

## Sensate Vision: From Maximum Visibility to Haptic Erotics

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### Abstract:

For years, moving-image pornography has been shaped by a desire for “maximum visibility,” according to film scholar Linda Williams (1999), informing pornography’s formulaic and repetitive graphic depiction of the mechanics of the sexual act, as well as its intense scrutiny of the female body, and its different generic tropes, the most important one being the so-called “money shot,” consisting of the external male ejaculation. However, in the course of the last two decades, a corpus of feminist, lesbian, and queer pornography has appeared, which not only expresses a particular interest in bringing to screen female sexual pleasure, but also problematizes pornography’s obsession with maximum visibility, instead seeking to convey the tactile and visceral “feel” of the sexual encounter. By taking up Laura Marks’s concept of “haptic visuality” as a particular feminist strategy, this article takes into account two examples of alternative pornography, namely *Touch* (2013) and *One Night Stand* (2006), in order to describe the ways in which these films not only appropriate the carnal appeal of pornography, but also reconfigure it, experimenting with different ways of visualizing female sexuality, and opening up not only what pornography might look like, but also what it might do.

“We all know what sex looks like. Many movies have tried to capture the magic, but most can only bring home the tricks”. This blurb from the sexually explicit documentary *Skin.Like.Sun* (2010) made

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by erotic filmmakers Jennifer Lyon Bell and Murielle Scherre, illustrates a much-heard critique on the representation of sex in mainstream pornography, namely that porn focuses primarily on exposing the mechanics of the sexual act. However, over the last few years, a collection of alternative pornography has been released, which instead emphasizes the tactile and visceral experience of the sexual encounter. Rather than going through the motions of a standardized repertoire of sexual practices and positions, focusing on a graphic depiction of the technicalities of the sexual act, this body of work troubles the premise that pornography and intimacy are mutually exclusive, adopting what Bettina Papenburg and Marta Zarzycka describe as a “carnal aesthetics” (2013). These films include but are not limited to *Belle de Nature* (Maria Beatty, 2008), *Flare* (Gala Vanting and Lighten, 2012), *Shutter* (Goodyn Green, 2014), and *Crystalline* (Four Chambers, 2014) as well as the aforementioned film *Skin.Like.Sun*. Even though these pornographies depict a wide range of gender expressions, sexual identities and sexual practices, what they share is a desire to explore different ways of visualizing sexuality, problematizing the demand for visibility that defines mainstream pornography. Blurring the boundaries between pornography and activism, pornography and erotica, and pornography and art, these films not only open up conventional notions of what pornography *is* and what it looks like, but also what it *does*. This article focuses on the ways in which this approach has been specifically deployed by filmmakers interested in exploring female sexuality—telling exceptions like Travis Matthew’s *In Their Rooms* series (2009-2013) on gay sexuality and intimacy and Morty Diamond’s transgender docuporn *Trans Entities: The Nasty Love of Papi and Wil* (2007) notwithstanding. But how to make sense of the intimacy and intensity conveyed in these pornographies, which make the spectator *feel* just as much as *see* sex acts on the screen?

### **The Pleasure and Danger of Pornography**

The 1982 Barnard conference is often marked as sparking the infamous “sex wars”, separating the feminist movement into two camps with the anti-pornography feminists on one side and the pro-

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pornography feminists on the other. However, whereas the group that protested and picketed the conference, the Women Against Pornography (WAP), self-identified as anti-pornography feminists, a definition that perfectly captured their message, the same cannot be said of the group against which they protested, for the label of “pro-pornography” was not a self-chosen description. In fact, many of these so-called pro-pornography feminists were profoundly critical of the sexist attitudes reflected in pornography, even if they opposed the moral panic evoked by the anti-pornography feminist movement, as well as the assumptions that sexism constituted an inherent component of pornography and therefore should lead to its abolition (Vance 1992, 5). If in the early 1980s there hardly existed pornography that could be applauded from a feminist standpoint, making it nearly inconceivable to call oneself a pro-porn feminist, even if one was not opposed to the concept of pornography per se, as the sex wars raged on, an increasing number of filmmakers took Annie Sprinkle’s motto to heart that the answer to bad porn is not no porn, but to try and make better porn. Thus, from the 1980s onwards pornography became increasingly appropriated as a powerful site for the exploration and promotion of female sexual pleasure, with lesbian pornography designating an especially viable site for the exploration of female sexuality outside the patriarchal framework of commercial hardcore pornography (Bensinger 1992; Butler 2004; Conway 1997; Henderson 1992; Johnson 1993; Patton 1994; Smyth 1990). This wave of alternative pornography has gained particular momentum over the last decade, resulting in half of the films shown at the Berlin Porn Film Festival in 2014 being made by female filmmakers and many dealing specifically with female sexual desire and pleasure, so that nowadays, feminism and pornography no longer seem to designate two mutually exclusive terms, nor does the idea of a feminist pornography automatically determine a *contradictio in terminis*. Functioning outside of the commercial and mass-producing adult industry, independent filmmakers have created their own niche, by picking up the camera and creating alternative imaginaries of sexuality to what they experience as the formulaic, limited, and exclusionary representations of sex

