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## ARTICLE

### **Pornographic Confessions? Sex Work and *Scientia Sexualis* in Foucault and Linda Williams**

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**ABSTRACT:** In the first volume of the *History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault states in passing that prostitution and pornography, like the sexual sciences of medicine and psychiatry, are involved in the proliferation of sexualities and the perverse implantation. Against an influential misinterpretation of this passage on the part of film studies scholar Linda Williams, this paper takes up Foucault's claim and attempts to explain the mechanism through which the sex industry, and pornography in particular, functions analogously to the sexual sciences in terms of the normalizing form of power that Foucault describes. Whereas Williams sets the question of prostitution aside, and argues that pornography must be a confessional discourse for Foucault, this paper argues that consumption rather than confession is the mechanism through which both prostitution and pornography deploy sexualities within a disciplinary system of power.

**Keywords:** Foucault, Linda Williams, pornography, prostitution

In 1977, Michel Foucault was asked by a government commission how he would like to see the laws concerning sexual crimes reformed in France. In his response he made no mention of prostitution and stated briefly that he was opposed to all legislation restricting sexually explicit materials. Prostitution and pornography appear to have been easy cases for Foucault, while he went on to say that there were only two kinds of sex acts that troubled him with respect to legislation – rape and sex with minors – and it is these issues that he contemplated in some detail.<sup>1</sup> Lest we

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<sup>1</sup> Foucault describes this phone call in "Confinement, Psychiatry, Prison," where he goes on to discuss rape with his interlocutors. Soon after, in "Sexual Morality and the Law," he addresses the issue of sex with minors. See Lawrence D. Kritzman (ed.), *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984* (New York and London: Routledge: 1988) 178-210 and 271-285. For critical responses to Foucault's comments on rape and sex with children, see Linda Alcoff, "Dangerous Pleasures: Foucault and the Politics of Pedophilia," in Susan J. Hekman (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations*

think that sex work was entirely unproblematic for Foucault, however, in *The History of Sexuality* prostitution and pornography are mentioned along with the disciplinary professions of medicine and psychiatry as having “tapped into both this analytic multiplication of pleasure and this optimization of the power that controls it.”<sup>2</sup> Prostitution and pornography are suggested by Foucault to be involved in the workings of disciplinary power as it constructs and controls sexuality, and in this sense would be problematic indeed, even if it would make no more sense to resort to legislation in the cases of pornography and prostitution than it would in the cases of other disciplinary practices such as psychoanalysis and psychiatry. Since law functions on a model of repressive, sovereign or juridical power, it is not very effective, and may even be counter-productive, to resort to law in order to resist what are in fact disciplinary phenomena.

This paper has two objectives, one negative and one positive. First, I wish to critique Film Studies scholar Linda Williams’ highly influential study of pornography, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the ‘Frenzy of the Visible’*, which draws on Foucault at length. Williams’ 1989 work was groundbreaking in that it was the first study of pornography that declined to engage in the censorship debate. Rather than questioning whether we should be for or against pornography, Williams approaches pornography like any other film genre, discussing it seriously in terms of influences and techniques. Williams considers pornography to be a “body genre” of film much like other low-brow genres such as melodrama and horror, which also work to elicit physiological responses in the viewer. Importantly for the current paper, it is one of Williams’ central theses in her book to take up Foucault’s association of pornography with the disciplinary sciences of medicine and psychiatry in order to argue that pornography is a confessional science and participates in the will to know about sex. Moreover, Williams understands Foucault’s situating of pornography within his discussion of the perverse implantation to mean that pornography results in a positive proliferation of fluid sexualities within individual lives. Williams’ use of Foucault has gone unquestioned in Film and Porn Studies and has been cited and

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of Michel Foucault (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 99-135; Vikki Bell, *Interrogating Incest: Feminism, Foucault and the Law* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993); Ann J. Cahill, “Foucault, Rape, and the Construction of the Feminine Body,” *Hypatia*, 15, vol., no. 1, (Winter 2000); Ann J. Cahill, *Rethinking Rape* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2001); Laura Hengehold, “An Immodest Proposal: Foucault, Hysterization, and the ‘Second Rape,’” in *Hypatia*, (Summer 1994): 88-107; Monique Plaza, “Our Damages and Their Compensation,” *Feminist Issues*, 1 (3), ([1978], 1981): 5-35; Chloë Taylor, “Foucault, Feminism and Sex Crimes,” in *Hypatia*, vol. 24, no. 4, (Fall 2009); Winifred Woodhull, “Sexuality, Power, and the Question of Rape,” in Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby (ed.), *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance*, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), 167-176.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1978), 48.

employed authoritatively by numerous other scholars; however, I shall contest both Williams' reading of Foucault and of pornography.

