male cumshot distinctly and the quantity of the ejaculate becomes absurd.<sup>8</sup> This parodist act refers to the supposed inability to present a visual proof of female orgasm, which had become a genre convention of mainstream porn. Furthermore, it refers to the male stereotype of unlimited sexual potency, which had become a genre convention as well. This established norm of the pornographic male body is reflected, exposed, de-naturalized and thereby destabilized (Williams, Agent 125-127). When the male actor finally also ejaculates, it becomes obvious that Annie's continuous shooting does not constitute a simple inversion of the subject/object-configuration and a combative challenge of the phallus. Instead, it represents an integrative gesture and aims at a penetration of the phallocentric lust economy as an essential component of the regime of sexuality.

Sprinkle's post-pornographic attempts however failed to transform mainstream porn. On the contrary, the final cumshot came in fact to be the increasing standard when the fast-forward technology of the video recorder began to prevail in the eighties. While in the pornographic feature film of the seventies, the cumshot was one element among others – in fact the focus was on dialogue, kissing, laughing and petting – in the course of the next media upheaval – the internet – the domination of the cumshot reached a new level. Porn-clips that merely string together contextless scenes of ejaculating penises have made the cumshot the embodiment of mainstream porn. Precisely at the moment of the increasing visual hegemony of the phallus, a new intervention in the field of sexuality and pornography emerged. In the

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> For a critical further development of William's analysis of the cumshot see: Aydemir, Murat. "The Cum Shot as Period, Ellipsis and Question Mark." Post/Porn/Politics. Ed. Tim Stüttgen. Berlin: b books, 2009.124-131.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> For the concept of framing see: Goffman, Erving. *Rahmen-Analyse*. Ein Versuch über die Organisation von Alltagserfahrungen. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977, especially 52-60.

year 2000, the Spanish philosopher Beatriz Preciado published her contra-sexual manifesto which has a gueer-feminist impetus. Preciado herself is not a porn actress but her theoretical reflections constitute a central point of reference for contemporary post-pornographic debates and practices. This applies for instance to the research and performances of Tim Stüttgen, who organized a symposium named Post-Porn-Politics as part of the world's first pornographic film festival in Berlin in 2006. What does Preciado's intervention consist of? Having become established as the ordering principle of sexuality ensuring the binary order of two genders as well as heteronormativity, she challenges the penis as phallus with the dildo. Based on the assumption that all hetero-sex was per se phallic, this prosthesis by then had been rejected by radical lesbian feminism as a replication of patriarchal-phallic sexuality (Preciado 58). In contrary to this position, Preciado regards the dildo as a parodist citation of the phallus and by her becomes simply declared as the original. With ironic reference to the Christian creation mythology, she writes in her manifesto "In the beginning was the dildo" (Preciado 12, my translation). Many different copies can now be generated from the dildo, amongst others the penis as a bio-dildo. The dildo and its equivalents are universally employable in a polymorphous-perversely fashion by every body-subject. Hereby, somaticsexual actions emerge that are detached from gender identity. Complementary, the anus as an erogenous zone undergoes a heightened appreciation. According to Preciado, the anus is radically democratic as every body is equipped with the zone and it is thereby not genderspecific (Preciado 9-19, 23-67; Stüttgen, Proletarier). Thus, the bodies produced by queer post-porn clearly differ from those selected and presented by the heteronormative mainstream porn. In that genre, the male body is materialized through the cumshot as a body of lust which is focused on the penis as exclusively erogenous zone. Consequently, this phallic gesture cannot exist in its traditional form in queer post-porn. To summarize, Preciado positions queer sexual practices against the heteronormative order that rejected and excluded them. The symbolic order of the new, contra-sexual society should not be conceptualized on the basis of the penis-phallus as the primary signifier but instead on the genderless dildo.

However, the artificial prosthesis of the dildo not only has the potential to blur the boundaries between different sexual and gender identities, but also those between human beings and technologies. Through the concept of Preciado's dildo, post-porn is already located within the scope of a feminist posthumanism. With reference to Foucault, the term

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> The German translation was used.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> In 2009, Stüttgen published a reader which is based on the symposium and provides a profound overview of current queer-feminist post-porn debates. Stüttgen, Tim, ed. *Post/Porn/Politics Symposium/Reader: Queer\_Feminist Perspective on the Politics of Porn Performances and Sex\_Works as Culture Production.* Berlin: b books, 2009.

technology is used to describe not only the inorganic and artificially created object but also its forms of application, i.e. discourses and practices that surround the tool or machine and activate it culturally in the first place (Preciado 115-117). In a feminist-posthumanist perspective, the inorganic and technological on the one hand and the organic and supposedly natural on the other hand are never located in an exterior relation to each other. This inseparable interconnection is analogous to the one between sexuality and power. Every mode of medical-technological interference with the human body – for instance the contraceptive pill - transgresses the boundaries of the organism and thereby renders such borders fragile and permeable (Preciado 109-127). So does a tool called dildo. When someone masturbates with a dildo in queer post-porn and the streams of lust circulate between the dildo and the organism, the attempt to establish the skin as a distinct barrier between the human being and technology becomes impossible and pointless (Joy 21:30-21:55). The diverse and rapidly increasing forms of interconnection between the organic and the technological produce new bodies over and over. As early as 1985, the feminist biologist and science historian Donna Haraway termed these hybrids cyborgs (Haraway 149-181). According to her, every human body is always already a cyborg as every body constantly is technologically connected. Hence, the body cannot be conceptualized without referring to technologies since it is produced by them in the first place.

12 Through the interconnections and hybridizations, body-subjects can emerge which are able to subvert the efforts of normalization of the existing, heteronormative and phallocentric regime of sexuality. This ability constitutes the political potential for a queer-feminist agenda. These ambivalent bodies and bodily performances elude the supposedly normal identity categories and thereby make them fail. According to queer-feminists, the powerful procedures aiming at a specific normalization of sexuality and gender become queered by queer bodies. As a result, a transformation of the established regime of sexuality is enforced (Stüttgen, Proletarier; Stüttgen, Therapie). At that point, queer post-pornographic practices can develop an impact on society as a whole. Due to the fact that no body-subject is able to step outside of the regime of sexuality, everybody is affected by a transforming regime of sexuality. Moreover, the flexibilization and destabilization of solid sexual and gender identities allow new feminist coalition formations which were excluded by the rigorous binary identity politics that had been pursued by PorNO (Hark 104f., 108; Degele 52f., 109-117). Under these circumstances, it even becomes possible for a heterosexual man to deal critically and reflexively with heteronormative mainstream porn from a feminist perspective.

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