

THE SEXUALISATION OF POPULAR CULTURE: TOWARDS A CHRISTIAN SEXUAL AESTHETIC

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Introduction

For roughly the last decade, North American sexual mores have undergone an intriguing and paradoxical transformation. This change can be witnessed in both mainline evangelicalism as well as within mainstream American popular culture. While parachurch organisations push for youth-abstinence and argue for increasingly more stringent sexual norms for teens and young adults, popular culture has evinced an increasingly more liberalised understanding of sexuality, including the popularisation of figures and images from adult media and increasingly explicit sexual references in popular music. Though both trends appear to convey antithetical sexual mores, I will argue that underneath these contrasting surface appearances their common fascination with sexual experience reflects an unhealthy trend in both popular culture and popular church towards a privatised and disembodied sexuality. For the Church to respond to an increasingly sexualised culture, it must address her own understanding of human sexuality and the body first. My thesis is a simple one: human sexual experience has become a commodity, a privately consumed good, which is alienated from either the human body or social community.

Popular Sexuality

On July 3rd 1995, the cover of *Time* magazine pictured a small boy who appears to be no more than seven years of age. Mouth aghast, eyes wide, fingers resting on the edge of a grey keyboard, his face is lit by the glow of a computer screen. The title reads “Cyberpom Exclusive: A new study shows how pervasive and wild it really is. Can we protect our kids – and free speech?” The cover captured wide-spread concern over the prevalence of online pornography which in the early days of the Internet was often cast in terms of child pornography and predatory sexual deviance. Although scandalous content has been present on the Internet since its inception, the perceptible presence of online pornography came as a shock to mid-1990s moral sensibilities, as the *Time* feature indicates. Whilst one could trace the popular history of modern pornography to the 1953 publication of *Playboy* magazine (Lane 2001), save for a brief change in sexual mores in the 1960s and early 70s, the consumption of pornography had principally been regarded until the mid-to-late 90s as a social taboo rather than a form of acceptable sexual expression.

Taboos may change from decade to decade, but these changes rarely occur without some kind of prompting. The sexual revolution of the 1960s was facilitated by radical advances in reproductive technologies. A cleft was driven between sexuality and reproduction which liberated both men and women from the most obvious implications of promiscuous or illicit (hetero)sexual activity, especially unplanned pregnancy. For some, the contraceptive pill was seen to offer women a tool through which they could gain further control over their own bodies (Watkins 1998). This led to a significant shift in the way in which human sexuality was perceived by dominant culture. In music, theatre, and cinema of this era, experimental attitudes towards human sexuality revelled in the separation of sexual, familial, and social responsibilities (Juffer 1998).

Thirty years on from the sexual revolution of the 1960s, another technology-induced sexual revolution is underfoot. As contraceptive technologies allowed us to view sex and reproduction as two distinct subjects, so too the second sexual revolution further disembodies sexual experience. Reified and de-corporealised, evacuated of any of the emotional or physiological accoutrements associated with 'real' sex, the online pomography boom of the mid-to-late 1990s has single-handedly revolutionised contemporary representations of sexuality in mainstream popular culture.

The concerns expressed by *Time* magazine reflects dominant attitude towards erotica in mainstream North American culture of the 1980s and early 90s, when the consumption of pornography was seen as a taboo activity. This taboo was reinforced by the social mechanisms which were in place to discourage one from easily consuming adult materials. For most of the 1970s, restrictive zoning laws meant that there were fewer than 1,000 adult theatres in the United States. To consume adult goods, a person would have to make their way into a seedy part of town, watch pornography in the less than desirable location of the adult theatre, and endure the risk of being discovered by a friend, relative or colleague.

As video technologies became increasingly more prevalent in American homes, pornography could be consumed domestically and in private. Though the potential for personal consumption of erotica was facilitated by new technologies, the process of procuring adult-oriented media still required one to contend with the clerk at the local video rental shop or to offer one's personal details to a mail order distributor and risk the knowing glance of the postman. The fear of face-to-face shaming was a significant deterrent against the personal consumption of hardcore erotica in the VCR era. Nonetheless, in her extensive survey of the porn industry, Pamela Paul cites research indicating that nearly one in five videocassettes purchased in 1986 belonged to the adult genre, and around 1,500 new adult movies were produced each

year during these early days of home video. In the late 80s to early 90s, the annual revenues of adult-films for home consumption grew from \$75 million in 1985 to nearly \$490 million in 1993 (Paul 2005: 54).