My second and more positive objective in this paper is to offer a new interpretation of Foucault's reference to pornography (and, to a lesser extent, prostitution – which Williams sets aside) in *The History of Sexuality*. This interpretation is more consistent than Williams' not only with Foucault's arguments in *The History of Sexuality*, but more importantly, with the manner in which pornography and prostitution actually function. First, I argue that in so far as pornography and prostitution involve expertise, they are closer to the *ars erotica* than to the sexual sciences. Second, I argue that the mechanism by which pornography and prostitution participate in the perverse implantation is not confession but consumption. Consequently, contra Williams, we must attend to the consumers rather than to what takes place on set or on screen to see how pornography serves its disciplinary function. Finally, I argue that although the perverse implantation deployed by pornography may result in a proliferation of sexualities at a society-wide level, on an individual level it is constraining rather than liberating, contributing – along with the sexual sciences of medicine and psychiatry – to the fixing of each of us into frozen rather than fluid sexual identities.

### ***Scientia Sexualis or Ars Erotica?***

Other than his references to specific literary works such as *My Secret Life* and the writings of Sade, Foucault only considers pornography once in the *History of Sexuality*, and what he says is all-too-brief and has been influentially misinterpreted by Williams. In the chapter entitled "The Perverse Implantation," Foucault writes:

And accompanying this encroachment of powers, scattered sexualities rigidified, became stuck to an age, a place, a type of practice. A proliferation of sexualities through the extension of power; an optimization of the power to which each of these local sexualities gave a surface of intervention; this concatenation, particularly since the nineteenth century, has been ensured and relayed by the countless economic interests which, *with the help of medicine, psychiatry, prostitution, and pornography*, have tapped into both this analytic multiplication of pleasure and this optimization of the power that controls it. Pleasure and power do not cancel or turn back against one another; they seek out, overlap, and reinforce one another. They are linked together by complex mechanisms and devices of excitation and incitement.<sup>3</sup>

This citation is interesting for at least two reasons. First, it helps to explain Foucault's opposition to any censorship of sexually explicit materials. Foucault's main objective in this reference to prostitution and pornography is not so much to

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 48 (my italics).

say anything about the sex industry *per se*, but to reject the strategy of repressing sex in order to control it more generally, whether this repression occurs through legislation or medicine. According to Foucault's theory of disciplinary power as productive, the workings of power and the very idea of repression are constitutive rather than extinguishers of desire.<sup>4</sup> As Foucault argues throughout the first volume of the *History of Sexuality*, when we try to control desire by repressing it we in fact produce it, and, as this passage makes clear, Foucault thinks that this is just as true with respect to the sex industry as to the medical treatment of perversions.

Second, while in this passage and elsewhere Foucault does not elaborate on the relation between the sex industry and the sexual sciences, it is curious that he would string together the apparently incongruous bedmates of medicine and psychiatry with prostitution and pornography. Each of these practices is suggested to be working towards similar ends within a disciplinary system of power: Foucault suggests that pornography and prostitution, like the sexual sciences, are involved in a "proliferation of sexualities," which proliferation, for Foucault, is in turn caught up with "the perverse implantation," as the chapter in which this citation occurs explains. Unfortunately, whereas in the case of medicine and psychiatry Foucault describes the precise mechanism through which this proliferation and implantation of sexualities occurs – confession – he does not give us a similar account of the manners in which prostitution and pornography deploy sexualities. In response to this passage, Williams has deduced that pornography simply *is* a sexual science for Foucault, and thus employs the *same* technology of deployment as the "other" sexual sciences. Setting the issue of prostitution aside – and even *replacing* the word "prostitution" with "law" in her reference to this passage<sup>5</sup> - Williams has argued that pornography is a confessional practice. As I shall argue below, however, and as is suggested by Williams' own need to switch the word "prostitution" for the more obviously confessional practice of "law" in her manipulation of Foucault's phrase, this is far from clear. In fact, to make sense of this citation, we need to understand how *both* pornography *and* prostitution function to deploy sexualities in a manner that is analogous (but not necessarily identical) to the workings of the sexual sciences.

In the *History of Sexuality* and in related works from this time, Foucault argues for the disentanglement of sex from truth and identity. He famously concludes this work by proposing that "The rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>5</sup> Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989), 35.

<sup>6</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 157.

