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Pandemic Media

Configurations of Film Series

Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory

edited by
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Vinzenz Hediger, and Antonio Somaini

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Pandemic Porn: Understanding Pornography as a Thick Concept

Leonie Zilch

The essay takes the notion of "pandemic porn" as an opportunity to address the descriptive and evaluative aspects that are intertwined in the term "pornography." What do we mean by "pandemic porn" and what is the "pandemic" of pornography? To do so, it considers pornography as a "thick concept."

From the start, 'pornography' named a battlefield, a place where no assertion could be made without at once summoning up its denial, where no one could distinguish value from danger because they were the same.
Walter Kendrick

COVID-19 and the Rise of Pandemic Porn

I was lucky to submit my dissertation two days before the university closed its doors due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Now, it is me and my screen—again. The self-imposed quarantine is followed by an official one. "Are you suffering from increased sexual arousal?" asks the white-coated expert on my screen sitting behind his desk with horn-rimmed glasses, a mustache and an "I <3 Mom"-cup

in front of him. Well, no, I spent the last months watching porn for my thesis. "Lockdown got you down?"—yeah, I want to see my friends and family again! "Don't worry! There's no need to be celibate these days." The image switches to a couple wearing gas masks, gloves, and protective suits while being intimate with each other. "In fact, sexual activity can be advised as a urboost to your immune system, so long as your taking appropriate safety measures. Welcome to *Sex in Times of Corona*!"[1]

The short film is a collaborative work of 16 erotic film makers from Berlin and the first "pandemic porn" that enters my filter bubble during isolation. Matt Lambert's *Moan Together*, Erika Lust's *Sex and Love in the Time of Quarantine*, and *Cruising 2020* by Todd Verow and James Kleinman follow. *Coronavirus Porn Is Going Viral on Pornhub* (Cole 2020) headlines *Vice* in March 2020, referring to 112 videos featuring the word "coronavirus." At the end of April, another article reports 1,528 videos (Cookney 2020) and Pornhub itself is continually publishing statistics about traffic changes and corona related search terms during the crisis.[2] The term chosen to address these corona-induced pornographies is "pandemic porn." To work out its various dimensions of meaning and to tackle the implicit and explicit moral concepts accompanying the term is the aim of this essay. For this purpose, I consider pornography as a "thick concept."

Pornography as a "Thick Concept"

The philosopher Bernard Williams (1985) used the designation "thick concept" to grasp those terms that combined descriptive and evaluative aspects, sometimes in a hardly distinguishable way.[3] I would like to consider pornography as a "thick moral concept" (Zangwill 2013), or more precisely as an "objectionable thick concept" (Eklund 2011). Even though the observation that "pornography is 'NOT a neutral topic'" (Smith and Attwood 2014, 9) has accompanied research on pornography since its beginnings,[4] I consider it useful and necessary to think about pornography in this broader sense. As research has also shown,

1   https://meow.wtf/2020/04/17/corona/ (accessed June 29, 2020).
2   On March 23, in response to a request from *Forbes* magazine, Pornhub released the first "Coronavirus Insights." The seventh and latest update was on June 18. https://www.pornhub.com/insights/ (accessed June 18, 2020).
3   Williams himself refers to a seminar by Philippa Foot and Iris Murdoch in the 1950s, which he attended, as initiating the idea of the term (Williams 1985, 218; see also Abend 2019, 210; Kirchin 2013a). Another reference always mentioned is Gilbert Ryle's notion of "thick descriptions," which again was adapted by anthropologist Clifford Geertz (Kirchin 2013b; Väyrynen 2019). Originally a concept of moral philosophy, it was quickly adopted by other areas of philosophy such as epistemology and aesthetics (Väyrynen 2019) as well as by other disciplines such as sociology (Abend 2019). Today, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* considers thick terms and concepts as "widely agreed to be of potentially high significance" (Väyrynen 2019).
4   Porn scholars find themselves repeatedly obliged to respond to their supposedly offensive subject matter. Their statements and reflections on this topic permeate the

pornography often receives a special status that allows morally evaluative judgments to be disguised as descriptive ones. As Alan McKee points out, it seems much more productive to think about what pornography shares with other phenomena than what is special about it:

> Exceptionalist approaches think that everything about pornography is unique—but this is only because they are looking so closely that they miss the world around the pornography, in which many characteristics are common. … As long as we study pornography in isolation we cannot properly understand how much of our object of study is actually broader cultural movements rather than being specific to pornography … . (McKee 2016, 116)

Understanding pornography as a morally thick concept, the notion "pandemic porn" can be conceived in at least two ways: first, for the kind of pornography that deals with or refers to the coronavirus pandemic (descriptive dimension). Second, it marks and extends the trend to label everything we (should not) desire as pornographic (descriptive and evaluative dimension). We remember rather new phenomena such as food porn, torture porn, war porn, earth porn, property porn, etc. In this latter sense, the term is also used for "compelling photos of the coronavirus pandemic … with the implication being that media outlets that publish it are trying to exploit a national tragedy for clicks" (Berezow 2020). In addition, a third (primarily evaluative) dimension exists when thinking about the concepts of pornography, the pandemic and their interconnection: *The Porn Pandemic* (Ferebee 2016). Books such as the one by Andrew Ferebee are not just *Simple Guide[s] to Ending Pornography and Masturbation Addiction and Getting Back into the Real World*, they are a symptom and product of the debates on pornography that have accompanied the term from the very beginning.

The Secret Museum and the Origins of the Term "Pornography"

As Walter Kendrick shows in his groundbreaking analysis *The Secret Museum* (1987), the term "pornography" first appeared in the English language as we know it today in 1850, in the context of the excavations of Pompeii. Among the vases, sculptures, paintings, and frescoes that the archaeologists unearthed there were some that challenged the archival system due to their moral indecency: "a small marble statue, highly naturalistic in style, representing a satyr in sexual congress with an apparently undaunted goat" (Kendrick 1987, 6), numerous representations of the fertility god Priapus, who was easily identified by his "gigantic erect phallus, often out of all human scale, which he brandishes because it is his essence" (8), as well as paintings

research literature as much as their research on pornography itself (see for example L. Williams 1989, 11; Koch [1997] 2016, 249ff.; Smith and Attwood 2014).

of copulating people and "lewd sculptures" (25). The real scandal, however, was not the artifacts themselves, but their significance in the lives of the city's inhabitants. "Paintings of nude bodies, even in the act of sex, had been placed side by side with landscapes and still lifes, forming a jumble that mystified modern observers" (9), explains Kendrick. He also refers to the notes of a cataloguer who was shocked to discover: "The inhabitants of Pompeii … placed these subjects, repulsed by modesty, in the most conspicuous places, so widely did their ideas of morals differ from ours" (10). From the beginning, the controversial items were kept separately and made accessible only to "gentlemen with appropriate demeanor (and ready cash for the custodian)" (6), but after a while, Kendrick points out, a suitable place and classification system was needed to catalog the artifacts: "The name chosen for them was 'pornography,' and they were housed in the Secret Museum" (11).

Following the public debate on pornography into the 1980s, Kendrick comes to the conclusion that "'pornography' names an argument, not a thing" (1987, 31).[5] In other words, what is perceived as "pornographic" depends on the prevailing moral concepts of its time:

> In the mid-nineteenth century, Pompeiian frescoes were deemed 'pornographic' and locked away in secret chambers safe from virginal minds; not long thereafter, *Madame Bovary* was put on trial for harboring the same danger. A century-long parade of court cases ensued, deliberating the perniciousness of *Ulysses*, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, *Tropic of Cancer*, and scores of other fictions, many of which now appear routinely on the syllabi of college literature courses. All these *things* were 'pornographic' once and have ceased to be so; now the stigma goes to sexually explicit pictures, films, and videotapes. (Kendrick 1987, xii)

Since then, more time has passed. In the last twenty years, many new forms of pornography have emerged in popular culture. A trend that Kendrick had already anticipated: "… it seems likely that future generations, if they use the term [pornography] at all, will mean by it something quite different—something as unimaginable today as *Debbie Does Dallas* was fifty years ago" (1987, xii). And he was right. Just as "unimaginable" as *Debbie Does Dallas* (US 1978) was in the 1930s, *Debbie Does Salad* (Kaufman 2005) was probably in 1987.

