

## CHAPTER 10 | Falling in Lust

### *Sexiness, Feminism, and Pornography*

HANS MAES

#### 10.1. Introduction

*Caffeine makes you sexy!* This absurd slogan can be seen in the shop windows of a popular Brussels coffee chain—its bold pink lettering indicating how they are mainly targeting female customers. It is one of the silliest examples of something that is both very common and very worrisome nowadays, namely, the constant call on women to look “hot” and conform to the standards of sexiness as they are projected in the media, entertainment industry, and advertising. But what exactly is wrong with this state of affairs and what can be done about it? In a recent essay entitled “Sex Objects and Sexy Subjects” Sheila Lintott and Sherri Irvin (2016) take up this pressing issue and make an elaborate case for what they call a “feminist reclamation” of sexiness. In what follows, we will investigate the merits and shortcomings of their proposal (Sections 10.2 and 10.3), present an alternative account (Section 10.4), and conclude by considering how pornography may be part of the problem but also part of the solution in this matter (Sections 10.5 and 10.6).

#### 10.2. A Critique of Sexiness

According to Lintott and Irvin (L&I) there are two problems with sexiness today. The first is that women are considered sexy in accordance with an *externally dictated* conception of sexiness. Sexiness “is not something a woman can secure for herself” (L&I 2016, 299). If a woman

wishes to be sexy she will need to conform to the standards laid out by men, so that in the end “what she wants and enjoys is what he wants and enjoys” (Dines 2010, 107). The second problem is that women are considered sexy in accordance with an *unduly narrow* conception of sexiness, one that excludes large portions of the female population from being considered sexy. This is especially felt by, for instance, elderly and disabled women who systematically fall short of the current standards of sexiness.

So, what are the current standards of sexiness? This is a question that L&I never address in any detail, possibly because they assume we are all too familiar with these standards. A half-joking, half-serious comment by American comedian Tina Fey gives us an idea of what may be involved:

Now every girl is expected to have Caucasian blue eyes, full Spanish lips, a classic button nose, hairless Asian skin with a California tan, a Jamaican dance hall ass, long Swedish legs, small Japanese feet, the abs of a lesbian gym owner, the hips of a nine-year-old boy, the arms of Michelle Obama, and doll tits. (Fey 2011, 23)

This brief summary not only highlights how impossibly demanding the standards of sexiness can be, but also how emphasis is placed exclusively on bodily features. Our idea of sexiness, L&I argue, completely ignores the agency, subjectivity, and autonomy of the person being judged sexy so that we have, in effect, an equation of sexiness with objecthood (L&I 2016, 299–300).

One obvious but radical solution would be to give up on sexiness altogether. As the “Women Against Sex” movement of the late 1980s used to put it: “There’s no way out of the practice of sexuality except *out*” (Mottier 2008, 69). L&I, however, firmly reject this option. Giving up on sexiness would mean giving up on a basic element of selfhood. As Ann Cahill has argued, and as elderly and disabled women may attest to, to never be the focus of a sexualizing gaze is to be rendered sexually invisible by society at large and to have your full personhood denied (Cahill 2011, 84). So, instead of giving up on sexiness altogether, L&I suggest that we reclaim and redefine sexiness in such a way that it makes room for women, and men, as sexy subjects rather than as mere sex objects. Here is how they conceive of this: “To say appropriately of someone that he is sexy . . . is to say that I recognize that he possesses physical features that are magnificent in their particularity (. . .), and that I recognize his body as infused with his sexual subjectivity” (L&I 2016, 309).

Two aspects are crucial in considering someone sexy. First of all, a *magnificent body*. Here L&I take their cue from Mia Mingus, a writer and blogger who identifies as a queer physically disabled Korean woman, transracial and transnational adoptee, born in Korea, raised in the Caribbean, nurtured in the South, and who is the author of the influential blog “Leaving Evidence.” In an inspirational keynote speech for the 2011 Femmes of Color Symposium in Oakland, Mingus introduced the term “magnificence” to refer and pay homage to bodies that are not conventionally attractive. Likewise, L&I use the term ‘magnificence’ to refer to the “nowhere-else-but-here-ness” of a body that we can learn to admire. Admittedly, this remains rather vague. But the purpose of introducing the term is clear: they want us to resist imposing preexisting standards on bodies and instead to take bodies on their own terms—thus making possible the aesthetic appreciation of the sexual particularity of a wide variety of body types.

But this is only half the story: the second thing we should do is ensure that our judgments of sexiness take into account not just bodies, but embodied *subjects*. The proper target of such a judgment is always a body infused with an authentic sexual expression—that is, a sexual expression that really comes from the person herself rather than originating in or aiming at some external ideal. Evidence of such authenticity will be found in the person’s confidence, comfort, and sense of improvisation, whereas discomfort, insecurity, and a strict adherence to norms as rules will indicate a lack of genuineness in sexual expression. Or, as Belle de Jour writes in her famous diary: “Sexy is the result of being pulled together and comfortable in your skin. Holding your stomach in when your clothes are off is not fuckable. Slapping your ample behind and inviting him to ride the wobble is” (de Jour 2010).