Rather than trying to find out what we *already* or *truly* are through introspections into our sex(uality) and desires, we should work on what we might become, what new pleasures and capacities of the body we might discover. In this initial volume, Foucault explores the possibility of mastering the body and its pleasures in terms of the Eastern *ars erotica*.<sup>7</sup> A few years later, he would describe this discussion of the *ars erotica* as “one of the numerous points where I was wrong in that book,” not because what he said there was false, but because he “should have opposed our science of sex to a contrasting practice in our own culture. The Greeks and Romans did not have any *ars erotica* to be compared with the Chinese *ars erotica* [...] They had a *techne tou biou* [care of the self] in which the economy of pleasure played a very large role.”<sup>8</sup> Foucault now contrasts the sexual sciences not to Eastern erotic arts, but to Greek and Roman practices of self-care, and provides a schematic account of the different approaches to sexuality in each of these cultures – the East, the ancient West, and the Christian and modern West:

If by sexual behavior, we understand the three poles – acts, pleasure, and desire – we have the Greek “formula” [...] In this Greek formula what is underscored is “act,” with pleasure and desire as subsidiary: *acte – plaisir – (désir)*. [...]

The Chinese “formula” would be *plaisir – désir – (acte)*. Acts are put aside because you have to restrain acts in order to get the maximum duration and intensity of pleasure.

The Christian “formula” puts an accent on desire and tries to eradicate it. Acts have to become something neutral; you have to act only to produce children, or to fulfill your conjugal duty. And pleasure is both practically and theoretically excluded: *(désir) – acte – (plaisir)*. Desire is practically excluded – you have to eradicate your desire – but theoretically very important.

And I could say that the modern “formula” is desire, which is theoretically underlined and practically accepted, since you have to liberate your own desire. Acts are not very important, and pleasure – nobody knows what it is!<sup>9</sup>

The Eastern *ars erotica*, or the “Chinese ‘formula,’” assumes pleasure and the techniques of mastering the pleasure-capacities of the body to be an area of knowledge external to the self that a subject can acquire through corporeal practice under the tutelage of a master. Ancient practices of self-care were concerned with an

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 57-71.

<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” in Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault, Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 234-235.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 242-243.

agent's ability to control his sexual acts or indulgences in pleasure and took little interest in desire. As Foucault writes:

For the Greeks, when a philosopher was in love with a boy, but did not touch him, his behavior was valued. The problem was, does he touch the boy or not. That's the ethical substance: the act linked with pleasure and desire. For Augustine it's very clear that when he remembers his relationship to his young friend when he was eighteen years old, what bothers him is what exactly was the kind of desire he had for him. So, you see that the ethical substance has changed.<sup>10</sup>

The shift that happened between the Ancient Greeks and Augustine, a shift in emphasis from acts to desires, is still with us today. While desire remains the aspect of sex which we stress, it has now become positive rather than negative: whereas Augustine worried about the nature of his desire in order to better annihilate it, we now seek to identify our desires in order to *affirm* and *inhabit* our authentic sexualities, and we take desire, rather than acts or pleasures, to be the key to unlocking the secrets of our souls.

Granted this unprecedented importance, Foucault suggests that desire has succeeded in eclipsing sexual acts almost entirely. With the *scientia sexualis* there is no need to act at all in order to have and to discover our sexualities, we just need to think about our personal desires and the types of selves that these constitute. For the *scientia sexualis*, sexual truth is already in the psyche, if we only introspect on our feelings, fantasies, dreams, childhood traumas, repressions and inhibitions. Sexual truth is psychologized, or is specific to each individual and need not be acted upon, in contrast to the *ars erotica*, for which the truths of sexual pleasure are mysteries into which one must be initiated, which must be practiced, and which have nothing to do with the individual practitioner or her psychic states.

Both the *scientia sexualis* and the *ars erotica* have their "sexual experts." For the *scientia sexualis*, these are scientists who may or may not have much sexual experience or much embodied knowledge of pleasure but who are medically-trained decipherers of desire, interpreters of sexual confessions, taxonomers of perversions or psychosexual types. The sexual experts of the *ars erotica*, on the other hand, are trained in the mastery of non-individuated bodies and pleasures.<sup>11</sup> Studying the *ars*

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 238.

<sup>11</sup> Bodies may be individuated in the *ars erotica* into a few physiological types: for instance, in the *Kama Sutra*, male bodies come in hare, bull, and horse types, and women come in deer, mare, and elephant types, according to the size of their genitals. Bodies also come with different degrees of passion – deemed small, middling, or extreme – and the *Kama Sutra* urges lovers to find partners who correspond to themselves in genital size and force

*erotica* would consequently be a deindividualizing practice. Unlike patients and practitioners of the *scientia sexualis*, an initiate of the *ars erotica* would not be concerned with understanding her own individual sexuality, or the various individual sexualities (perversions, etc.) of others, but in understanding the pleasures of bodies *per se*. While corporeal pleasure is important to the *ars erotica*, the Western obsession with sexual identity has no more place in these Eastern practices than it did in the self-mastering techniques of the ancient Greeks.

