

Pornophication and gender stereotyping in mass culture in Denmark

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My name is Anette Dina Sørensen. I have worked as a gender researcher for many years mainly studying images of gender and sexuality in mass culture. For the last four years the main focus of my research has been pornography and the way in which pornography is absorbed in mass culture. For the time being I am in charge of a Nordic research project concerned with analysing the increased spread of pornography, and what effects this might produce on young girls’ and boys’ interpretations of gender. The project is located at NIKK, The Nordic Institute of Women and Gender Studies.

I am invited here today for two reasons. First to give you a short insight into the experiences we have in Denmark with the pornophication of mass culture, the implications it has on images of men and women produced in all kinds of media, and not least the problems I fear it may give rise to as to gender equality on a more general level. Secondly I am here to introduce you to the Nordic project I just referred to above.

For the last few years we have witnessed a new phenomenon in the Nordic countries - and in Estonia as well I am sure. In the public debate in the Nordic countries it is referred to as “the sexualisation of the public arena”, and it implicates an increase in references to sexuality in mass culture. But what is actually new about this situation is on one hand the far greater

imprint of pornography in mass culture and on the other hand a boom in media transmitted gender stereotyped images. In the 1990s especially advertising images reflected the post-modern dissolution of the traditional meaning of gender, but now we see a tendency towards a backlash bringing back extremely traditional gender images.

The use of sexuality in mass culture as an attention-catching device and as a means of addressing specific target groups is by no means a new phenomenon. In Denmark pictures of sexuality has been represented legally in the public arena since a change within the legislation liberated pictorial pornography in 1969 (Thing, 1999). However, in recent years references to sexual matters have proliferated. But what is new - and this presents us with a massive challenge - is the increased imprint of pornography in mass culture. This is the case not merely in advertising, but as a general trend in fashion coverage, in youth magazines, in TV programmes and music videos, and not least in campaigns launched by young people themselves. And in my opinion it all hangs together: the revival of stereotyped gender images is very much connected with the breakthrough of pornography in mass culture (Sørensen & Cawood 2002, Sørensen 2002).

The mainstreaming of pornography: “porn chic”

“Mainstreaming” is the term which best designates the present-day position of pornography in our culture. The British media researcher Brian McNair has dealt with this phenomenon and he uses the term “porn chic” (McNair 2002 and 2003). “Porn chic” designates the cultural process by which pornography slips into our everyday lives as a commonly accepted and often idealised cultural element. This process is accelerated by three interacting tendencies which I usually call:

Overhead-presentation:

- 1. Volume**
- 2. Clean-up**

3. Fragments

1. Let me begin with the first one: *Volume* applies both to the case that pornography has become more easily available and available in greater quantities. More products are simply on the market. Limitations of time, place and supply no longer apply for users of pornography. You can get what ever you want, whenever you want it, and every were you like. Additionally, as a consequence of the technological development you can consume pornography anonymously.

2. Parallel to these changes in supply and availability, there is a *clean-up* tendency, through which regular pornography is about to become respectable. This trend is promoted by the mass media's growing interest in the field and appears in such diverse genres as TV documentaries, features in ordinary magazines, reviews of porn videos and magazines in ordinary magazines (Sørensen 2003). In Denmark, one latest manifestation of this clean-up tendency was the huge media coverage given to an ex-pornmodel when she published her autobiographical account of her "amazing" life in the international porn industry (Kean & List 2002). Let me give you an example:

Overhead-presentation:

- **Danish postcards**
- **Article in Danish girls magazine**
- **Article in international music magazine "Q"**
- **Advertising distributed through regular mail in Denmark**

3. Simultaneously with the two tendencies mentioned above, a third tendency emerges via this "porn chic" process or the mainstreaming of pornography. *Fragments* of pornography slip out into the mass culture. On billboards, in music videos, in fashion reportage and in youth magazines there is an increasing use of figures, stylistic features and verbal expressions

which are not in themselves pornographic though they are quoting from a pornographic universe: such things as the postures and dress of photo models, their movements, the scenarios in which they are pictured. Let me give you an example:

Overhead-presentation:

Sisley – an advertisement

Members campaign of a Danish Right Wing Youth Organisation

Stripperella (cartoon on Nordic MTV)

If we focus on the advertisement from Sisley. One item in this Sisley catalogue carries a reference to the cum-shot, that is, the climax of a porn movie where a male model ejaculates into the mouth or onto the face of a female model. Here a paraphrase of the cum-shot is given in a picture of a young woman squirting milk into her mouth from a cow's udder. The milk trickles out of her mouth and down her chin whilst she looks ecstatically and teasingly. Her gaze corresponding exactly to that directed at the imaginary viewer by a model in a traditional porn film.

Stereotyped gender representations

In my opinion the mainstreaming of pornography in mass culture gives rise to a set of problems connected with the way in which gender is represented. Much regular pornography, both soft-core and ordinary hard-core porn, makes use of gender-role stereotypes which seep into the mass culture as it draws on pornographic references. To put it bluntly, the division of gender roles in mainstream hard-core pornography is quite traditional: the women exhibit themselves and then provide sexual servicing. On the other hand the men are able to perform sexually any where any time - unfailingly. Naturally, this gender representations do not occur in *all* kinds of pornography; but they pretty much fit the general picture. However, the point is that it is increasingly the case when advertising images and fashion take over the pornographic styles.

This situation is quite surprising with respect to the advertising industry, which generally has the reputation of being “streetwise”, able to size up any change in society and get on board of cultural trends as soon as they appear. Relations between the sexes are no exception. For the last 50 years advertising has functioned as a seismograph recording changes in the gender relation. Every expansion of the roles or shift of power has immediately been registered and distributed to the consumers.