L&I’s revisionary proposal is that we consider “sexy” as no longer synonymous with “sexually attractive” but rather as meaning “sexually authentic.” In other words, we should no longer treat sexiness as a response-dependent property since ascribing sexiness to a woman should not depend on the responses of men. So, instead of thinking that a woman is sexy if men experience her as sexually attractive, it should be the other way around: if a woman is sexy (because she has a magnificent body infused with sexual subjectivity), then men should try to experience her as sexually attractive. With the revised notion of sexiness comes an ethical imperative to make our desires match our judgments—something we can help bring about through what L&I call an “aesthetic practice.” For sexiness is an aesthetic property, and just as we can and should always seek to

broaden our aesthetic horizons, we can and should broaden the horizons of what and whom we find sexy, primarily by increasing exposure to a diversity of bodies and decreasing exposure to “perfect” sex symbols. The result of this will be that the twofold problem disappears: women will no longer be considered sexy in accordance with an externally dictated or unduly narrow conception of sexiness.

### 10.3. A Critique of the Critique

Is L&I’s diagnosis of the problem accurate? And is the remedy they propose as effective as they want it to be? These are the main concerns we want to address in this section. But we will begin by taking stock of some potentially unwelcome implications of L&I’s proposal. First, if we were to adopt their revised notion of sexiness, we would have to accept that Marilyn Monroe, often considered the ultimate 20th-century icon of sexiness, was really not sexy at all. This is because the actress was very insecure most of her life as a result of trying to conform to all the externally imposed expectations that came with her being a celebrity sex symbol. So one could not say that her body was “infused with an authentic sexual expression.” By contrast, imagine a guy who really does not care about how he is perceived by others and lets himself go completely (think: zero body hygiene, terrible BO, greasy hair, burping, snorting, farting, and leering at each passerby that catches his fancy). The confidence, comfort, and sense of improvisation he displays count as evidence of genuineness on L&I’s account, and hence it would appear entirely appropriate to consider him sexy. Both these cases are deeply and worryingly counterintuitive.

However, L&I might be willing to bite the bullet here; after all, they are very upfront about the revisionary nature of their proposal. So let’s move on to a more serious objection. One of the wrongs that L&I seek to correct is the fact that large portions of the female population, and in particular elderly and disabled women, are excluded from being considered sexy. But there is reason to think that adopting their proposal would actually do very little to remedy that situation and that many elderly and disabled women would fare no better as a result. Consider the following scenario: X desperately wants to retain a fresh and youthful look but feels increasingly miserable now that she has passed 60 and is stuck with a rapidly ageing body. X may not be considered sexy according to current standards of sexiness, but X would also not be considered sexy under L&I’s revised account of

sexiness—along with all other women who are not comfortable with their looks and body.

In defense of their view, L&I could point out that at least now it is up to X herself to achieve sexiness; all she needs to do is stop trying to conform to an external ideal and confidently express her own sexuality. But is that as easy as it sounds? For many people like X it will simply be impossible to make that change without help and guidance. Once you have lost confidence, and this is certainly true for sexual confidence, it is extremely difficult to regain it. In that light, L&I’s proposal could turn out to be strikingly counterproductive. For if they manage to convince readers that it is all up to them to achieve sexual authenticity, and if many of their female readers consequently fail to confidently express their sexuality (which is to be expected given common societal pressures), then these women will not only fail to be sexy but it will be *their own fault* to boot. After all, it was “up to them” now. This is not an improvement but is in fact worse than how things are under the existing regime.

Revising the notion of sexiness along the lines that L&I suggest does not prove a cure-all and may not even be an improvement upon the current state of affairs. Furthermore, their original diagnosis of the twofold problem of sexiness is itself not without problems. Take the claim that women are considered sexy in accordance with an externally dictated conception of sexiness. With some indignation L&I mention how the ultimate arbiter of sexiness is not the woman herself and not even her loving partners (L&I 2016, 299). But, one may ask, does the same not hold true for almost any other desirable quality? Sure, what is considered sexy and whether X is considered sexy are not decided by X. But what is considered courageous or honest and whether X is considered courageous or honest are also not decided by X. Likewise, it is not X (nor her loving partners) who is the ultimate arbiter of whether she is considered witty or friendly.

Admittedly, this may not be the most charitable interpretation of L&I’s claim. What they seem to object to most of all is the fact that what is considered sexy, and whether X is considered sexy, is entirely decided by a group of people *of which X is not a member*. To be more specific, it is mostly men who determine what counts as sexy for a woman in such a way that a woman’s desire to be sexy is a desire for qualities that men find sexually attractive: “what she wants and enjoys is what he wants and enjoys.” However, the question arises whether this only affects women. Isn’t it the case that a man’s desire to be sexy is ultimately a desire for qualities that women find attractive, and hence should we not say that it is

mostly women who determine what counts as sexy for a man? If so, then we are no longer to treat this a purely feminist concern.