In *Hard Core*, as noted, Williams identifies pornography with the *scientia sexualis* that Foucault discusses in the *History of Sexuality*. Williams' initial argument for the pornography/sexual science identification involves showing that pornography and two modern scientific developments – photography and psychoanalysis – came of age together, and share a history that has not been disentangled since. As Williams documents, the scientific inventions of photography were quickly employed to produce pornography, while sexual scientists such as Charcot took quasi-pornographic photographs with titles such as “*Ècstase*.” Science, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and pornography thus have an interactive history, and this history is one of the grounds for Williams' blurring of the notions of pornography and sexual science. The use and making of pornographic images in the history of the sciences of psychiatry and psychoanalysis is not enough to establish pornography *as* a sexual science, however, or even to say that it is *like* a science. Charcot touched many things, and early scientist-photographers worked in many genres, but not all of these became science.

More significantly, Williams argues that photography and its immediate production of pornography are situated in the particularly modern and Western “will to know” about sex, which *volonté de savoir* is also what motivates the sexual sciences. Foucault's argument is that we, as a society, want to know about sex, since we have come to think that sex is the key to understanding who we are, the means to realizing both our truth and our happiness. It is in this context that we participate in the studies of the sexual sciences, undergo analysis and self-analysis, and consume the books, magazines, and television shows that feature sexological knowledge. In this context, pornography is interpreted by Williams – and by authors who cite Williams' study such as Chris Straayer, Julie Lavigne and Gertrud Koch – as catering to this same will to know the truth about sex. Like sexual scientists in their interrogations, Williams thinks that we consume pornography out of the desire to hear “sex speak” or to witness sexual confessions.

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of passion. These basic differences in scale are, however, quite different from, and far less individualizing than, the psychosexual taxonomies of the sexual sciences.

While Williams shows that the sexual and photographic sciences produced pornographic images, Koch shows a reverse movement, pointing to cases in which pornographers made overtures to the sexual sciences. She points out that certain pornographic films "declared their intention to offer practical advice for living, to be purveyors of knowledge. Examples of these are the Oswald Kolle series, or *Helga*. The classification of formal knowledge by category still attaches to an unending series of 'Film Reports,' often presenting sexual behaviour according to various occupations."<sup>12</sup> Koch goes on to note that certain "early porn films displayed a lexicographic tendency," and quotes two descriptions from a 1956 essay by Curt Moreck:

A special flavour is given to obscene films through the scrupulously realistic presentation of every imaginable perversion. Although life itself very often offers the connoisseur a view of simple vice, the chance to enjoy real perversity as a spectator is much rarer; in this case, film tries to fill the void. There are some films in this genre which seem to have been staged directly from Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis*, as a manual of abnormal sexual operations for civilized man.

All the vices of man flickered by on the screen. Every one of the hundred and fifty ways from the old *Treatise on the Hundred and Fifty Ways of Loving* was demonstrated, with occasional interruptions for lesbian, pederast, and masturbation jokes. All that was harmless. Sadists and masochists waved their instruments, sodomy was practiced, coprophagous acts were on display.<sup>13</sup>

Cases such as Moreck describes indicate that pornography might offer itself as the sort of material which the sexual sciences study. Indeed, Krafft-Ebing used the pornographic texts of Sade and Sacher-Masoch to identify the characteristics of sadism and masochism. Some pornographic films could function like the texts of Sade and Sacher-Masoch as other illustrations of perversions which the sexual scientists might analyze. As Foucault notes, the anonymous author of *My Secret Life* described the value of his writings as a quasi-scientific contribution to human knowledge of sexuality.<sup>14</sup> In instances such as these – voluntarily in the cases of *My Secret Life* and the films that Moreck describes, and involuntarily in the cases of Sade and Sacher-Masoch – pornography serves as material for the sexual scientists' studies of perversion. In the case of *My Secret Life*, because it is the author himself who offers his experiences to the scientists, and because the text is written in an autobiographical mode, pornography works as the kind of confession which sexual scientists elicit from their patients. In the other cases, the data is more dubious and

<sup>12</sup> Gertrud Koch, "The Body's Shadow Realm," in Pamela Church Gibson (ed.), *More Dirty Looks: Gender, Pornography and Power* (London: The British Film Institute, 2004), 155.

<sup>13</sup> Cited in Koch, 155.

<sup>14</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 22.



involuntarily provided, and Sacher-Masoch was appalled to find a sexual perversion named after himself in the *Psychopathia Sexualis* on the basis of his literary works.

Although this shows that some pornographers have justified the existence of their work by claiming to contribute to scientific knowledge, and a few have done so in an autobiographical or confessional mode, it is surely the case that *most* pornography is *not* autobiographical and is *not* offered up as quasi-scientific information about human sexuality, but as fiction and fantasy. Significantly, while anti-pornography feminists have regularly claimed that pornography reflects and reinscribes (a misogynist) reality, the pornography industry and its defenders persistently argue that their opponents are failing to distinguish between fantasy and reality. Pornography, they argue, is not truth but fantasy, and the people who consume it realize this. The value of pornography to society is defended as art and imagination, and not as science, knowledge, or truth.