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offered by mainstream pornography. As such, alternative pornography has become a vibrant, if not uncontested, vehicle of activism, creating a means of self-expression, self-definition, and self-sexualisation for those groups that have often remained invisible and stigmatized by mainstream pornography, exploring female sexuality—lesbian, bisexual, and straight—as well as queer, transgender, and—to a certain extent—gay sexuality. This paper discusses the ways in which the subgenre of alternative pornography relies heavily on the concept of visibility, in its aim to offer resemblance, recognition, and a sense of community to those who mostly remain invisible within culture at large. As will become apparent in the course of this paper, this notion of visibility as a political objective is intimately tied up with the concept of maximum visibility (Williams 1999) as a defining principle of the genre of pornography. Moreover, the challenge of representing female sexuality “on its own terms” is in no way limited to the subgenre of alternative pornography, but rather has shaped feminist theory and practice from the second-wave onwards, and remains heavily debated up to the present day.

Not only does alternative pornography differ from mainstream pornography in terms of content, showing a diverse range of bodies, practices, and identities, it also expresses a variety of ways of bringing sex to the screen, in terms of form, style and aesthetics, ranging from cinema vérité to highly stylized, experimental, and cinematic pornographies. This paper investigates both the pleasure and danger related to alternative pornography that aims to explore female sexualities on film. Making sense of alternative pornography in a way that does not automatically reject the genre of pornography as a potentially productive site of knowledge production with regard to female sexualities means first and foremost engaging with the many paradoxes that define the genre of pornography in its specificity and the medium of film more generally. On the one hand, pornography has often been condemned for being *too close* to the body, luring the spectator into the image and creating a “leaky body” in a similar way to other “low” genres such as horror and melodrama, thereby eradicating any distance

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that would allow the spectator to critically, morally, or aesthetically reflect on the images that are in front of him or her (Williams 1991). On the other hand, pornography has also been fiercely criticized for creating *too much distance*, inviting a voyeuristic controlling gaze that objectifies the women depicted on screen thereby denying them any (sexual) subjectivity. As such, alternative pornography is wrapped up with, as well as exemplary of, a wider set of issues and concerns around vision, visibility, and practices of looking that have been used to define film as a *visual* medium, and which make the exploration of female sexuality on film a particularly dangerous endeavor. In large part these concerns are not new; rather they have haunted feminist theory for decades, informing seminal works by film theorists such as Jacqueline Rose (1986), Laura Mulvey (1975), and Teresa de Lauretis (1985), as well as philosophers like Luce Irigaray (1985) and art theorists like Linda Nochlin (1989) and Griselda Pollock (1988). Moreover, returning to the original diary that accompanied the 1982 Barnard conference, which mentions a talk called “Power, Sexuality, and the Organization of Vision” by Mary Ann Doane and Barbara Kruger, as well as the subsequent anthology *Pleasure and Danger* (1992) which includes a chapter on the “pleasure of looking” by Bette Gordon with photos by Nan Goldin, it becomes apparent that this interest in vision, visibility and practices of looking has been entangled with the pleasure and danger couplet from its very beginning, and has yet to lose its urgency in relation to the representation of female sexual pleasure in contemporary alternative pornography.

Taking the conjunction of pleasure and danger as a starting point in exploring the ways in which female sexuality is visualized in contemporary alternative pornography, this article addresses the way in which alternative pornography expresses a *negotiation* of visibility, rather than a wholehearted rejection or uncritical acceptance of pornography’s demand for visibility. As such, it investigates the ways in which these pornographies trouble the “ocularcentrism” (Jay 1988) of film in favor of a more embodied account of cinema that plays with the affective qualities of film. Importantly, this does not

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mean returning to some naive or essentialist belief in female sexuality as somehow more natural, erotic, elusive, and closer to the body, creating some sort of feminine aesthetics. Rather, it entails a particular *feminist strategy* that troubles the connection between pornography, visibility, and the production of truth. Moreover, this strategy allows for an alternative pleasure of looking; one that does not rely on a voyeuristic and controlling gaze, but rather establishes an intersubjective relationship between the image and the spectator. Engaging with the aesthetic strategies these films adopt in order to express the intensity, or the *feel* of sex, this article calls for a critical re-appreciation of pornography as a particular “body genre” (Williams 1991), which is realized “in/through” the body (Dyer 1992, 122). Such a re-appreciation would not only account for the ways in which some of these films adopt a “haptic visuality” (Marks 2002), but also how they trouble the principle of “maximum visibility” (Williams 1999) that defines conventional pornography. As such, this re-appreciation offers a much needed analytical shift away from representation—which focuses on *what* these films show—towards a recognition of the “non-representational signs” (Dyer 1992, 18), focusing instead on *how* they show sex. Rather than offering a definition of what alternative pornography *is*, then, this article explores what alternative pornography *does*, opening up pathways to what it might become in the future.