Of course, it could be thought that the real problem lies with *the sort of qualities* that men find sexually attractive, which brings us to the second part of L&I's diagnosis. According to L&I, women are considered sexy in accordance with an all-too-narrow conception of sexiness. If you do not have long legs, glossy hair, smooth skin, full lips, and firm breasts, you do not count as sexy. Now, while it is easy to find some confirmation of this thesis—just google “sexy women” and see which images come up—one may query again whether this is an exclusively feminist issue. What happens if one does an Internet search for “sexy men”? Going by the pictures that Google brings up, an equally narrow ideal of male sexiness emerges. Besides showcasing the obligatory six-pack, all the men in those pictures “are slim, toned and muscular; they are usually clean-shaven with the exception of a little ‘designer stubble’ [ . . . ] strong jaw, large lips and eyes, soft-looking, clear skin” (Gill et al. 2003). A reply could be that women are able to find men sexy even if they do not have a stereotypically sexy body. This is true. But then again, men might say the same thing. Men do not reserve their sexual interest for those few supermodels who have a body like Elle “The Body” Macpherson. The much-maligned male gaze tends to be far more indiscriminate.

At this stage it will help to introduce a distinction that is largely ignored by L&I, between *appearing sexy to someone* and *being generally considered sexy* (or, from the viewer's perspective, between *finding* someone sexy and *judging* someone to be sexy). It is a distinction that may seem trivial but that is commonly made. You may know that someone is generally regarded as sexy, and yet you may not find her sexy yourself. Conversely, you may find someone very sexy and at the same time acknowledge that she is not generally considered sexy. The two are also related in an obvious way, for someone will be generally considered sexy only if there are enough people who find her sexy. The relevance of this distinction should be clear: while many if not most women have appeared sexy to someone at some point, only a small minority of women are generally considered to be sexy. This is a pretty uncontroversial observation, but one that helps us see how L&I's feminist critique is somewhat misdirected, for the same observation could be made about men. Many men have appeared sexy to someone at some point, but only very few are considered sexy *tout court*. Moreover, it would be an exaggeration of sorts to claim that one's full personhood is denied if one is not generally considered sexy. This is not in any way a “dehumanizing” situation that calls for urgent action.

With this in mind, let us summarize the grounds for challenging L&I's diagnosis that focuses on the externally dictated and unduly narrow standards of sexiness for women. Yes, what is considered sexy for a woman is not simply determined by women, but the same is true *mutatis mutandis* for men. And, yes, only a minority of women are generally considered to be sexy, but the same is arguably true for men; what is more, it is not immediately apparent whether this is a situation that needs to be remedied. That said, even if L&I have proposed the wrong diagnosis, it does not yet follow that there is nothing wrong with sexiness. On the contrary, as we will argue in the next section, the problems with sexiness are numerous and various.

#### 10.4. An Alternative Diagnosis

L&I's revised notion of sexiness will make it possible for elderly and disabled women to be generally regarded as sexy. However, being so regarded is arguably not the main concern of these specific groups. After all, most of us are not generally considered sexy in the way that Angelina Jolie and Scarlett Johansson are, and most of us are not inclined to see this as a grave injustice. The real issue for elderly and disabled women, and the reason why they may feel marginalized compared not just to A-list actresses but to the average woman in the street, is that their *sexuality* is all too often ignored. They are not perceived as people with sexual needs and desires and with a sexual identity that deserves respect and acknowledgment. To the extent that this is the case, there is ground for saying that their full personhood is being ignored or denied. In addition, disabled and elderly women will less frequently *appear sexy* to people they encounter (which is different from being generally considered sexy). Although this is linked to the fact that their sexuality is often ignored to begin with, it constitutes a separate wrong. For here the issue is not so much that a crucial aspect of selfhood is denied, but rather that they are systematically missing out on a valuable experience, namely the experience of being wanted or being the target of someone's sexual interest. And insofar as finding someone sexy is regarded as prelude to, and for some even a prerequisite for, a romantic relationship, they run an increased risk of losing out on another valuable good, romantic love.

All this is of course also true for elderly and disabled *men*. Indeed, the stereotype of the disabled person as asexual or sexually abnormal is sometimes referred to as the Chatterley syndrome, after the male disabled

character in D.H. Lawrence's novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (the affair between Lady Chatterley and the gamekeeper Meadows is presented by Lawrence as the almost inevitable outcome of the sexual impotence and inactivity of her disabled husband; see Battye 1966, 8). So, what are the problems that *women in particular* face? These are best revealed when we ask two further questions: How does one appear sexy in present-day society? And how important is it to appear sexy?