While Koch's study, like Foucault's discussion of *My Secret Life*, is interesting in that it shows that *some* works of pornography have engaged with and even hoped to contribute to or collaborate with the sexual sciences, this is not a feature of most pornography, either in the nineteenth century or today. It is in fact highly questionable whether pornography arises primarily out of a "will to know" about sex at all. For one thing, mass-produced and circulated pornography pre-existed the *volonté de savoir* that Foucault describes. While Williams begins her study of the history of pornography with the invention of photography in the nineteenth century, thus making it contemporary with Charcot, she might have begun with the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century instead. Like the invention of the camera, the invention of the printing press quickly gave rise to the mass production and circulation of pornographic works, such as Giulio Romano's 1520 series, *I modi*, and this well before the age of the "will to know" about sex that Foucault describes.<sup>15</sup> It is thus quite possible for a society to make, distribute, and consume pornography on a large scale with non-epistemological motivations and prior to the existence of the sexual sciences, and this leads me to doubt that the primary impulse behind the production and consumption of pornography is any more part of a *volonté de savoir* today than it was in the 1520s.

Of course, pornography might function very differently today than it did in the Renaissance, and yet even in this age of the will to know about sex, it is far from clear that it is in the spirit of knowledge that pornography is either made or consumed. Do people consume pornography to learn about sexual pleasure or to

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<sup>15</sup> Bette Talvacchia, *Taking Positions: On the Erotic in Renaissance Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999)

have it? Is pornography primarily about satisfying curiosity or desire? Is pornography an epistemological endeavor or a masturbatory aid? Are these necessarily inter-related? Epistemological pursuits may certainly be prurient, and Foucault himself characterizes *fin-de-siècle* medicine as “a pornography of the morbid,”<sup>16</sup> but does all sexual pleasure today seek the truth of sex? Williams seems to think that it does, for she even includes peep shows under the umbrella of the “scientific will-to-knowledge.”<sup>17</sup>

I have no doubt that people look at pornography with some intellectual curiosity and that it can play an educative role, for better or for worse, but I am not sure that this educative role is the primary motivation or function of pornography, its explanation or *raison d'être*. According to one poll, eight-six percent of respondents think that pornography is educational, and Pamela Paul writes that young men in particular may use pornography “to figure out what women want and expect from sex. In fact, studies show that men learn from and emulate what they see in pornography.”<sup>18</sup> I shall argue below that mainstream heterosexual pornography does not so much educate men in women’s desires as construct a fantasy for men according to which women’s desires and pleasures correspond to their own. Something similar might be said about prostitution, which is also often used for male sexual initiation and education, but which in fact probably teaches men very little about women’s actual pleasures or desires. Here, however, I want to argue that in so far as advocates say that pornography (or prostitution) is educational, they mean that it teaches sexual *skills* or *techniques*, not truths about the psychosexualities and desires of the individuals on-screen or employed. This, for Foucault, would situate pornography (and prostitution) closer to the *ars erotica* than the *scientia sexualis*. To recall, the sexual experts of the *ars erotica* are trained in practices that bring about pleasure and have mastered an art of manipulating bodies, while the sexual experts of the *scientia sexualis* are trained in diagnosing psychological perversions and interpreting desires. If porn stars (and prostitutes) are “sexual experts” of a sort, capable of contributing to the sexual education of consumers, it is in the manner of the *ars erotica* and not of the sexual sciences.

Let it be granted, then, that pornography can serve a pedagogical function, as is so frequently claimed. It is nevertheless not clear that this situates pornography on the side of the sexual sciences, and moreover it is not clear that this is very often the *main* purpose in consuming pornography, or that it is a consumer’s primary

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<sup>16</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 54.

<sup>17</sup> Williams, 51.

<sup>18</sup> Pamela Paul, *Pornified: How Pornography is Damaging Our Lives, Our Relationships, and Our Families* (New York: Times Books, 2005), 18.

motivation or merely a side-effect. Since pornography tends to be repetitious, it also seems unlikely that viewers *continue* to watch pornography for its educational function. After a short time, one has likely learned what pornography has to teach, but many go on watching pornography for other reasons, which reasons were probably the main motivation in the first place.