In many ways, the genre of alternative pornography pays more than lip service to Carole Vance’s appeal that “it is not enough to move women away from fear and oppression; it is necessary to move towards something: towards pleasure, agency and self-definition” (Vance 1992, 24). However, even if it may seem like we have come a long way from the infamous sex wars, there still is a long way to go when it comes to the promotion and affirmation of autonomous female sexual pleasure, making the “paradoxical conjunction of pleasure and danger” in relation to female sexualities as relevant and urgent today as it was thirty years ago. While in 2015 there has emerged a transnational film culture of filmmakers, performers, and artists who are dedicated to changing the landscape of the

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pornographic imagination, as Ingrid Ryberg assesses, we have to be wary of too easily calling it utopia, for this figuration of “safe space” is as wrought with complexity, contradiction, and conflict as it is powerful to those involved (2013). Moreover, as Michael Warner argues in his book *The Trouble with Normal* (1999), Western culture is still deeply ingrained and affected by a “rhetoric of shame”, leading both producers and consumers of alternative pornography to continue to struggle with the same stigmatization and rejection which for a long time made any serious attempt to engage with pornography in a positive manner seem not only highly suspicious, but also inherently anti-feminist. Drawing on Gayle Rubin’s seminal essay “Thinking Sex”, which was originally published in *Pleasure and Danger*, and became a foundational text influencing generations of scholars interested in questions of sex and sexuality, Warner assesses how some people, identities, and practices more than others come to carry the burden of shame and stigmatization according to a series of hierarchies that sort the good sex from the bad (1999, 25). Needless to say, pornography is positioned firmly on the side of what is considered bad, abnormal, and unnatural. This stigmatization of pornography, and the subsequent measures and legislation that are taken in order to control and regulate the production, distribution, and consumption of pornography, is particularly harmful to those groups that do not depend on pornography solely as a way to get off, but for whom pornography also offers other pleasures; the pleasure of recognizing themselves and their desires; of exploring their sexuality; and of gaining and expanding knowledge of sex which cannot easily be found elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> Here, the camera constitutes “a witness”, acknowledging those desires, experiences, embodiments, and practices which are normally absent and rendered invisible in mainstream culture (Warner 1999, 184). Thus, Warner states:

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<sup>1</sup> Only one example of this culture of stigma and shame is the recent change in UK legislation which concerns the distribution of sexually explicit imagery, targeting pornography that deals specifically with (non-normative) female sexual pleasure (see Quinn 2014; Blake 2014).

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[Pornography] is not just speech, privately consumed; it is publicly certifiable recognition. This is part of the meaning of every piece of porn, and what is difficult to communicate in the dominant culture is that the publicity of porn has profoundly different meanings for nonnormative sex practices. When it comes to resources of recognition, queers do not begin on a level playing field (1999, 185).

Although Warner concentrates on queer desire in the quote above, he also acknowledges the burden of stigmatization and shame that has been placed on female sexuality. This burden is directly related to the danger of female sexuality—when women are held accountable for the sexual harm and/or violence inflicted on them and made responsible for the prevention of any such harm to occur, or the way in which women are denied sexual subjectivity by upholding an ideal of femininity as passive, complaisant, and demure, punishing those who do not comply with this ideal. Rather than continuing a feminist rhetoric of danger, obscuring from view the “the potentially creative effect of pornography” (Warner 1999, 186), I want to argue here for the importance of a feminist investment in pleasure, which works towards a future beyond stigma and shame, by engaging with the political and creative potential of pornography, and the ways in which alternative pornography is evoked as a space for exploring female pleasure and affirming sexual autonomy and agency.

### **Documenting Sex, or, Visibility and its Discontents**

Alternative pornography, as the term suggests, can be described as a reaction to mainstream pornography, creating alternatives to the overwhelming amount of hardcore images of sex relying on a patriarchal and capitalist framework. As such, the production of alternative porn is informed by a Do-It-Yourself (DIY) attitude and a desire for different representations of sexuality, or, as performer and filmmaker Gala Vanting argues in the short film *Something Better: Performers talk Feminism and Porn* (2014): “You can’t really sit around complaining about women’s representation in porn and expect that to change, so you need to actually wrangle the means of production yourself and get out there with a camera, and make what you want to see”. Rather than designating a monolithic and static