Before we begin to formulate an answer to these questions, some caveats are in order. First, the dichotomies we will discuss below are quite rough and general in nature, meaning that they will allow for exceptions and need to be further refined in subsequent psychological and sociological research. Second, the list below is by no means intended to be exhaustive (one of the interesting issues that we will skip over is discussed by Robin Zheng in Chapter 9 of this volume). Third, while there is strong anecdotal evidence for the overall thesis we will develop, it awaits full and proper scientific testing and will have to remain speculative until then. Finally, an important terminological clarification: finding someone sexy is not the same thing as desiring to have sex with someone. One can desire to have sex with a person without finding that person particularly sexy (if one desperately wants to have a child, for instance). Conversely, one can find some people very sexy without ever wanting to have sex with them. Finding someone sexy should not be thought of as a type of desire or as a type of behavior but rather as *an emotional response*—in the way that Jenefer Robinson (2005) has characterized such responses. For Robinson, an emotion is a process that begins with a rough-and-ready affective appraisal that draws attention automatically and insistently by bodily means to whatever in the environment is of vital importance to the subject (in this case a potential sexual partner). This noncognitive appraisal then causes physiological responses, motor changes, and action tendencies, which are eventually succeeded by cognitive monitoring. But since we are never fully in control of our emotions—once an affective appraisal occurs, the response occurs—we experience emotions as passive phenomena. This also holds true for when we find someone sexy (hence the title of this chapter).

How does one appear sexy if one does not have a stereotypically sexy body? The answer will differ greatly depending on whether you are a man or a woman. Personality traits like assertiveness, self-assurance, authority, independence, boldness, and ambition are often cited as contributing to a man's sex appeal, whereas this is less so for women. The same behavior that makes a man seem persuasive, ambitious, and self-assured is, in a woman, often seen as pushy, selfish, and bossy and so as not particularly



attractive (Valian 1999, 131).<sup>1</sup> What many men still find attractive in women are traits like tenderness, shyness, delicacy, demureness, and passivity, at least if recent Hollywood hits like *Twilight* (2008) or *Drive* (2011) are anything to go by. Besides personality traits there are (what Aristotle called) “external goods,” such as power and wealth, that may help to make a man sexy. Again, this seems less often and less decisively a contributing factor for women. As a commentator of *The Nation* observes about women in politics:

Unlike for their male counterparts, competence in a woman is a necessity, but often not very sexy. While this might explain (and this is not always a bad thing) why there are almost no scandals involving women politicians, it also means that to be successful in politics, women have to deliberately play down or inhibit those charismatic qualities—call it swagger . . . or a winning smile—upon which many of their ambitious male counterparts thrive. (Tillet 2012)

Physical prowess and dexterity are also markers of sexiness for men, but not necessarily for women. In fact, women who run or throw a ball in clumsy way—“like a girl,” as some would say (Young 2005)—are frequently perceived as cute because of it.

These differences between men and women are far from innocuous: the traits and properties listed above are all associated with specific heteronormative gender roles in a society that still bears the marks of a long history of gender inequality. Men used to occupy almost all positions of power and authority, whereas women were excluded from those positions. Men were active in the world, while women were tied to the home and dependent in a myriad of ways on their husbands or male family members. This unfair inequality has still not disappeared. And, we now want to argue, to accept or even promote traits and properties like assertiveness and power (for men) and shyness and bashfulness (for women) as markers of sexiness is a particularly effective mechanism for sustaining gender inequality. It is effective because it makes the respective traits appealing to both men and women and makes gender inequality infect our sentiments, which are rarely amenable to rational control and argument (see Eaton 2008). It helps to sustain gender inequality because assertiveness and confidence

<sup>1</sup>As studies using actors trained to behave identically have demonstrated, women in positions of leadership are judged far more negatively than men are—as “bossy and dominating” and less competent (Valian 1999, 131).

are traits that help men get ahead in the world, so that for them the desire to be sexy is perfectly compatible with other ambitions. In contrast, shyness, passivity, and clumsiness are far less advantageous and useful traits to have, so for women the desire to be sexy is often at odds with other ambitions they may have.

We are now in position to revisit L&I's original diagnosis and look beyond any flaws to the substantial grain of truth it does contain. In targeting what they regard as an *externally dictated* and *unduly narrow* conception of sexiness, L&I got something very right. For one thing, the traits and properties that make men look sexy are traits and properties that are desirable for many different reasons and not just because they make a man sexy. By comparison, many of the traits and properties that make women look sexy (e.g., shyness, clumsiness) are only desirable insofar as men find them attractive. As a consequence, this particular kind of *external* approval—the admiration of the opposite sex—will carry much more weight in women's pursuit of sexy-making features. For men, the wish to appear sexy may not be the only or even the main reason why they want to become more independent, develop skills, or accrue more power. Thus, appearing sexy may well be, and often is, the byproduct of another ambition—an added bonus, so to speak. For women, it is almost never that easy. In addition, while a man can achieve sexiness in a great variety of ways (power, fame, wealth, as well as exceptional skills, talents, abilities) and so is not bound to focus on his physical appearance, the latter is much more crucial for women. In this sense, the path to sexiness is much *narrower* for women.