The diversity of the 1990s

In the light of the pornographic breakthrough in mass culture around the millennium, the 1990s was a decade in which the traditional meanings of gender were destabilized in advertising. This was quite in line with the way things were going in society as a whole - in Denmark and in the Nordic countries as well. For three decades Nordic women had claimed their right to power and promotion in society – and now they increasingly took it, and for the first time in history Nordic men were taking parental leave when they had a child. Gender roles were shifting

This was reflected in advertising. Advertising is very receptive to social changes. In advertisements women conquered the public sphere, took possession of the car and broke down the doors of sanctuaries traditionally male dominated. They were represented as powerful, intellectual, independent beings.

Overhead-presentation:

In Wear/Martinique: “Living is knowing how to tackle a crises”, 1996

At the same time this variety of meanings were also characteristic to the images of masculinity in mass culture. It became possible in the 1990s to pull the meaning of masculinity free of power and the breadwinner role, and

to picture men as sex objects, sensitive dependent individuals and caring fathers.

Overhead-presentation:

Marc O’Polo (advertisement)

Hugo Boss (advertisement)

As Marc O’Polo proclaimed in 1997: “The male swan will watch over the offspring while his mate searches for food” (Sørensen 1997).

Today – it seems - the diversity of gender representation is increasingly being marginalized and we are heading towards the sexualization of femininity: a reduction of the meaning of femininity to “sexy”. However, it would not be fair to neglect the fact that sexualization increasingly is applied to images of men as well. For sure we are confronted with pictures of half-naked men in mass culture, but compared to images of women it is only exceptionally. It was recently emphasised that “sex” is the paramount mark of femininity, during all the fuzz surrounding the launch of Yves St. Laurent’s new men’s fragrance “M7”.

Overhead-presentation:

M7 - YSL

The advertisement shows a full-frontal naked man with the penis clearly visible and a number of men’s magazines, including GQ, found this so offensive that they refused to publish the ad unless the offensive part of the picture was cut away. We had the same experience in Denmark a couple of years ago. An advertisement for an alcohol product called “Cult shaker” featured both a naked man and a naked woman.

Overhead-presentation:

Cult Shaker

However, the company behind these advertisements could not get permission to exhibit the naked man in the public arena of Copenhagen, because the local authority found it too offensive and refused to allow it.

Thus, despite 30 years of so-called sexual liberation it is still hard to show full-frontal nakedness if the model is not female. And the reluctance to produce pictures which sexualise men and masculinity may mean that the increased sexualisation of mass culture in the wake of the porn-chic tendency will primarily apply to images of women and femininity.

Let me end this presentation by showing you how gender are represented in a Danish travel brochure target at young people. If you have any doubt as to the reality of gender stereotyping or the effects of the mainstreaming of pornography in mass culture, the gender images in this travel brochure will assure you that things have taken a rather drastic turn. Young women are not only portrayed as sexualized, easy-to-get-blonds, they willingly pose as such while young men are portrayed as bar-flies having a good time drinking and finally choosing a sleeping partner for the night.

Overhead-presentation:

Travel Brochure: Young fun tours, autumn, 2002

Wanted: alternative narratives of gender

As I see it the mass-cultural mainstreaming of pornography (the porn-chic tendency) saddles us with a kind of problem which may well have circulated in our culture in earlier times but which now strikes with renewed force.

When the range of gender images available in mass culture presents an increasingly one-dimensional view of what masculinity and femininity can mean, the possibilities for identification at the disposal of boys and girls,

young men and women, are drastically limited. Media research has taught us that there is a correspondence between reality and the pictures produced by mass culture (Drotner 1996). It is not solely the case that people's various life practices influence mass-cultural pictures and narratives; the influence also goes the other way: people's life practices take shape from the images produced by mass culture. Those images, therefore, do not simply screen off reality: they also contribute to forming that reality. So if we are serious about the Nordic ideal of equality and wish to create equal opportunities for men and women it is imperative that alternative mass-cultural narratives about gender are created for the generation which is now growing up. If there are no stories about female company directors, female professors and presidents, or about male sex-objects and caring fathers, how can the new generation ever realise that these possibilities exist? And how are they to learn that gender need not limit options?

“Youth, gender and Pornography in the Nordic countries”

– a Nordic research project

The “porn-chic” phenomenon as I have described and discussed above is usually referred to as "pornophication of public space" in the Nordic countries – and probably here as well. In the Nordic countries the phenomenon has created a fierce public debate, as well as concern among parents and teachers on what effects the increasing - and not always voluntary - exposure to pornography might have on children and teenagers.

Because knowledge in this area is scarce the Nordic Ministers of Equality have launched a two-year project to map out the effects of pornography on Nordic youth's perceptions of gender. The project is financed by the Nordic Council of Ministers, the Nordic countries and the Nordic Institute for Women Studies and Gender Research (NIKK), and is administered by NIKK. I am in charge of the project in cooperation with professor Susanne V. Knudsen.

The study's primary focus is the increased spread of pornography, and what effects this might produce on young girls' and boys' interpretations of gender. The study aims at revealing possible connections between teenagers exposure to pornography and their attitudes towards gender and power by:

- Gaining insights on the extent of 'pornophication', its media basis and the situations in which it is present, with special focus on nordic teenagers experiences with and attitudes towards pornography.
- Unveiling what gender conceptions the young think pornography depicts, and their feelings towards these.
- Studying how the increased exposure to pornography relates to the teenagers own perceptions of gender, and their own ideas on what sexuality is about.

The project's methodological design offers three perspectives from which these topics are to be studied:

- An internet-based, quantitative questionnaire.
- Qualitative studies including individual and focus group interviews with teenagers.
- Media analyses focusing on pornography and sexualization in media products targeted at young people.

The whole project will be finished in late June 2005.