Setting these questions aside, even if we were to accept Williams' assumption that pornography arises and is consumed out of a will to know about sex, it is important to note that not everything that engages in this *volonté de savoir* becomes a sexual science. Foucault himself observes that the desire to confess and to hear confessed the truths of sex quickly expanded beyond the scientific realm, and finds expression today in our intimate conversations with family members, friends, and lovers and in "'scandalous' literature."<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the confessional impulse does not merely characterize our speaking about sex, for Foucault, but modern subjectivity more generally, or the wide-spread trend toward psychologization. For instance, Foucault discusses the manners in which criminal law became psychiatrized and involves confessional practices in the modern era, even in cases which have nothing to do with sexuality.<sup>20</sup> For Foucault, this does not transform law, "scandalous literature," or pillow talk into science, although it indicates that they interact with the human sciences in interesting and problematic ways.

### "Confessional Frenzy"?

Williams, however, argues that pornography in general (and not only in a few autobiographical instances) *is* a sexual science, and that it functions in our society as the sort of confession which the sexual sciences elicit and which Foucault examined. According to Williams, pornography is consumed as a confessional genre, and as a confessional source of truthful information about female pleasure in particular. She writes that pornography has "the goal of making visible the involuntary confession of bodily pleasure."<sup>21</sup> In this way "We begin to see [...] how this sexual science gives form to the 'truths' that are confessed."<sup>22</sup> In particular, "Hard core desires assurance that it is witnessing not the voluntary performance of feminine pleasure, but its involuntary confession."<sup>23</sup> Pornography, according to Williams, is not just

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<sup>19</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 21.

<sup>20</sup> Michel Foucault, "Confinement, Psychiatry, Prison," and "The Dangerous Individual," in Lawrence D. Kritzman (ed.), *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), 178-210 and 125-151.

<sup>21</sup> Williams, 50.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

confessional but a “confessional frenzy,”<sup>24</sup> and “proceeds by soliciting further confessions of the hidden secrets of female pleasure.”<sup>25</sup>

Although the last formulation, with its language of soliciting rather than staging “confessions” from porn stars, obscures the point, the more sophisticated version of Williams’ argument is not that the porn stars are *actually* confessing, but that pornography aims to produce *the illusion* of confession, and that pornographic films are *consumed as* confessions. Referring to Diderot’s tale of the speaking sex, as discussed by Foucault, Williams writes that “Motion pictures [pornography] take over from the magic of Mongogul’s silver ring to offer the illusion of a more truthful, hard-core confession.”<sup>26</sup> Williams thus realizes that it is in fact male directors catering to male viewers who have been doing most of the “speaking” in pornography, so that if male viewers think that they are “hearing” confessions of female pleasure “spoken” through close-ups of female genitals engaged in real sex, this involves mostly male pornographers ventriloquizing their voices into the vulvas of their female stars. However, Williams asserts that this is equally true of the “other” sexual sciences:

Freud’s theory of the fetish develops out of a particular way of seeing women as ‘lacking’ that cinema participates in as well. Neither institution actually reflects the confessional truths they purport to record; rather, they produce these truths in their new forms of power and pleasure.<sup>27</sup>

In other words, Freud and Charcot do not give us the unadulterated confessions of their female patients any more than the pornographers do, and yet what they said, like the images that the pornographers produce, is productive of truth. Doctors and pornographers, according to Williams, both give us confessions of female pleasure as seen through the lens of male interpretation and desire in manners that do not so much reflect as construct the truth of female sexuality. In one example, Williams describes staged photographs of a faked hysterical attack by the photographer Muybridge as other “‘confessions’ of a female body.”<sup>28</sup> Even pornographic literature written by male writers is interpreted by Williams as “confessions” of female pleasure:

there is not much difference between literary confessions (written by men but often focused on women) of female pleasure [...] and the more direct and graphic confession of pleasure by women’s bodies in hard core. Both are

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 47-48.

examples of men speaking about women's sex to other men; both want to know more about the pleasures of women [...].<sup>29</sup>

Williams suggests that if *Fanny Hill*, written by John Cleland, is read as a confession of female pleasure, then so can pornography be – but does anyone read *Fanny Hill* this way?

In any case, porn stars, especially female porn stars, like the model who faked a hysterical fit for Muybridge, or the “hysterics” who performed for Charcot, are thus not *really* confessing, for Williams, but she claims that they are *viewed as confessing*, especially during their “involuntary convulsions” or orgasms, authentic or otherwise, and that their performances *function as confessions* in the production of knowledge about sex. According to Williams, it is because we watch pornography to see confessions that the orgasm must be as visible as possible, as evidenced by the *de rigueur* “money shot” in the case of male porn stars. For Williams, it is a major problem for the pornography industry that women do not (usually) produce similarly visible “confessions,” when “involuntary confessions of pleasure” – especially female pleasure – is what hard core is all about.