So far, we have focused on the question “How does one appear sexy?” in order to address relevant differences between men and women. But there is another question worth asking in this regard: “How *important* is it to appear sexy?” Even in modern and “enlightened” Western societies, women are still socialized to believe that sexiness is essential to their value as persons, as this testimony of a young girl on the “Everyday Sexism” blog (<http://www.everydaysexism.com/>) painfully illustrates:

I always feel like if I don't look a certain way, if boys don't think I'm “sexy” or “hot” then I've failed and it doesn't even matter if I am a doctor or writer, I'll still feel like nothing . . . successful women are only considered a success if they are successful AND hot, and I worry constantly that I won't be.

All too often, sexiness is viewed as a woman's only or most important quality. An incident that happened in the summer of 2013 can serve as a case in point. When Marion Bartoli won Wimbledon in July of that year

and embraced her father in the player's box, BBC commentator John Inverdale told Radio 5 Live listeners:

I just wonder if her dad, because he has obviously been the most influential person in her life, did say to her when she was 12, 13, 14 maybe, "listen, you are never going to be, you know, a looker. You are never going to be somebody like a Sharapova, you're never going to be 5-ft-11, you're never going to be somebody with long legs, so you have to compensate for that."<sup>2</sup>

This is just the tip of the iceberg—the iceberg being the massive pressure on women to accept and believe that sexiness is their most desirable quality and is basically indispensable if you want to feel like a real woman. This is probably the most objectionable difference between the genders. And here we take a view that is diametrically opposed to that of L&I. L&I basically agree that sexiness is essential to someone's value as a person; that is why they suggest a revised notion according to which everyone could in principle be considered sexy. We, on the other hand, wish to emphasize that sexiness is not essential to a woman's value as a person, just as it is not essential to a man's value. Granted, it can be valuable and desirable to at least *appear* sexy to some people on some occasions. But this does not mean that sexiness as such should be seen as indispensable for one's self-esteem or the esteem of others. There is something deeply wrong with a society that allows and even encourages half of the population into believing that that is the case.

### 10.5. Pornography: Part Problem, Part Solution

For L&I, considering someone sexy is, or should be, a matter of making the correct judgment: you ask yourself whether the person under consideration has a magnificent body infused with sexual subjectivity and if the answer is no, they are not sexy; if the answer is yes, they are sexy. This then is followed by an ethical imperative: you have to make your feelings and desires match your judgment. So, in suggesting a way forward, L&I mainly place emphasis on the individual responsibility that every one of us has in making a correct assessment and doing the right thing. One can, however, have serious doubts about the effectiveness and feasibility of such

<sup>2</sup>The clip (and transcription) are available on the BBC website: <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-23214821>.

a proposal. To begin with, feelings of sexual attraction often go against our better judgment and are very hard to steer or control. We typically do not choose whom we fall in or out of lust with. Biology plays an important part in this, naturally, but is by no means the only factor in play. One's upbringing and education, as well as the images and stories one is confronted with on a daily basis, in advertising, in the media, in the arts, in the many forms of entertainment: all of this has a tremendous influence. It is these culturally specific and ultimately changeable processes of socialization that we think should be the main focus of any attempt to address contemporary issues with sexiness. Granted, if all of us were to simultaneously adopt L&I's revisionary account of sexiness and were able to manage our feelings and desires accordingly, then the problem would disappear. But how this could ever come about in reality is something L&I do not explain. Simply relying on the moral compass of people, or on the effectiveness of a philosophical argument in convincing people, won't get us very far.

Instead of revising the very concept of sexiness and placing the onus on the individual, we think it is crucial to look to the social level and revise the way we actually raise and educate our children, along with the manner in which models of sexiness operate in the media and advertising, in the arts and the entertainment industry. Evidently, there is not enough scope to investigate in detail how the continuous promotion of gender inequality through these different channels takes place and can be countered (Lorber [2012] provides a good starting point). However, we do want to complete our critique of sexiness with a critique of one area of representation that we have left unmentioned so far but that has had a huge impact on what and whom we find sexy: pornography.

By eroticizing certain actions, bodily features, and personality traits, pornography not only reflects but also helps to shape what and whom we find sexy. If that is so, and one can find an elaborate and compelling argument for this in Eaton (2007), it is reasonable to assume that pornography is partly responsible for what has gone wrong with the standards of sexiness in our society. But it also follows that pornography, given its potential impact on our sexual likes and dislikes, can become part of the solution. Hence, before taking a wholesale stance for or against pornography, it is important to know what kind of pornography is being considered.

