



# János Zoltán Tóth

# HARDCORE PORN MOVIE IN THE AGE OF NETWORK CULTURE

Ph.D dissertation

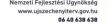
Theses

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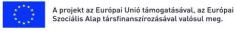
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In my doctoral dissertation I study the elements of the paradigm shift hardcore porn movie has gone through in the past decade. I define hardcore porn movie as a production category, which has gone through significant changes since the appearance of web 2.0, regarding mainly the circumstances of its distribution and production. Porn movie's institutional definition, its relation to its official distribution system appears to be more important of a condition to porn than to any other genre. The development of the genre's textual, formal, etc. features has always been in direct connection with the genre's 'foreign affairs', consequently these new thematic directions, and innovations of form stay in the center of my research.

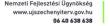
Setting a corpus to my research was not a result of an arbitrary choice. I have been researching the way pornography is being organized through a network. My research can be considered valid for a limited but at the same time extremely wide variety of internet content; this is mainstream hardcore pornography, a production category that accounts for the most popular types and directions inside hardcore porn. Mainstream in this case is not without any extremities, but it distances itself from elements considered excessive even by hardcore, like child pornography, coprophagy, necrophilia, or zoophilia. Auteur movies and art porn movies are not part of the corpus of the research as well.

The aforementioned paradigm shift is a layered, complex phenomenon, which can be approached from a number of aspects. The first one of these, is that the cultural status of the representation of sexuality and along with it hardcore porn movie have changed significantly over the past ten years.

Therefore, the relevance of this study primarily lies in the fact that from the '70s, hardcore porn emerged as the most productive film genre. It is not a marginal cultural phenomenon or the domestic affair of some enclosed subcultures any more, but a genre actively forming global aesthetic culture due to the extensiveness of the network. Porn is present in the life of the everyday person even if she/he does not actually watch porn.

The popularization of porn is strongly attached to the moment when porn became a commodity, and mass production was able to satisfy the demand created by it - but this in and of itself would still not be enough. Porn is already present in the '80s as an industry creating huge profit, but only from the '90s does it apply what Brian McNair and other authors backing him, for example Feona Atwood call the pornographication of culture and the emergence of striptease-culture. Atwood deduces porn's cultural presence and effect not only from its strong market position. The structure of culture has changed significantly during the post-modern. Atwood states, starting from Giddens' and Bauman's thoughts, that sexuality is the most important point of convergence in the construction of the postmodern subject's identity. Acquiring one's identity is directly proportional with the recognition of the culture of sexuality. The consumer sees sexuality as one of the most important tools of self- expression.

Similarly to McNair, Feona Atwood thinks that porn culture has changed register, which can mostly be seen in the fact that porn has become an everyday experience. Porn stars have become famous and celebrated all over the world. Their books or their writings in magazines giving sexual advice are read by a vast number of readers. According to Atwood, porn's iconography outreached the limits of the genre; porn style became a definitive aesthetic in video clips, television shows, as well as











in fashion. In the transformation of pornographic contents, gestures, iconography, and style into a material of common experience, aside from the discursive technology of power, a more comprehensive, a more generally culture-defining tendency also plays a part, which became stronger especially in the past few decades. In the culture called post-modern, takeover between different registers of culture became more dynamic. Discrete differentiation between high and low is still constituted of continuous appropriations and the multiplication of provisional formations, albeit the constantly reproducing oppositions, thanks to the dialogue of dialectics. I think one requirement of this easing is the transformation of the premises controlling everyday aesthetic judgment.

Another important aspect of the paradigm shift is that pornography has a growing tendency as a research material. Porn has not simply become a part of our everyday culture, but at the same time it has gotten into the forefront of academic research. In order for this shift in canon policy to be able to happen, naturally, the definition of culture itself had to change. All this in itself provides favorable conditions for the appearance of porn studies and a growth in prestige for the research, but even the succession of 'cultural revolutions' during the last forty years meant a significant contribution to the evolution of the systematic angle of approach needed for the inquiry of the hardcore porn movie. Accordingly, it is not only the position of porn as a form of representation that changed with the realignment of culture's structure, but there came to being a field of study that made possible the scientific approach to the subject. With the authors of the 1960s (Barthes, Foucault, Sontag) pornography appears as intellectualized and over- aestheticized through the research of Bataille and Sade's philosophical progressivity.

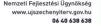
The conservative feminists of the 1980s directly put the research of hardcore pornography into the center, but, in that decade, political questions still strongly overshadowed genre criticism studies.