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entity, alternative pornography functions as an umbrella term, signaling a range of approaches, practices, and aesthetics, pushing the boundaries of what is considered pornography, and what is considered erotica or art. However, there is more to this story than simply replacing “bad” porn with “good” porn. Rather, many filmmakers of alternative pornography are invested in “creating change by offering an authentic expression of sexual pleasure” (Young 2014). As such, it is not enough to simply show that “real” sex is taking place, but it becomes equally important for pornography to represent “authentic” sexuality. This interest in realness and authenticity has also resulted in the increased interest in alternative pornography as a form of documentary, or “docuporn”. For instance, *Skin.Like.Sun* is described as an artistic erotic documentary about a sexual encounter between a real-life couple on a sunny afternoon in an attractive old house in Belgium. Not only is the authenticity of this film centered around the real-life relationship of the performers, it is also expressed through the practice of filmmaking, as the film is edited in nearly real-time in order to convey the slowness of the sexual encounter as it gradually unfolds, countering the heavily edited and compressed representation of sex in conventional pornography. Hence, *Skin.Like.Sun* can be said to document authentic sexual pleasure as it is experienced by real-life lovers in a particular encounter.

Whereas *Skin.Like.Sun* is characterized by high production values, a very different case is *One Night Stand*, the first feature-length film by French filmmaker and photographer Emilie Jovet, which premiered at the Berlin Porn Film Festival in 2006. A no-budget DIY film, Jovet used a simple DV-camera to shoot the film herself. Also, rather than using a professional crew and actors, and using a prewritten script, Jovet invited her friends and acquaintances from the Parisian lesbian-queer community to share their fantasies and bring them to life in front of the camera. The end result consists of six independent vignettes of approximately fifteen to twenty minutes which each show a different sexual encounter. The vignettes contain hardly any narrative, and with their gritty, shaky camerawork

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and harsh lighting, and the action unfolding in dim lit staircases, raunchy toilets and squeaky beds, they express a raw, punk-like aesthetic. The different scenes in *One Night Stand* show a wide variety of body-types and gender expressions—from girly-girls, girls next door, and *parisiennes* with long hair, garters, and stockings, to butches with shaven heads and dog collars, and a transgender guy with a fetlock dressed in a leather jacket—as well as a diverse range of sex acts, such as dildo play and female ejaculation. Even though the film shows hardcore sex, the different vignettes are intimate at the same time, focusing on the spontaneity, energy, and intensity that are part of having sex, as well as the occasional clumsiness and uneasiness that goes along with it. *One Night Stand* expresses as much interest in capturing the intimate looks that are exchanged, in catching the rosy cheeks, the trembling and contracting of the body, and the glistening sweat, as it does in making visible every graphic detail of the sexual act depicted. Rather than focusing primarily on bringing to the screen the mechanics of the sexual act, *One Night Stand* is concerned with getting across the authenticity of the sexual encounter. This desire for authenticity also comes to the fore in the interviews that accompany the sex scenes, in which the performers describe their experiences in making the film, their motivations for being in it, and their overall views on pornography, sexuality, and sexual politics. In one of the interviews, Carmen expresses her motivation to participate in the film as follows:

Because I'm fed up with all the taboos on lesbian sex which is supposed to be very soft, as soft as velvet, that we slightly touch. "Oh! It's so good!" It's nothing like I've experienced in bed. So I wanted to be part of this project and say that lesbian sex is also sex, and it's not only touching a nipple and small neck licking.

*One Night Stand* perfectly illustrates Heather Butler's description of the way in which lesbian pornography attempts to "authenticate lesbian sexuality through representation" by "proposing alternatives to the representation of lesbian sexuality in mainstream pornography as simply 'taking it' or 'faking it'" (2004, 167-168). This desire for authenticity is not only expressed by the filmmakers;

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it is also shared by its audience as Cherry Smyth describes: “Lesbian sexuality has been repressed, rendered invisible and impotent by society. By watching porn, we can on some level recognize ourselves, defend our right to express our sexuality and assert our desire” (1990, 154). Hence, alternative pornography becomes more than something that aims to arouse and titillate, it becomes part of an “identity political project aimed at strengthening and rendering visible marginalized subject positions and experiences” (Ryberg 2008, 72). Moreover, in their account of the place of porn in bareback subculture, Paul Morris and Susanna Paasonen argue that porn has been central to bareback culture “as a form of witnessing that documents sexual practices and renders forms of intimacy visible” (2014, 552). Even though there are important differences in terms of content, aesthetics, and ethics, I think that this approach of pornography is not exclusive to the subculture of barebacking, but can also be used to describe a much wider range of alternative pornographies, including *One Night Stand*.