Many objections can be raised here. To begin with a relatively small one, it is not clear why Williams consistently associates pornographic orgasms with involuntariness. In the case of “money shots,” which Williams repeatedly calls “involuntary confessions of pleasure,” Williams herself tells us that male porn stars are paid extra for these scenes, and thus certainly intend them. It is also not clear that confessions in general should be characterized as “involuntary.” While Foucault stresses that confessions are authenticated by the inhibitions that they overcome, this does not make them involuntary but rather feats of voluntary effort. In a legal context, an involuntary statement does not qualify as a confession at all. In literature, texts written in the third person and texts in which the first person narrator's name does not correspond with the author's name (for instance, *Fanny Hill* does not correspond with John Cleland) are also not considered confessional.<sup>30</sup> In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault describes confession as “a ritual of discourse where the subject who speaks corresponds with the subject of the statement,”<sup>31</sup> which cannot be said for any of the cases which Williams is calling “confession.”

Our everyday as well as Foucault's use of the term “confession” refers to a truthful statement made by one person to another about herself, whether this statement

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 55-56.

<sup>30</sup> Philippe Lejeune, “Le pacte autobiographique,” in Philippe Lejeune, *Le pacte Autobiographique* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), 13-46.

<sup>31</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 61.

refers to something she has done, felt, or had done to her. Not every statement we make about ourselves is considered to be a confession, however: calling a statement a confession implies that it speaks of something that is shameful, difficult to say, or revelatory of who the speaker is. According to Foucault, confession is a discursive act that individuates us, and it is one of the privileged forms of truth-telling and self-constitution in our culture. In "Subjectivity and Truth" Foucault defines confession as: "To declare aloud and intelligibly the truth of oneself."<sup>32</sup> In *The History of Sexuality*, confession is "a ritual which unfolds in a relation of power, since one doesn't confess without the presence, at least the virtual presence, of a partner who is not simply an interlocutor but the agency that requires the confession, imposes it, weighs it, and intervenes to judge, punish, pardon, console, reconcile."<sup>33</sup> For Foucault, confession is also "a ritual where truth is authenticated by the obstacles and resistances that it has had to lift in order to be formulated," or one that is always told with difficulty and shame. Finally, it is a discursive act in which "articulation alone, independently of its external consequences, produces, in the person who articulates it, intrinsic modifications: it makes him innocent, it redeems him, purifies him, promises him salvation."<sup>34</sup> In a later essay, "Christianity and Confession," Foucault furthermore makes clear that confession must be verbal and not merely performative. To make this point, he recounts a story from Cassian in which a monk who stole a loaf of bread each day experiences repentance during a sermon, and therefore performatively reveals to those congregated the loaf of bread hidden under his robes, and then confesses verbally to having stolen and eaten a loaf each day. Only when he makes a verbal confession does "a light [seem] to tear itself away from his body and cross the room, spreading a disgusting smell of sulphur."<sup>35</sup> Satan and his temptations were not dislodged from the monk at the moment that he felt contrition, nor at the moment that he displayed the stolen loaf to his fellows and thus theatrically exposed his guilt. Only when he confessed his wrongdoing in words was the Devil forced from his body. Foucault uses this story to argue that confession is discursive rather than performative, unlike earlier, pre-confessional forms of Christian penance.

To summarize Foucault's understanding of this crucial Western practice of truth-telling, confession is interpersonal, discursive, autobiographical, difficult or shameful, and subject-forming. This said, can pornography be described as

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<sup>32</sup> Michel Foucault, "Subjectivity and Truth," in *The Politics of Truth*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), (1997), 173.

<sup>33</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 61.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>35</sup> Michel Foucault, "Christianity and Confession," in *The Politics of Truth*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), (1997), 222-223.

confessional according to Foucault's analysis of confession? Contra Williams, I would argue that it cannot for the following reasons. First, the relation between actors and viewers in pornography is not an interpersonal one, and the acts involved are theatrical performances rather than discursive acts. Moreover, although this point requires more explanation, it does not seem to me that the actors are overcoming inhibitions in order to confess/perform pleasures which are subject-forming, constitutive of their identities, or individuating. Performing in a pornographic film, like engaging in prostitution, may be taken as constitutive of psychosexual subjectivity in the modern West in that it is assumed to damage the sex worker's authentic sexuality.<sup>36</sup> In this case, however, her authentic sexuality is not what gets performed in either the brothel or the set, but is what gets obscured in this process. According to this negative view of pornography, what we see in a pornographic film is not an expression of the porn star's sexuality, but a possibly permanent and damaging obscuration of it.