As astounding as Paul's numbers seem, compared to today these figures are diminutive. Whereas mainstream Hollywood studies produce around 400 films in a given year, the porn industry makes somewhere between 10,000 and 11,000 titles with 700 million porn videos or DVDs rented annually in the United States alone. It is estimated that the adult industry (inclusive of adult toys, magazines, web sites, hotel movie sales) has a total revenue somewhere between \$10 and \$15 billion annually. This figure is bigger than the total amount of mainstream Hollywood movie revenues in a year and considerably larger than the annual cumulative revenues from professional sport ticket sales in the United States (Williams 2004: 2). Because of its sheer prevalence and market share, pornography (online or offline) exerts a tremendous amount of pressure on contemporary popular culture.

Porn Sexuality

Within academic studies of adult media, there are a variety of opinions on the relative merit or danger of pornography. Anti-porn advocates comment on its objectification of the female body and argue that porn reinforces negative

images of feminine subservience and masculine control. Furthermore, Paul adds that pornography's addictive characteristics and current ubiquity within mainstream media are severely detrimental to healthy sexual relationships (Paul 2005). Yet pro-porn advocates argue that pornography fosters healthy fantasy and can actually be beneficial to adult sexual relationships. Kipnis notes that, in cathartic fashion, 'pornography manages to penetrate to the marrow of who we are as a culture and as psyches' (Kipnis 1999: 206). Pro-porn feminists see pornography as the apogee of female sexual-self-determination, allowing women to subvert masculine dominated sexual mores (Juffer 1998: 236; Milne 2005) For good or for ill, pornography's increased presence within popular culture signifies a radical shift in the way in which sexuality is perceived and promoted, a shift which has reached its zenith in the last decade.

What kind of sex is promoted by is porn sexuality? Without delving into unseemly depictions, it is graphic. Hardcore pornography spends little time developing romance, situating sexuality within relationships or communities, and predominantly focuses on genital sexuality. With forensic attention to detail, hardcore pornography is aimed at portraying isolated moments of ecstasy as the pinnacles of human sexual achievement. Porn-sex is a compartmentalised experience which has been distilled from the broader implications of human sexuality. Not unlike refined sugar which has little

resemblance in taste, colour or appearance to naturally occurring sugar cane, porn-sex has little resemblance to human sexuality. It is rather a sexual commodity and in this sense, the term 'pornography' shows its etymological heritage. *Porno*, the greek word for 'whore' and *graphia* the greek word for writing connote the marketing of sexuality in forms which are easily traded and easily disposed of. Sex as a commodity is a highly technologised sex. It is a sex which depends on market forces, distribution technologies, and alienated workers who engage in the processes of this industry. Like so many technologised goods, we are swimming in a sea of over-supply. This glut of sexuality has led to an anaemic obesity in popular sexual practices where quantity and explicitness are traded as alternatives to quality and subtlety. We live in a hyper-sexualised culture which has disconnected the experience of sexual pleasure from its place within human sociality.

Christian anti-porn

While popular expressions of the erotic have been on the rise, the Christian response to an increasingly sexualised secular culture has been primarily one of avoidance. In keeping with the sentiments depicted in the 1995 *Time* magazine articles, the rise of Internet pornography led to the creation of anti-porn Christian lobbies and organisations which aimed at sheltering the young from explicit sexual materials. Accompanying this assault against obscene media was a renewed parachurch interest in teenage and young adult

sexuality which strived to counter what were perceived as the lax sexual mores in popular culture with the religious language of chastity and abstinence.