*Inegalitarian pornography*—that is, pornography that eroticizes the mechanisms, norms, myths, and trappings of gender inequality (Eaton 2007)—is likely to contribute to all of the problems highlighted in Section 10.3 and should therefore be opposed. (Similar problems arise with pornography that eroticizes aspects of racial inequality; see Zheng

in Chapter 9 of this volume.) A very large part of 20th-century mainstream pornography falls in this category. All too often in these films, photographs, and stories, men are portrayed as confident, active and in charge, whereas women are shown as passive and subordinate in a variety of ways. All too often one will encounter forms of objectification, from the subtle to the very blatant, being made into markers of sexiness. Moreover, most mainstream porn of that era seems to convey the idea that you can only be sexy as a woman if you have a stereotypically sexy body. The actresses of 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s mainstream pornography are young, tall, thin, and fit, with glossy hair, smooth skin, full lips, and firm breasts. Male actors did not have to fit a similarly narrow stereotype (just think of the most famous male porn star, Ron Jeremy, also known as “The Hedgehog”). As such, this kind of pornography did indeed project and endorse a very narrow conception of what is sexy for a woman.

Other authors have written about censorship, boycotts, and other ways in which the pernicious influence of this kind of pornography can be stopped or curbed (see, for instance, Dwyer [1995] and Eaton [2007]). In the remainder of this chapter, however, we want to address how pornography itself has a role to play here and how it can be part of the remedial process. The basic idea is simple: if inegalitarian pornography is a serious issue of concern, then egalitarian pornography may actually help to address this issue.

*Egalitarian pornography* is pornography that is premised on the full equality between sexual partners and hence does not eroticize any acts of violence, humiliation, or objectification or any of the gender stereotypes that help to sustain gender inequality. Production companies like Puzzy Power, a subdivision of Lars von Trier and Peter Aalbaek Jensen’s production company Zentropa, were founded in the late 1990s with the aim to produce and market precisely this sort of pornography. Excerpts of the Puzzy Power Manifesto (<http://www.puzzypower.dk/UK/index.php/omos/manifest>), which served as a guide for the production of films, attest to this:

women must not be subjected to violence or coercion against their will.  
 (...) **What we hate** is the oral sex scene where the woman is coerced to perform fellatio, her hair pulled hard, and come is squirted into her face.  
 (...) The films must be based on woman’s pleasure and desire. (...) We must see the beauty of the body, of the male body, too, and he is welcome to offer his body up to us.

This resulted in aesthetically appealing films like *Constance* (1998), *Pink Prison* (1999), and *All About Anna* (2005), which were directed by women, aimed at women, and featured strong, confident female leads who are not just consenting to certain sexual acts but actively taking control of their own fantasies.<sup>3</sup>

Directors such as Anna Span, Erika Lust, and Muriel Scherre (to name just a few) have since taken over the baton and continue to make work in this vein, clearly inspired by the shared thought that is formulated so well by the performer and filmmaker Gala Vanting:

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.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, and perhaps instigated by these new voices and directions in pornography, the new millennium has seen more and more mainstream pornographic films being made on an egalitarian basis, although it is pretty evident that this positive evolution is not driven by any high-minded ideals but rather by blunt economic calculation (the idea being that an increase in female consumers will lead to an increase in profits). However that may be, by not making the gender stereotypes and objectification into markers of sexiness, with a camera lingering not just on the naked female body but also on male bodies, and with a narrative that gives equal weighting to male and female pleasure, egalitarian pornography is one of the forces that may help counter the influence of inegalitarian pornography and have a more beneficial impact on what and whom is regarded as sexy.

## 10.6. Radical Egalitarian Pornography

Our pro-egalitarian porn stance comes with two important provisos. First, pornographic films with confident female characters who seem to be in charge do not ipso facto qualify as egalitarian pornography, for female performers can be (and frequently are) shown as actively desiring and

<sup>3</sup>Puzzy Power was not the only, nor the first, production company to depart from the mainstream. For instance, Candida Royalle founded her Femme Productions company in 1984 with the express aim of making so-called couples porn and films based on female desire.

<sup>4</sup>Gala Vanting speaking in the short film *Something Better: Performers Talk Feminism and Porn* (directed by Ms. Naughty), Australia: Bright Desire, 2014.

consenting to degrading acts. As former porn star Patrice Roldan (aka Nadia Styles) recalls:

I would say “Treat me like a little slut” or . . . “Fuck me like a whore.”  
I would say the most degrading things I could say about myself because  
I thought this was what it meant to be sexy and what people wanted to hear.  
(Cited in Hedges 2009, 62)

Given the existence of what in the philosophical literature is referred to as adaptive preferences—that is, preferences that are inconsistent with basic human flourishing and formed under conditions that are nonconductive to human flourishing (Khader 2011)—it is abundantly clear that it is not enough for a film to show a woman positively wanting to look or act or be treated in a certain way for it to qualify as egalitarian pornography.