By the mid '90s analyses concerning pornography are not simply results of personal interest, but the visuality of porn movies becomes a tendentiously researched topic. It can be understood as a real paradigm shift that, in the Anglo-Saxon world, a discourse named porn studies is systematically trying to find its borders, and the fields of problems, through which it could identify itself. However, these studies cannot be considered homogeneous from a scientific standpoint. Porn studies tackles questions of sociological, aesthetical, philosophical interest, as well as questions of film- and media criticism, etc. There can be seen a huge step forward in international research concerning porn studies since the '60s, but it is to be noted that the genre's present day research is still significantly lagging behind other genres' critical reception. The critical under-representation of porn movie in the literature of genre films becomes especially emphasized by the fact that on a quantitative scale porn movie is ahead of every other genre.

In my study, because of the interdisciplinary nature of the subject, I approach hardcore pornography from five aspects. Endorsing the use of these heterogeneous aspects serves a dual purpose. Porn's tendentious sweep gives porn studies new goals, while old commonplaces and statements stuck as general truths are still awaiting review. The most important goal of present day studies is preparing the most detailed portrait of the genre.

# 1. Film-historical aspect

In my paper, I separate netart, which appeared at the new millennium and which I present as the comeback of the small form of porn, from earlier formations of porn, in order to let the extent of











the changes in media as well as in network culture be perceivable in comparison with earlier forms of porn movie. I broke down the history of porn movie to three periods. The first stage in the history of porn movie is the period of stag films. Thanks to its formal elements, stag can be regarded as the first showing of the small form. Stag film, which appeared from the 1890s retained nearly the same form until the 1970s, as the circumstances of its screening and distribution did not change significantly. It is screened predominantly in bachelor parties and brothels, where male audience experience the sexual spectacle as a social experience. Thematically the films go about from simple striptease scenes to hardcore scenes involving different role-plays. The actors are in every case amateurs and anonymous. Stag film emphatically searches for explicit voyeuristic situations, for example when someone peeps on the play of the maids and the landlord, or on a couple making love in the reed field. With its thematic richness, the stag film is barely lagging behind '70s standards. Group sex, a wide variety of positions, oral sex, glory hole scenes, 'boobie sex', and bisexual games make the early period of stag films really colorful.

The easing of censure that long defined the development of American film culture in 1969, along with the birth of the new ranking categories was a huge contribution to open the way in the seventies for hardcore adult feature films, which showed unbelievable formal and thematic richness. I call this period in the history of porn movie the period of the large form. In this period, American movies, which screened more than 750 porn movies, widened the genre's traditional audience in social as well as gender respects, and started industrial scale production of porn. It is a generally valid statement that hardware controls and forms software, in other words, the potential of the apparatus forms the genre. Porn again is a special field in the production of genre film, because the parameters and the potential of the technology have always been more determining factors in its quest using channels of its alternative public and medial possibilities than in the case of any other genre.

In the 1970s hardcore pornography significantly broadened the boundaries. Still, its biggest novelty was the fact, that it made pornography a part of everyday language. Thanks to the porn lawsuits, and scandals around movies like *Deep Throat* (Damiano, 1972) legislation and politics started to take pornography into account. Watching porn became fashionable in the '70s. This is the era of the porn chic, when stars like Warren Beatty protested for the genre. Typical audience of porn cinemas, the 'raincoat audience' was replaced by average citizens, even women showed up at these screenings. The age of sexual revolution, civil rights movements, and the rewriting of social rules proclaimed such values, where watching porn movies could even count as a political statement.

# 2. Genre critical aspect

Every genre theory comes with a demand for totalization, for universal validity. In reality, their validity is strongly limited. It is true that genres can be characterized with a common value structure, with schematisms, with bearing invariant variables, institutionalized systems, etc., but the validity and scope of the genre theories studying and categorizing these characteristics are different in the case of every genre. Criticisms of genre theories are in many cases inaccurate when trying to put forward a critique referring to the totality of a given genre theory.









However, in my dissertation, I will not attempt to evaluate the totality of the featured genre theories, and the aspect system of those, but I would rather attempt to measure the productivity, the operationability of the directions that dominate contemporary genre theory in terms of hardcore porn.

I am more closely dealing with three genre critical models. The first genre theory in Hungarian literature is the archetypical film theory of Jenő Király. Substantive theories can be an obvious theoretical apparatus for studying porn. Porn's value structure based on oppositions and conflicts can be made discernible by archetypical analyses. The scenery of contemporary porn is defined by montage aesthetics of different elements, motifs in conflict. This oppositional structure, however, can only partially be originated in ancient, visceral subject matters of sexuality. In its bigger part, it can be originated in the logics of perversion, which first gets elaborated in the western world by Sade, about this, Király was not mistaken.