Explosion of the Pornographic

Particularly since the 2000s, there has been an expansion, or in Helen Hester's words, an "explosion" (Hester 2014, 181ff.—she doesn't seem to know Casetti) in the use of the term 'pornography.' What is striking is that sex seems to be

5   We may remember, for example, United States Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's famous expression "I know it when I see it" to characterize hard-core pornography in 1964.

displaced in the phenomena described as pornographic (181ff.). In her conceptual analysis of the term, Nina Schumacher (2017) distinguishes various forms of these pornographic configurations. As she points out, the term pornography is charged with new connotations of the immoral, the condemnable, or the obscene. What these pornographies have in common is that they approach their objects closer than usual and exhibit them in a rather excessive way (Schumacher 2017, 11f.). In this manner, they address and expose what is not (yet) shown or usually not visible or mentionable (11f.).

Schumacher locates rather ironic forms such as fruit porn or the picture book *Porn for New Moms* (Anderson 2008) in the satirical-critical tradition of the concept (Schumacher 2017, 213f.; O'Toole 1998, 1). The latter features attractive men whispering 'obscenities' such as "So, tell me again, what was the consistency of the poop" or "Let's not have sex tonight. Let me just rub your feet while you tell me about the baby's day" (Schumacher 2017, 210f.). Beyond that, she classifies the "lifestyle-pornographies" food, travel, and property porn as "pornographies of desire" (214). These would awaken longings (for food, travel, real estate) for which there can be no immediate or no satisfaction at all. In this case, the pornographic manifests itself through conventional aesthetic strategies known from pornographic films, e.g. the close-up as an expression of the "principle of *maximum visibility*" (L. Williams 1989, 48; Schumacher 2017, 215). Hester further attests a "harmless voyeuristic pleasure taken in representations of desirable items and covetable experiences" (Hester 2014, 187). According to Schumacher, components of the pornographic are just as much realized through the obscenity of what is shown, i.e. the abundance, the decadence, which one becomes aware of when watching and secretly desiring unhealthy but tasty food, travel, or property one cannot afford (Schumacher 2017, 215ff.). She aptly points out that these 'pornographies of desire' are products of capitalism propagating boundless increase, which cannot tolerate the finite satisfaction of needs (218). More popular phenomena such as torture porn, misery or social porn, or "Pornography of the Gag Reflex" (Hester 2014, 49ff.)[6] are characterized by Schumacher as 'pornographies of the rejected' (2017, 224ff.). What is rejected is the human or social body itself and, especially, its bodily fluids. The obscenity of what is shown lies in the exposure and the display of the body in pain or distress.

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6   David Edelstein (2006) coined the term "torture porn" to characterize horror films that expose the vulnerability of the body in a spectacular way, which means through depictions of torture, rape, or destroyed bodies in general. Misery porn (Hester 2014, 181ff.) or, in a more general sense, 'social porn' (Schumacher 2017, 224ff.) refers to literature, films, or TV shows in which poverty or other forms of social hardship are exposed. As 'pornographies of the gag reflex' Hester describes for example Charlotte Roche's novel *Wetlands* (2009) or the Internet phenomenon *2 Girls 1 Cup* (2007).

Without going into the remaining pornographic configurations discussed by Schumacher and Hester, it should have become clear, to borrow Hester's words:

> Porn cannot be characterized as merely 'a sex thing' (O'Toole 1998, 342), even if adult entertainment can; it is not preoccupied with eliciting a genitally sexual response but with provoking more general forms of queasy *jouissance*—horror, anger, sorrow, and a certain nauseated fascination. This kind of response is not a symptom of categorical moral bankruptcy, but part of a dysfunctional sympathetic impulse and a persistent (if perhaps regrettable) facet of our interaction with certain images and texts. (Hester 2014, 185f.)

Pandemic Pornographies

In the following, I would like to discuss the outlined dimensions of pandemic porn considered as a thick concept and address the evaluative and descriptive components they engage with. The first (descriptive) dimension signifies pornography that deals with or refers to the coronavirus pandemic. The objects gathered with this description are as heterogeneous as all pornographic configurations are and not limited to audiovisual content (see for example ABC 2020). To give you an impression: *Sex in Times of Corona* presents eleven short episodes that elaborate on how to have sex without breaking the quarantine regulations in admittedly bizarre ways.[7] *Cruising 2020* is a one minute, not sexually explicit short film featuring two gay men cruising in a park always staying six feet away from each other. The short film *Sex and Love in the Time of Quarantine* follows six adult performers, two couples and two solo actors, as they shoot porn in their own home and how they deal with isolation and their sex life as couples or singles, while *Moan Together* is more of a sexually explicit music video featuring 50 queer sex workers from all over the world performing one song. Typical corona narratives on tube sites, on the other hand, show people breaking quarantine regulations to have sex or getting caught breaking quarantine by the authorities. Gloves and masks are well loved accessories, as is medical clothing in general. Some videos are funny, some educational, some seem to have been created out of boredom. What these pornographies display, as porn scholar Madita Oeming puts it, is that: "porn does not exist in a vacuum" (Cookney 2020), it also reflects our everyday lives. Therefore, the term "pandemic porn," in this sense, simply describes audiovisual media or literature that deals with the corona crisis in a creative way, under a broad understanding of the pornographic.