It is key to keep this in mind even when considering films distributed under the label of “female-friendly pornography.” Take Erika Lust’s breakthrough short film *The Good Girl* (2004) that tells the story of Alex, a successful businesswoman who often thinks about sex but usually does not find the time or courage to act upon it. After a phone call with a friend who challenges her to be more sexually adventurous, she takes a shower, orders pizza, and—lo and behold—the goods are delivered by a tall, handsome delivery guy. This is an opportunity that Alex will not let go by. In many ways this film offers a refreshing alternative to (and parody of) mainstream pornography. But in other respects, it falls significantly short. For instance, when Alex drops her towel in an attempt to seduce the pizza delivery guy she appears shy, clumsy, and insecure. It is a very erotically charged moment, but that is precisely the problem: much like mainstream pornography, the film eroticizes the gender stereotype of a vulnerable woman versus a confident man. Moreover, at the end of their tenderly and beautifully filmed lovemaking, Alex asks the delivery guy to “cum on my face like they do in porn movies,” which he then happily does. Thus, the film continues and even celebrates this most prevalent trope of unequalitarian pornography rather than subverting it. While this may be female-friendly pornography, it is not egalitarian pornography (being friendly toward someone and treating her as an equal are two different things).

Second, just because something qualifies as egalitarian pornography this does not mean it is therefore above criticism. Films like *Constance*, *Pink Prison*, or *All About Anna*, for example, still fall short in addressing some of the problems highlighted in Section 10.3. In particular, they seem

to subscribe to and project the view that only one type of body is truly sexy. The actresses and actors all appear to fit the same mold, and a real diversity of bodies is lacking. Furthermore, they are very heteronormative in outlook (there is no gay male sex, and the lesbian scenes function only as a prelude or interlude to the main act of heterosexual sex) and seem to build on a rather essentialist view of female sexuality as being emotional, soft, and sensitive. As it says in the *Puzzzy Power Manifesto* (<http://www.puzzzypower.dk/UK/index.php/om-os/manifest>):

Feelings, passions, sensuality, intimacy, and the lead-up must be emphasised. . . . The woman must be turned on, and her anticipation be built up into insurmountable lust, as the joys of anticipation are and will always be the greatest.

It is here that the need for what is commonly termed “feminist pornography” becomes apparent. Feminist pornography is deliberately not aimed at a singular female viewer (“*the woman*”) but at a multiplicity of viewers with different sexual preferences and identities. And while it can include “touchy-feely” scenes and stories, there is no need for it to be “vanilla.” According to the *Feminist Porn Book*, feminist porn “uses sexually explicit imagery to contest and complicate dominant representations of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, disability, age, body type, and other identity markers” (Taormino et al. 2013, 9). Or as Carlyle Jansen, founder of the Feminist Porn Awards in Toronto, puts it:

Women and/or traditionally marginalized people must be involved in the direction, production, and/or conception of the work; the work must depict genuine pleasure, agency, and desire for all performers; and the work must expand the boundaries of sexual representation on film, challenge stereotypes, and presents a vision that sets the content apart from most mainstream pornography. (cited in Vasquez 2014)

Because the aim is to reach and involve not just women but also other traditionally marginalized groups and to include queer, transgender, and gay porn, some have preferred to use the term “alternative pornography/ies” (sometimes shortened to “alt porn”; see Biasin et al. 2014; Janssen 2014). But while this term may indeed be more inclusive, it runs the risk of being *too* inclusive. After all, some niche pornographies provide an alternative to the mainstream but in a bad way (e.g., crush or rape pornography). Other pornographic works may be alternative but not sufficiently egalitarian (cf.



*The Good Girl*). That is why we propose to use the term “radical egalitarian porn” for the kind of work described in the two quotes above—a label that is more inclusive than “feminist pornography” but less vague than “alternative pornography.” So, pornography that is radically egalitarian is pornography that militates against the perpetuation of any harmful stereotype in such a way that exposure to this kind of pornography will no longer have a detrimental impact on our responses of sexual attraction but, on the contrary, might help to bring them in line with our ideas of gender equality.

In closing, we briefly want to discuss what we see as two natural allies of radical egalitarian pornography: art and the Internet. Firstly, some antipornography feminists consider the Internet a great threat because it has made the production, distribution, and consumption of pornography so much easier, which has opened the door to the deplorable “pornification” of culture and of sex (see, for instance, Paul 2005). But if you take into account the great variety of pornographies out there, and in particular the positively subversive potential of radical egalitarian pornography, it becomes clear that this is a one-sided view. Take the group of people that L&I have rightly drawn attention to as being marginalized under the current sexiness regime: disabled and elderly women. One of the problems they face in contemporary society, as was argued in Section 10.3, is that they will less frequently appear sexy to other people—no doubt due in part to the fact that they rarely feature as sex symbols in the mainstream media. Internet pornography can help to counterbalance this.