Substantive theories display genres as a thesaurus of eternal human problems and problem solving formulas. With this, if unwittingly, they detach the observation of the genre from the sociocultural environment, and they neglect the role of change and invariance in the development of genres. However, accidental theories, like genre evolutionism discussed in the present study, are interested in the genre's 'foreign affairs'. This is even more important, because porn's own walk of life was shaped by censure, and the technical conditions providing the special modes of the genre's representation and visualization, as well as the forms, dramaturgy and style thet can be considered as paradigmatic in different eras of the genre. Studied through Thomas Schatz's genre evolutionistic theory, the genre's evolution cannot be seen as linear. Hardcore's history cannot be described with a route from early primitivity and formal untidiness to more complex forms, the way Schatz's theory propagates. The easiest proof for this is the fact that contemporary hardcore pornography is not at the highest level of refinement to this time. Contemporary porn in many respects returned to 'small form' of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century from the '70s 'large form'. To be more precise, the emergence of new technological conditions such as the network, computers and later on the appearance of mobile strongly influenced movie making, altering the expectations of the audience and habits of consumption. The result is the prevalence of a type of porn movie, which in certain aspects is more similar to the short film of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, than to feature films of the 1970s.

Finally I attempt to present Torben Grodal's genre theory model along with a critique of it. I compare Grodal's cognitive approach to the findings of Linda Williams's action theory study on body genres. Williams's analysis form statements about genres triggering intensive physical reactions by using largely the apparatus of psychoanalysis. The different and in many cases opposing preconceptions of cognitive sciences and psychoanalysis can be fruitful in the research of the structure of porn effect.

# 3. The media critical aspect

The appearance of porn inside a network was not only an opportunity for a new market, but it reformed the matrix of sub-genres along web 2.0's own, inner logic. Thanks to the digital environment, not only some new textual-thematic constants became successful, but there appeared











new types of images and aspects that rearranged the space of the spectacle itself, and with it they introduced a new type of approach to the body.

Web 2.0 services are not only user friendly, but they help users share certain content, comment, or get in contact with others. I think this is the first time in the history of pornography when, thanks to this, the receiving end can more intensively take part in building the genre's narrative portrait. The digital-analog conversion also defines the genre's form. Seemingly no other type of genre

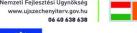
film is able to display the database-film in the Manovichian sense so categorically that porn movie does. The modular, parasyntagmatic construction of porn movie nearly naturally predestines itself to work as a database. Yet, at the same time, we must notice that during the entire history of porn we take the fact as an inherent characteristic feature that it displays sexuality as a line of arbitrarily interchangeable scenes, lacking causality. This is even true to the sex scenes of '70s feature films. During the course of its history, the lack of a narrative is to a variable degree a general characteristic feature of porn. In this respect, internet porn, which can be identified with pure modality, is the strongest representation of this tendency. Still, it would be an anachronism to explain an earlier filmic tendency as an exclusive consequence of new media, as it is in the case of Vertov mentioned by Manovich. It is important to note that the films themselves cannot be strictly called database-films. It is more important that the movies appear on websites rendered into databases, where algorithmic search is made possible by tags used to mark whatever detail of sexual importance. In my dissertation, I demonstrate that this folksonomic order eliminates the hierarchic order based on taxonomic divisions characterizing the genre to date.

The transformation of media conditions made new production and distribution strategies necessary. According to the big dick theory, the emergence of internet brought about the transformation of the market structure, the broadening of supply. In the physical markets and warehouses abundant in goods, in order to minimize losses only largely successful products were brought into mass production. Goods that seem locally unsellable can mobilize sufficient purchasing power on a global scale for alternative market investments to become successful. Using a simple example, a shop serving only special sexual demands would go bankrupt. A site or video channel presenting only pissing sex, or vacuuming videos is able to find an audience globally that would make mass production rational.

In the early era of internet porn, special perversions, extreme sexual practices appeared segregated, ghettoized in the supply chain of global porn. From the mid-2000s the fact that operators of the biggest sites could not afford doing without distributing movies for members of the mentioned minority subcultures, resulted in the transformation of the definition of mainstream.

# 4. The aesthetic ideology of the porn movie

The genre critical and media critical aspects are in many cases unable to handle the politics of the image. Yet from the '80s onwards, especially thanks to conservative feminist movements, the political definition is the most important question of pornography in everyday as well is in academic discourse.











This involves three closely connected fields of questions: the submission of the woman in porn, violent behavioral patterns spread performatively by porn, and the realism of the porn movie.

Linda Williams sees perfectly the interconnection between medium and politics when she remarks on porn perverting its own form, i.e. porn raises the questions of its own media.

I discuss the three questions separately.