Even though alternative pornography explicitly takes up the genre of the documentary in order to convey the authenticity of the sex and the sexualities depicted on the screen, the conventions of documentary realism also play a key role in the construction of mainstream pornography, as Linda Williams states in her seminal book on heterosexual pornography called *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible”* (1999, 203). In fact, pornography as a genre is defined precisely by this documentary interest in representing “real” sex. Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, Williams argues that pornography is prompted by “the modern compulsion to speak incessantly about sex” (1999, 2). As part of the modern Western organization of the knowledge of sexuality, pornography functions as a *scientia sexualis*, aimed at “eliciting the confession of the scientific truths of sex” (1999, 3). The occasional flimsy fictional narrative around the pizza delivery guide aside, what defines the genre of mainstream pornography is its promise that we are watching sex that is not

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staged, acted, or faked. As such, pornography takes off precisely where Hollywood films stop when the camera sways away and the image fades out after the characters kiss and embrace. In its relentless effort to offer visible evidence, and proving that sexual pleasure is taking place, the genre of pornography is guided by the principle of *maximum visibility* (Williams 1999, 50-51).

The principle of maximum visibility is responsible for many of the filmic conventions that make up the standardized pornographic formula, including lighting, camera angles, and editing, as well as the close-ups of body parts and the selection of sexual positions that show the most of bodies and genitals. It also informs the two main tropes of mainstream heterosexual pornography: “the meat shot”, a close-up of penetration, and “the money shot” (or cum shot), which shows external penile ejaculation. With regard to the representation of male sexual pleasure, the convention of the money shot produces “the visual evidence of the mechanical ‘truth’ of bodily pleasure caught in involuntary spasm; the ultimate and uncontrollable—ultimate *because* uncontrollable—confession of sexual pleasure in the climax of orgasm”, according to Williams (1999, 101). However, when it comes to the representation of female sexual pleasure, the principle of maximum visibility appears hardly bulletproof. Rather, female sexual pleasure proves elusive in terms of the cinematic will-to-knowledge of hardcore pornography due to its supposed invisibility. Whereas the visual economy of pornography “fixes” male sexual pleasure through the visible evidence of the “involuntary convulsion of pleasure” (Williams 1999, 113) of the money shot, which functions as a punctuation, marking the conclusion of the sexual narrative, the narration of female sexual pleasure is constructed as always fleeting, without goal or end, making it impossible for pornography to uncover the secrets of female sexuality once and for all. Williams states:

Hard core desires assurance that it is witnessing not the voluntary performance of feminine pleasure, but its involuntary confession. The woman’s ability to fake the orgasm that the man can never fake (at least

according to certain standards of evidence) seems to be at the root of all the genre's attempts to solicit what it can never be sure of: the out-of-control confession of pleasure, a hard-core "frenzy of the visible" (1999, 50)

Paradoxically, it is precisely this problem of the supposed invisibility of female sexual pleasure which triggers contemporary mainstream pornography. In contrast to the disinterest of earlier pornography in representing female sexuality, such as the stag films, Williams describes how the problem of the supposed invisibility of female sexual pleasure has become central to pornography from the 1970s onwards. Within this "regime of the visual knowledge of pleasure", failing to uncover the secrets of female sexual pleasure, the "spectacle of ejaculation", is offered as a solution, serving as a substitute "for what is not there: the invisible female orgasm" (Williams 1993, 243)

In her article "Maximizing Visibility" (2008), Ingrid Ryberg adopts Williams' concept of maximum visibility, and focuses on the problematic notion of visibility within alternative pornography, stating that within this subgenre of pornography, the notion of visibility turns out to be two very different, if sometimes conflated and confused, notions (72). On the one hand visibility in pornography relates to the aforementioned scientific will-to-knowledge through an explicit cinematic language aiming at revealing all the body's secrets and sexual pleasures; on the other hand, visibility is central in various identity politics projects aiming at rendering visible marginalized subject positions. If the aim of alternative pornography is to render certain groups and practices visible, Ryberg asks, how can this aim be achieved without repeating patriarchal assumptions that take maximum visibility as the only satisfying way to represent sex? Whereas the money shot is the reference point for most pornography, as the ultimate expression of pornography's demand for maximum visibility, female sexuality is a 'problem' within this framework of visibility, and does not comply with that demand, for the female orgasm takes place inside the body, and is usually without visible 'evidence.' One of the strategies

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that have been adopted in order to visualize female sexual pleasure, and which is often seen as a solution to the supposed invisibility of female sexual pleasure, is the practice of female ejaculation—“by now something of a lesbian pornographic trope along with the dildo” (Ryberg 2008, 74). Within lesbian and queer pornography, as well as the discourses around it, female ejaculation is hailed as the definite unmasking of the supposed invisibility of female sexual pleasure, problematizing the status of the male money shot as the only conclusive answer to the demand of visible proof of sexual pleasure in pornography. Female ejaculation is seen as troubling a myriad of deeply ingrained cultural assumptions about the difference between male and female sexuality, where male sexuality is understood as active, external, and fixed, and female sexuality in contrast is perceived as passive, internal, fragmented and fleeting. For instance, Kathy Daymond, in an intimate account of her motivations for making *nice girls don't do it* (1998), a short experimental documentary film demonstrating female ejaculation, states:

Long denied, ridiculed, marginalized, and pathologized, female ejaculation is, I think, one of the most powerful dimensions of female sexuality. It contests the claim of the phallus to dominance in the visual field and renders female sexuality visible by extending it from internal to public space [...] In its radical potential to displace the phallus and male ejaculation from their privileged positions, female ejaculation is about as *queer* as it gets (emphasis original, 1998, 62)

However, at the same time that female ejaculation makes the female orgasm visible, it is conflated with and becomes an integral part of an identity political project that seeks to authenticate lesbian sexuality by offering proof that the women in the scene are “real lesbians” or at least “really” enjoying themselves, Ryberg argues (2008, 74). In this way, the appropriation of the convention of maximum visibility actually becomes a double edged sword:

If, on the one hand, female ejaculation can be seen as a challenge to a dominant male-oriented account

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for sexuality where no other measurement of pleasure than male ejaculation has been imagined, on the other hand it can be seen as an adjustment to this very norm, where women are now trying to be as good as or the same as men, instead of being represented on other or their own terms (75)

However, in this case, the tactic of maximum visibility remains unquestioned and unproblematized. There is still no question of representing female pleasure on its own terms, since it simply repeats existing strategies of representing sexual pleasure and does not trouble the emphasis on vision. Thus, the question arises whether the celebration of female ejaculation as visible proof of female sexual pleasure does not actually pose a serious threat to the affirmation of female sexual autonomy, when it means entangling even more intimately the “truth” of women’s sexualities with the principle of maximum visibility. By replacing male ejaculation with a female one, alternative pornography runs the risk of repeating a phallic visual economy of pleasure, without questioning “the frenzy of the visible” that takes maximum visibility as the only acceptable means of acquiring knowledge of female sexualities. When it comes to conflating the sexual practice of female ejaculation with the authentication of lesbian sexuality, its value in representing female sexual pleasure can only ever be limited, since it is confined to the parameters set by the paradigm of maximum visibility, negating any other means of exploring and validating female sexuality.

Adopting an opposite strategy of resisting maximum visibility by decentering the female genitals is equally problematic, Ryberg concludes, for it runs the risk of representing female sexuality in stereotypical terms, as somehow more romantic and less straightforward than men’s sexuality, implying an alignment with a traditional view on femininity as less sexual and more sensual than masculinity (2008, 77). This leaves feminist, lesbian, and queer pornography in a conundrum. For how to resist the persuasive demand for maximum visibility in the representation of sexual acts, and avoid representing female sexuality through a masculine lens, without hiding it behind the veil of

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romanticized metaphor or distraction, and rendering female pleasure invisible all over again? For the question remains of how pornography “might speak to women of their sexual pleasure if the standard for authentication is visible, genital orgasm” (Johnson 1993, 30). How might alternative pornography move beyond what Cindy Patton calls “the cultural paradigm of cum worship” (1994, 180) and produce a knowledge of sex that does not negate but rather promote female sexual pleasure and autonomy? How to go forward and untangle pornography from its reliance on the principle of maximum visibility? Another analytical lens is needed to explore alternative pornography’s potential to trouble visibility as the yardstick for explicit cinematic representations of sexuality. Recent scholarly interest in the question of tactility and the senses in the cinematic experience, in particular Laura Marks’ concept of “haptic visuality” (2002), may offer precisely such an approach, shifting the focus to the very materiality, or the surface, of the film.

### **Sensate Vision, or, Notes on a Haptic Pornography**

After years of feminist film theory focusing primarily on the ideological strategies at work within mainstream cinema, with Laura Mulvey’s analysis of the gaze (1975) as a definite benchmark, in the last decade there has been a shift towards a way of thinking film and the cinematic experience in terms of embodied spectatorship, as part of a larger trend within cultural theory that has been referred to as the “affective turn” (Clough & Halley 2007). This focus on embodiment and affect, and in particular Laura Marks’ understanding of the eroticism of haptic visuality (2002), may prove productive in getting out of the conundrum and to think through the strategies that define alternative pornography’s attempts to explore female sexuality beyond the frenzy of the visible. Marks describes the erotic capacities of the haptic as two-fold: first, “it puts into question cinema’s illusion of representing reality by pushing the viewers back to the surface of the image”, and second: “it enables an embodied perception, the viewer responding to the video as to another body and to the screen as another skin” (2002, 4). Rather than focusing on the narrative structure, or the representation of



identities, and the objectifying gaze from a position of mastery, Marks describes “the invitation of a small, caressing gaze” as an alternative economy of looking, a look that is directed at all the intimate details of an image, that calls attention to the surface, and that is more in line with the notion of the *glance* than the “deep” mastering gaze (2002, 6).