That Internet pornography can be liberating for people with unusual sexual preferences has often been commented on. Turner Prize winner Grayson Perry, for instance, attests:

what the internet did was tell you that you weren't alone. And it was shocking. When I was young, when I was about ten years old, I used to have this fantasy, which used to turn me on greatly, of being in a body cast—lying in hospital, motionless, unable to move. And then when the internet came along, one day I just thought, “I wonder,” and then I just googled “plaster casts” and like—eugh! There's websites called things like Cast Your Enthusiasm. It's an offshoot of bondage. (Eno and Perry 2013)

The flipside of this, if you want, is that the Internet can have an equally liberating effect on people who in the pre-Internet age would find no external

confirmation for the thought that they, too, might be experienced as sexy by other people. Porn director Anna Span said in an interview:

I always say to women, if there's something you don't like about your body, put it into a search engine, add the word porn and you will find a load of sites where that is the most attractive thing about you—whether you are very hairy, or very fat or an amputee. There is [a kind of porn] for every preference. (Cited in Gardner 2013)

Likewise, while the sexuality of disabled or elderly people is still all too often ignored in the everyday world, this is not the case in the world of (radical egalitarian) pornography. There is porn made by and featuring elderly and disabled men and women. A particularly powerful example is *Breaking Barriers* starring Encarna Conde, a wheelchair user who has a muscle control disorder called ataxia and is also president of the Association of Andalusian Ataxia Groups (see Tremlett 2006). Thanks to the Internet (and Internet communities), this is now easily and globally accessible. (Again, this is not to say that pornographic films and photographs involving disabled and elderly people cannot be objectifying and exploitative; too many of them still are, unfortunately.)

Secondly, art. More often than not, pornography and art are thought of as fundamentally incompatible. The former merely panders to people's tastes, some have argued, while the latter tries to educate our tastes (Scruton 2009). Art, says Gordon Graham, “aims to stimulate new interest and value in its readers, and not merely to accept and exploit their pre-existent interests and values. Its hope is not simply to *serve* but to *create* its audience” (Graham 2008, 159). By contrast, the goal of mainstream commercial pornography is first and foremost to serve and gratify its audience. Its formulaic and conformist character is a direct consequence: storylines and role plays that have proven effective are repeated over and over again, sex always proceeds along the same well-trodden path (from oral sex to various forms of penetration culminating in the obligatory “money shot”), and any real deviation from the heterosexual norm is taboo lest it might be offensive to some consumers' tastes.

However, things are different with radical egalitarian pornography. Because works of this kind set out to challenge the existing sexiness regime and its underlying prejudices, and because their aim is precisely to expand and educate viewers' sexual tastes—under the motto “informed sex is better sex” (Carlyle Jansen, quoted in Vasquez 2014)—they are compelled to seek out innovative and thought-provoking ways of representing (the

role of gender, race, ethnicity, class, disability, age, and body type in) sex and sexiness. A case in point is *Skin.Like.Sun* (2010; Jennifer Lyon Bell and Murielle Scherre), a stylish pornographic documentary about a real-life couple filmed in real time so as to convey the unscripted progression of a genuine sexual encounter. Or *One Night Stand* (2006; Emilie Jouvét), a collection of five vignettes exploring a variety of sex acts, body types, and gender expressions in a dark underground lesbian and queer club, filmed in situ with a handheld camera and with a raw DIY punk aesthetic as a result.<sup>5</sup> It is their radical egalitarian agenda that motivated these filmmakers to experiment with both content and form in such a way that their creations have at least as much in common with art films as with mainstream commercial porn films. And while they may not be able to compete with the latter in production value, they far exceed their mainstream counterparts in cognitive value, originality, and general artistic quality.

Indeed, if we accept, as we have argued elsewhere (Maes 2011, 2012, 2013), that the distinction between art and pornography is not an absolute one, and that there is in fact a middle ground between these two domains of representation, it is only to be expected that most works of radical egalitarian pornography will be situated in or very near this middle ground and may legitimately lay claim to the status of pornographic art or artistic pornography. This easy confluence of radical egalitarian and artistic ambitions is only to be encouraged, we believe. For one thing, achieving art status would grant these films prestige and a special sort of authority that would help to undermine the influence and authority that inegalitarian porn still has in matters of sex. Moreover, it will help to pave the way for an open discussion of such works in the public domain and for a proper art critical analysis of this specific genre. (The fact that there is no public porn criticism—in the way that there is film criticism or art criticism—is probably one of the reasons why prejudice and misinformation can so easily spread and thrive here.)

In sum, and to conclude, we have made the case, starting from our reflections on sexiness, that a sensible anti-inegalitarian porn feminism is to be complemented with a forceful and feminist pro-egalitarian porn stance and that in particular the production and online distribution of radical egalitarian pornographic art deserves to be supported and promoted. This is one way of getting at the truth of, and lending further substance to, Annie Sprinkle's often-cited quip: "The answer to bad porn is not no porn, but to make better porn."

<sup>5</sup>Thanks to Sara Janssen for pointing me in the direction of these films.

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