In the mid 1990s I was completing my undergraduate theological training at a small Christian liberal arts university in the heart of the 'silicon forest' near the headquarters of Microsoft. During the summer of my senior year I helped to wire the new campus computer network which would enable broadband Internet access in student halls of residence and classrooms. In a college that segregated halls of residence by gender and that had severe penalties for allowing members of the opposite sex into one's hall, the issue of providing potential high-speed unrestricted Internet access was highly problematic for the Information Systems Management. Of course, no one wanted to assume that *our* students would ever access pornography *intentionally*, as it was against our signed code of honour even to go to a movie that held anything above a PG rating, much less unrated adult content. Rather, concerns centred on the risks of *inadvertent* access.

Both secular and Christian companies sprang into action by providing online solutions which would pre-digest online content and prevent users from unintentional deviance. Business minded and technically savvy Christians

were amongst the first to take advantage of this early fear of cyber-porn. In 1996 *InegrityOnline* began offering a Christian Internet service which not only blocked erotica, but offered protection from the cults, Satanists, pagans, and alcohol producers who were vying for the attention of early Internet users. Such unwholesome threats in cyberspace could be barred from homes for a mere \$16.99 per month (plus connection fees). In those early days of the Internet, an *@ingtegrityOL.com* email address became a badge of cyber-purity, a virtual *ictus* which identified its bearer as a concerned Christian who opposed the prevalence of offensive Internet content.

Today, *IntegrityOnline* still provides Internet service, content filtering and website hosting for concerned Christian consumers. Though it still bars Internet pornography, it has teamed up with an even more proactive anti-porn Christian group which sees itself as a kind of ministry to the porn industry – inclusive of its producers and its consumers. *xxxChurch* describes itself as the ‘#1 Christian Porn Site’, offering a supportive online community for Christians who struggle with online pornography. Its mission is ‘to bring awareness, openness, accountability and recovery to the church, society and individuals in the issues of pornography and to begin to provide solutions through non-judgmental and creative means’ (xxxChurch 2006). The organisation uses crass humour, timely advertising campaigns, grass roots activism, motivational speaking engagements and MTV-style video clips

which describe the seedy underbelly of the sex industry to accomplish their mission. Its proactive stance towards the sex industry includes attendance at adult media conventions ('Porn Patrol'), and the production of a *Jesus Loves Porn Stars Bible* a cleverly repackaged version of the *Message* distributed to sex workers.

For *xxxChurch*, porn is problematic because it encourages sexual expression outside of the bounds of married heterosexual sex.¹ This argument focuses exclusively on issues of sexual purity and gives ascent to the disembodied sexuality promoted by porn-culture. Human sexuality as reified through pornography becomes a determinative force which violates God's image by resulting in unsanctioned sexual activities. The ethics are framed around one's own consumption of pornography, one's own experience of arousal, and one's own moral responsibility to God to keep sexual urges under tight control. However, problems with reinstating such a conservative and traditional Christian sexual ethic were noted in Mary Pellauer's influential 1987 article on the church's responsibility for pornography. She notes:

¹ Their language seems to echo the early Church theologian Tertullian, whose *de Spectaculis* admonished his flock in the second century not to attend gladiatorial combat or other public forms of entertainment because it stirred the passions.

If we look to the Christian tradition for guidance, the answers are disquieting. Any sexuality uninterested in the "procreative end" of the acts, any sexual conduct focused on sexual joy for its own sake, has historically been condemned. To use contraception in marriage was called criminal, flagitious and debauched; to Augustine it represented "cruel lust or lustful cruelty" (to take but one classic example). In the Middle Ages, masturbation and "unnatural positions" were considered more severe offenses against the ordinances of God than were rape or incest. (Pellauer 1994:348-9)

It would seem that the fascination with sexual purity places the same emphasis upon genital sexuality as does the adult industry itself. Porn-sex is all about single sexual experiences, taken in isolation from human social relationships or the embodied life. In her work, Pellauer argues that churches can only attend to the problem of pornography by fighting against the violence towards women that is depicted in fringe forms of pornography and by addressing the economic injustices of the adult film industry. Pellauer identifies a more holistic and sophisticated agenda for addressing pornography, which requires far more concerted effort and social activism than does the moralising of *xxxChurch*. Indeed, by focussing on the gory details of porn, *xxxChurch* mistakes moral purity for a solution to the problems of disembodied sexuality.