One striking example is the film *Touch* (2013) by Sensate Films, an independent production company responsible for several short films exploring female sexuality. On their website they introduce the concept of “slow porn” to describe their approach, and explain their films in the following way:

Many are not ‘explicit’ in the traditional sense of the word, yet they reveal more about human desire and vulnerability than many more categorically XXX films can endeavor to. They also allow our audiences to look beyond the mainstream pornographic tropes for the eroticism of an experience.

Even though Sensate Films' productions are not always explicit as it is conventionally understood by mainstream pornography, it would be a mistake to claim that they are not hardcore: in their careful attention to the complexity of sex, the ways in which danger and pleasure are entangled in our experience of sexuality, immersed in each other in a way that can be felt corporeally and affectively rather than rationally, these film are as hard core as they can get. Through cinematic means filmmakers like those of Sensate Films seek to convey the vulnerability, empowerment, and intimacy that are part of an intense sexual encounter, as well as the play between proximity and distance, between touching and being touched, that are part of the sensuous experience of sex, and say as much about the “truth” of sexuality, but which the demands for visible proof and maximum visibility cannot address.

At the same time that *Touch* troubles the principle of maximum visibility, it also gives something in

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return, by offering a cinematic aesthetics that not only involves optic vision, but also constitutes a multisensory way of seeing, creating a tactile relationship between the viewer's body on the one hand, and the screen on the other (Marks 2002, 3). Rather than constituting a radical break with visibility, haptic images determine an oscillation between the surface of the image and the depth, between seeing and not-seeing, and between distance and proximity. Marks explains how “cinema's optical images address a viewer that is distant, distinct, and disembodied”, whereas haptic images “invite the viewer to dissolve his or her subjectivity in the close and bodily contact with the image” (2002, 13). However, this description of the difference between optical and haptic images does not completely hold when we think of pornography, for even though its transparency invokes a controlling and objectifying gaze, it cannot be said that pornography invokes a disembodied viewer, as it is explicitly aimed at an embodied response in the body of the viewer, namely arousal. However, if we understand the difference between optical pornography and haptic eroticism to be located in a will to mastery on the one hand, and a kind of “interacting up close with the image” (Marks 2002, 13) on the other, then we can become attuned to the way in which haptic pornography troubles visibility by drawing the viewer “close, too close to see properly, and this in itself is erotic” (Marks 2002, 16).

The film opens with close-ups of a woman's facial features, her eye, her mouth, disappearing already before we can properly make out what it is that we see, fading in and out of focus so that sometimes only shapes and colors remain. Different images are superimposed, so that we see something that looks like a hair on skin, but we cannot be sure; we see fingers, moving, touching, but they are too close to make sense of; is it her fingers we see, or someone else's fingers on her? Finally we see a woman, lying on a bed, her face in a state of pleasure, as hands move over her body and we hear a voice-over describing the sensations she experiences when being touched in this way. However, as images continue to be cut on the rhythm of her voice, creating a sequence of images which function as “tactile, sensuously saturated caresses” (Marks 2002, 15), we again see close-ups of fingers, fabric

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of silk and cotton moving and sliding along skin, invoking texture rather than form, images of her body in bed superimposed in different colors, and shadows moving so that it is hard to make out her body, or how many hands are touching her. As the images move in and out of focus we are at times immersed in the film as we can see her face, her chest moving up and down as she breaths heavily, her head tilted back, and her eyes closed, her body through the white dress she is wearing; whereas at other times we are pushed to the surface of the image, seeing only shapes, texture, color. As her excitement grows, and we hear her panting and gasping, however, it is impossible to make out what moves her as we try to distinguish and grasp the shadows, shapes, and colors that move over her. By engaging with these haptic images, the viewer has to give up visual control, and rather is invited to “fill in the gaps in the image, engage with the traces of the image leaves” (Marks 2002, 13).

Not only does haptic visibility shift the attention to the surface of the image; it also calls attention to the interactive character of cinema viewing. Marks states: “rather than witnessing cinema as through a frame, window, or mirror, [...] the viewer shares and performs cinematic space dialogically,” for “cinematic perception is not merely (audio)visual but synesthetic, an act in which the senses and the intellect are not conceived of as separate” (2002, 13). Viewing, in this sense, is no longer an act from a distance, initiated by a pre-existing subject, but rather a mutually constitutive exchange. It is precisely this shifting between distance and closeness, the giving up of visual control and the sense of separateness of the viewer, that makes the relationship between viewer and the image an erotic relationship, or, as Marks calls it, an “intersubjective eroticism,” which is defined by “a kind of visibility that is not organized around identification, but that is labile, able to move between identification and immersion” (2002, 17). Since it is this particular kind of intersubjective relationship between the beholder and the image that determines its erotic nature, and not its content, “the fact that some of these are sexual images is, in effect, icing on the cake” (2002, 14). However, this does

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not mean that a film cannot be both sexual *and* erotic, allowing for the possibility of a haptic pornography:

Pornography is usually defined in terms of visibility—the inscription or confession of the orgasmic body—and an implied will to mastery by the viewer. The erotic relationship I am identifying in haptic cinema depends on limited visibility and the viewers’ lack of mastery over the image. Haptic visuality suggests ways that pornography might move through the impasse of hypervisuality that by this point seems to hinder rather than support erotic representation (Marks 2002, 15).