7   To name a few: Creating a doppelganger, "fuck yourself", phone sex (illustrated by tin cans connected through fiber), using a 1,5 meter Popsicle-Dildo, voyeuristic-exhibitionistic neighborly help, or "run fast" (down the hallway) for your own "juicy cumshot" (shot out of the window).

The second dimension can easily be placed within the wider 'explosion of the pornographic' and shares the aesthetic characteristics and connotations highlighted by Schumacher and Hester with these new forms. It marks and extends the trend to label everything we (should not) desire as pornographic. What is referred to as pornographic in an aesthetic sense is the excessive documentation of the crisis in mass media: statistics and graphics of hospitalized persons, the number of fatalities or of already overcrowded hospitals. In this case, the characterization as pornographic is clearly evaluative. Displaying this suffering for the dramatic effect, i.e. clicks or profit, is considered unethical and impious in the western Christian value system. This extends to the accompanying voyeuristic pleasure that enjoys this exhibition of suffering.

Furthermore, I have distinguished a third dimension that is not directly related to the corona pandemic, but rather describes a culturally pessimistic, anti-pornographic attitude that, as mentioned above, has accompanied pornography since its existence. As Madita Oeming (2018) convincingly points out, a change in rhetoric and argumentation strategies can be observed over the last decade of anti-porn sentiments. A newly emerging medical rhetoric declares pornography a 'pandemic' or 'epidemic,' suggesting that pornography addiction spreads like a virus and infects, of all people, those in power: white heterosexual men (Oeming 2018, 214f.). This means that nowadays "the focus has shifted from the production to the consumption side" (214f.), with the effect being that:

> Through re-framing its consumption as pathology, the cultural narrative about porn has effectively been changed from 'women need to be protected from men' to 'men need to be protected from porn'—just like the public was once successfully convinced that soldiers needed to be protected from STI-spreading prostitutes. (215)

This framing makes pornography a public health issue that allows us "to present moral judgement as scientific fact" (213). In search of an answer to the question of why this narrative is so successful and powerful, Oeming makes two assumptions. First, she places it in the context of contemporary masculinist, right-wing populist, and anti-third-wave feminist arguments. Analyzing the rhetoric of popular scientific self-help literature, she outlines that "porn addiction alongside 'the rise of women' and 'patriarchy myths'" are cited as the cause for America's male youth "'failing' academically, socially, and sexually" (215).[8] Second, she refers to the combination of "age-old cultural anxieties surrounding sexuality with the newborn moral panic about the internet; the latter being rooted, of course, in yet another long tradition of humankind's recurrent fears about technology and new media" (214).

8   As Oeming plausibly further argues, the diagnosis "porn addiction" "frees consumers from moral judgement—it is compulsive, what can they do?—and puts the blame on the product" (Oeming 2018, 214).

This observation reminds us once again how interwoven fears around sexuality and new media are. It also poses the question of the interconnection between pandemic porn and pandemic media.

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**Philipp Dominik Keidl, Laliv Melamed, Vinzenz Hediger,
and Antonio Somaini (eds.)**
Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory

**With its unprecedented scale and consequences the
COVID-19 pandemic has generated a variety of new con-
figurations of media. Responding to demands for infor-
mation, synchronization, regulation, and containment,
these "pandemic media" reorder social interactions, spaces,
and temporalities, thus contributing to a reconfiguration
of media technologies and the cultures and polities with
which they are entangled. Highlighting media's adaptabil-
ity, malleability, and scalability under the conditions of
a pandemic, the contributions to this volume track and
analyze how media emerge, operate, and change in
response to the global crisis and provide elements toward
an understanding of the post-pandemic world to come.**

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