Christian pro-abstinence

North American evangelical parachurch organisations such as *xxxChurch* have addressed the sexualisation of popular culture by centring their concern on the sexual practices of teenagers. In their logic, human sexuality is only to be expressed within the marriage union of one man to one woman. Deviations from this, in terms of pornography consumption, masturbation, homosexuality, and pre-marital/extra-marital sex are forbidden. Amongst the young, the message of teen abstinence is promoted forcefully by parachurch organisations like the *Silver Ring Thing* which provide young adults with a counter-cultural message of sexual abstinence as an alternative premarital sex.

Preceded in 1993 by the *True Love Waits* campaign, *Silver Ring Thing* traces its history back to 1996, when its founders wanted to offer an alternative to the rising rates of teen pregnancies and STD infections which they witnessed in their home city, Yuma, Arizona. Their self admitted goal is 'to create a culture shift in America where abstinence becomes the norm again rather than the exception.' The founders of *Silver Ring Thing* felt that 'the distribution of condoms or the practice of "safe-sex" will not ensure protection

from the physical, emotional and spiritual problems resulting from sexual activity among teens. The only way to reverse the moral decay of any youth culture is to inspire a change in the conduct and behavior from those within the culture' (Silver Ring Thing 2006). With this in mind, their campaign endeavours to promote a revaluation of virginity, where purity could be measured in terms of explicitly female sexual chastity.

It would seem on the surface that the movement picked an appropriate time for its crusade against teen promiscuity. In 1972, fewer than 5% of girls under the age of fifteen and 20% of boys under the age of fifteen had engaged in sexual intercourse. By 1997 sexual activity amongst under-15s had risen to 38% of girls and 45% of boys (Detweiler & Taylor 2004: 41). In higher age brackets, teenage sexual activity becomes even more prevalent and even more varied ((Mosher et al. 2005).

The renewed interest in virginity advocated by organizations such as *Silver Ring Thing* has manifested itself in two intriguing ways within popular culture. The pro-virginity trend connotes interesting language that leaves open the possibility that virginity once lost can be restored through spiritual practices. The 2004 satirical Christian film *Saved* chronicles the inner turmoil of a pregnant teen, Mary (Jenna Malone), who becomes pregnant over the

summer holidays after having felt led by God to have sex with her boyfriend in order to free him from his homosexual urges. Knowing that their sexual relationship was an attempt at saving her boyfriend's immortal soul, she confidently prays to Jesus to restore her physical and spiritual virginity. Given her unshakable faith it is at a considerable spiritual cost that she discovers that she actually became pregnant by her boyfriend over the summer. The film's depiction of this second virgin Mary great with child connotes the paradoxical separation of sex and body present within American popular culture.

Prayers for a restored virginity and *Silver Ring Thing's* fascination with teenage moral purity reflect a common tendency towards an overly genitally centred disembodied sexual ethic. Such fascination removes the body from the sexual organs and contemplates a sexuality that is an isolated and commoditised experience. Sex in popular culture and in porn culture, in church and in the media, is all about a protected experience which exists outside of the realm of consequence.

Conclusion

Pornography has become a mainstream feature in contemporary popular culture. In 1993 figures of adult video sales in the US hovered around \$490 million and today the whole of the adult industry sees revenues of between \$10 and \$15 billion. The industry has leached into popular culture and popular church a disembodied model of sexuality where moral purity consists of what we do with our genitals, not what we do with our bodies, nor what we feel with our hearts. In response to the sexualisation of popular culture, popular church groups like *xxxChurch* and the *Silver Ring Thing* have reinstated 'traditional' sexual ethics which focus on the moral impurity of any form of extra-marital sexuality. By focussing on the sex act and emphasising the taboo of orgasm, they neglect to situate sexual practices within a broad spectrum of normal human behaviours. Given this trend, what the churches need today is a more developed and holistic set of sexual aesthetics and not a more restrictive and forensic set of Christian sexual ethics.

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