The haptic visuality of *One Night Stand* is most apparent in the scene ‘Red Fetish Bathroom’ which shows the sexual encounter between Cameron and Shadow. Prominent music in the first half of the scene sets the mood and rhythm of the scene, but contrastingly only the sounds of breathing and moaning remain in the second half of the scene. This absence of the music is significant, because as Martine Beugnet notices, the sounds of lovemaking are usually replaced with the unifying, covering effect of music, “as a way to cover over what might appear to some as the tasteless grunts and moans of sex” (Beugnet 2013, 176). Furthermore, Cameron, Shadow and the camera all move within the cramped space of the bathroom, with its red colored walls, making it appear like the camera is part of the sexual encounter. There are hardly any wide shots, and more often than not, the images consist of (extreme) close-ups, filling the shot with indistinct body parts. At times it is hard to make out which body-part it is that fills the screen, whose body it belongs to, and what is going on exactly. This confusion is amplified in the moments that the camera zooms in to the extent that only blurry spots of color remain, limiting the visibility of the scene, and once again disturbing the will to knowledge that usually defines pornography. The intimacy and immersion that is suggested through the camerawork, together with the usage of the actual sounds of sex without an underscore of music, creates a sense of directness and un-mediation; a way of speaking sex that is raw, direct, and in-your-face, and which can be described as a hyperauthenticity. Contrasting the hypervisuality that usually

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dictates pornography, this aura of authenticity is paradoxically produced precisely by disturbing the maximum visibility, and replacing it with a haptic visuality. Through its DIY aesthetics, showing only blurs and indistinct figures and body-parts, the scene draws attention to the surface of the film. The scene still contains hardcore sex, but more important than the visibility of the sexual practices is the sense of tactility, the affects, intensities and sensations that are produced, and implosion of distance between the viewer and the images. The sweat, the shaking, the breathing that quickens or stops, the harsh lighting combined with the red walls and cramped space of the bathroom, all contribute to an experience that gives the viewer the feeling of being part of the sexual encounter. They reel the viewer into the film, creating an intersubjective relationship that makes the viewer partake in the encounter, rather than offering the gratification of seeing every single part of the physical sexual act from the outside through a voyeuristic gaze. The haptic visuality of the scene emphasizes the rhythm, the speed and the slowness of the sexual encounter, rather than the technicalities of the sexual acts that are performed. In contrast to the transparency of the documentary realism that is conventionally adopted by pornography in order to represent sex, the intersubjective relationship that is established between the viewer and the haptic image accounts the intense tactility, the temporal differences and the blurring of boundaries that make up the sexual encounter, but which maximum visibility fails to grasp. Moreover, even though maximum visibility is no longer at stake, the scene does not fall back on the stereotypical representation of female sexuality as soft, romantic, and sensual rather than sexual, of which Ryberg warned, for explicit sex is very much at the core of this scene; it is overt, intense, leaving nothing to the imagination.

Although the scene shows very explicit sex, the limited space of the toilet and the handheld camerawork, shows not only how haptic visuality can have a place in hardcore pornography, but also how it creates an embodied relationship between the viewer and the image, as the scene invites an

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“intersubjective relationship” between the image and the viewer which is active, “calling on the viewer to engage in its imaginative construction” (Marks 2002, 16) rather than calling for a gaze that is passive, controlling, and projective (13). Haptic visuality in this scene leads to the representation of authentic sexual pleasure, as it highlights the sensuous and tactile experience, reeling the viewer into the image, letting her almost touch the glistening sweat on the naked bodies, and then creating distance by rendering the image at times opaque, invoking a viewer experience that relies on “an embodied intelligence”, as a way of “thinking with your skin” (Marks 2002, 18). However, this article does not want to suggest that haptic visuality automatically offers a more true or authentic representation of female sexual pleasure per se, prescribing some sort of recipe, or evoking a feminine aesthetic. Rather, it shows haptic pornography as a feminist strategy and one of the ways in which female sexual pleasure can be explored. It shows the ways in which alternative pornography is beginning to open up pornography to include other ways of seeing and feeling sex, expanding knowledge of sex, and reconfiguring understandings of what pornography can do, and what it looks like, and what it might become in the future.

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