Starting from Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, the dehumanization of the woman is always part of the space of the spectacle, organized by the male look. According to Mulvey's psychoanalytical approach, fear of castration reflected in the female character has a cardinal

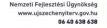
role for the man in developing his strategies of looking. In connection with this, I show how voyeurism and fetishism work as complements of each other. Voyeurism is a form of looking concentrating on movement and change, in its totality, on narration. The voyeuristic recipient watches porn where the difference of sexes is clearly declared (for example in the crotch shot, a recurring element, where the camera closes straight in on the woman's legs wide open), and with the help of which he can demystify the object of looking, or even punish it. Fetishism is an act of receiving entirely contrary to voyeurism. The fetishistic viewer does all he/she can to hide sex differences. In this the fetishistic use and introduction of sex toys (champagne bottle, vibrator), or clothing elements of the female character (stockings, high heels, whip, etc.) can be of help.

The performativity of the porn movie means the second cardinal question of the medium getting perverted. According to common judgment, porn can be held responsible for the spread of extreme sexual violence. As I draw attention to it in my dissertation, using rape as an ultimate argument in judging pornography is an ultimately schematic approach, which gives way to losing the exact view-point, from where we would be able to see that porn's performativity cannot be restrained to the imitation of rape. In reality, the performativity of a porn movie by far exceeds that of other genres, but this effect is more of a consequence of the biopolitical emphasis of memes. Concerning its effect and importance it is much more than the memetic fixation of an extreme behavioral pattern (in this case rape). As a result of the body being its primary object (even though this statement is more often heard in connection with normal movies), porn's memes, its samples referring to the material qualities of the body invisibly or indirectly play a monumental role in the process, which is called 'embodiment' by the literature defining body as a social construct.

The most important element of porn movie's aesthetical ideology is the realism with which porn movie uncocks politically incorrect actions and pushes them into the realm of censure.

Thus, realism offers a seemingly final and simple explanation for the phenomena connected to porn. Yet, in reality, realism is more likely to hide the complexity of these problems than to unfold them; to make this visible I demonstrate porn movie's realism as a phenomenon layered in itself, and I separate three levels of this reality-effect.

In discussing the realism of the porn movie, the first level is the realism of the film image. In the sub-chapter explaining this, I discuss the relevance of the realism of the film medium regarding











porn movie. With the help of semiotic and consumer-sociological media criticism I would like to show the way superstitions and habits constitute the technical realism of the technical image, which, in the case of the porn movie, many times stays without reflection, is taken as an evidence and taken from the mode of operation of the apparatus.

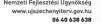
The often mentioned realism of the porn movie is outlined at another level by the difference between document and fiction. The separation of document and fiction is so much more the result of the use of the picture than a realism deducted from the technical features of the image. However these categories often appear in the literature as 'inner', ontological characteristics, and not as coding and reading differences. The relationship with reality in this case cannot be understood from the previous media connections, nor from the fact that photocopic reality is captured on the film. Although without doubt, this is what provides ground for deciding whether or not to grant documentary value to something.

This field of questions leads us toward the discursive space of genreism and documentarism. I will also point out that the primacy of pro-filmic actions and the appearance of corporealism have a decisive role in defining porn's place on the border between fiction and document.

The third realism that can be connected to porn movie is a realism in a political or sociological sense. Politics here cannot be understood along with party preferences. By this I simply mean a realism that serves as a display for social reality and social relations. Realism in the political sense shows the originality of the actions in the world, or the structure, the logic which organizes these actions. Along the history of the film, politically motivated realisms always had different ideas about this task. Artists of social montage schools had completely different ideas about portraying social reality than did the Italian neo-realists or New Hollywood directors of the '60s.

Based on this, the most important statements that can be formed in connection with internet porn, which opened a new chapter in the history of porn movie after the turn of the millennium, are the following:

- 1. Porn movie is a meta-movie that brings out those film theoretical problems in the most concentrated way that have always been determining factors during the history of film because of its nature as a media.
- 2. Porn is disturbing, not only because it makes social taboos visible, but also because it brings to the surface the repressed aspects of the representation and the filmic media, the ontological uncertainty, that comes into force during double screening.
- 3. The basic form of internet porn is fetish.
- 4. Internet porn is an attraction film, structurally characterized by the tradition of the early silent film.
- 5. Porn destroys the ideal of the genre through the fact that the foksonomic order of databases makes new ways of genre creation possible.
- 6. Hardcore porn is a male genre. Its visual nature is defined by the therapeutic neutralization of the fear of castration.











- 7. Internet porn offers a mixture of the points of views of fetishism and voyeurism for the male look. Politically correct sexuality does not exist. Pleasure is always given as a power play. Porn as a genre of sexuality is all the more successful when 'dramatizing' and defining as a requirement for satisfaction those inequalities which keep sexuality in constant motion.
- 8. The problem of the performativity of rape/violence is a fake question in the case of pornography. The performativity of the porn movie defines our relationship to sexuality in a complex way, down to the level of instinctual actions.
- 9. From a biopolitical aspect porn movie can be perceived as one of the most important galleries of body images.

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