Another way that pornographic performances may be constitutive of sexual identity in the eyes of viewers and for the stars themselves is insofar as such performances constitute her according to the identity of "sex worker" or "whore," regardless of the nature of the particular sex acts in which she is engaged; in other words, performing as a dominatrix in a pornographic film does not constitute the actress as a dominatrix in her own eyes or those of her viewers, but it may constitute her as a sex worker or a whore, with all the stigmatization that this entails in a society such as ours. Men interviewed in *Pornified* note that they would not date or marry the actresses who arouse them, precisely because of the type of woman that performing in pornographic films makes them. Performing in pornographic films functions to constitute actors *as porn stars/whores* for their viewers and probably for themselves, whatever (possibly more positive) meaning this has for them, but it does not constitute them as, say, lesbians if they engage in lesbian sex scenes, or sadomasochists if they perform in s/m scenes, for the precise reason that they engage in these acts *as theatrical performances* and they are consumed as such. Williams is not arguing that the porn stars are seen as confessing to being porn stars, however, but that they are seen as confessing *to pleasure*, to truths about female sexuality, or to their own feminine pleasure in particular acts, which does not seem to be the case.

Most importantly, it seems to me that no one considers the majority of pornographic films to be confessions for the very simple reason that they are fictional and not autobiographies or documentaries. Pornography does not declare itself to be a truth-telling genre, but fantasy catering to the desires of its viewers (not its actors),

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<sup>36</sup> This view is widespread, but see, for instance, Igor Primoratz, "What's Wrong with Prostitution?" in Alan Soble (ed.), *The Philosophy of Sex: Contemporary Readings* (Lanham, Boulder, CO, New York and Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002), 455.

whereas, as Philippe Lejeune has argued, confessional texts are to be understood as quasi-legalistic and particularly authentic cases of truth-telling or self-revelation.<sup>37</sup> Peter Brooks, in his study of confession, notes that “Western literature has made the confessional mode a crucial kind of self-expression that is supposed to bear a special stamp of sincerity and authenticity and to bear special witness to the truth of the individual personality.”<sup>38</sup> We do not consider a pornographic sex scene to be particularly sincere, or to be any more confessional than a Hollywood sex scene, even though, unlike in Hollywood films, porn stars are having *real* sex, as demonstrated by the all important “meat shots” and “money shots” that characterize hard-core. Although the act or sex is *real*, it is not *true*: porn stars are not telling *the truth* of their sex or their *desire*. We see acts and maybe pleasures in porn, but we do not know (and, as I shall argue below, I do not think that we care) if we are seeing *desire*. In this sense, again, pornography seems closer to the *ars erotica* than to the *scientia sexualis*.

Throughout *Hard Core*, Williams fails to distinguish between reality and truth, or *real sex* and *the truth of an individual's sexuality*, and between acts and pleasure on the one hand, and sexuality and desire on the other. For Foucault, however, these are crucial distinctions, indicative of the epistemic transition to modernity, or the shift in importance from act to actor, deed to desire.<sup>39</sup> An individual may be considered a pedophile even if he has never acted on his desires, but only demonstrated them through certain fantasies, consuming certain literature or websites, just as a person may consider herself to be bisexual even if she has only had heterosexual sex, on the basis of her longings. We evidently think that the sexual acts we perform *in reality* may have little to do with *the truth of our sex*. For this reason, as Foucault makes clear in *The History of Sexuality*, sexual confessions (and even legal or criminal confessions) may or may not be about what a person *really does*, but they are always

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<sup>37</sup> Lejeune, 13-46.

<sup>38</sup> Peter Brooks, *Troubling Confessions: Speaking Guilt in Law and Literature* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2000), 18.

<sup>39</sup> Foucault stresses this shift towards psychologization in many contexts. As seen above, he contrasts the Eastern interest in bodies and pleasures to the Western focus on sexuality and desire. In later works, Foucault contrasted ancient Greek and Roman practices of self-mastery focusing on acts to the modern fixation on desires. For Foucault, it is a peculiarity of the modern West that truth does not lie in what we have done but in what we feel. Foucault notes a similar manifestation of this shift in interest from deed to desire, act to actor, with respect to law: while in the past judges were only concerned with crimes – or with establishing what had happened, who did it, and what punishment corresponded – today they are at least as concerned with criminals, or with the psyches, motivations, intentions, childhood histories, regrets, and likelihood of recidivism. Foucault makes this point frequently, for instance in “Confinement, Psychiatry, Prison,” “The Dangerous Individual,” and *Discipline and Punish*, among other places.



and more importantly concerned with what he or she *wants to do*. This is why confessions are importantly discursive rather than theatrical. While Williams thinks that pornography is confessional precisely because it uses bright lights and close-up camera shots, or is a “frenzy of the visible,” confessions are in fact about the *invisible*, what cannot be seen and must therefore be said – or whispered. Contra Williams, the invisibility of the female orgasm in fact poses no problem at all for a confessional discourse, even if it poses a problem for pornography.

In the case of hard-core, we know that the actors are having real sex, and even that the male actors are having real orgasms or some degree of real pleasure, even if they need to take Viagra to achieve it. However, we have no idea how they feel about it, what their intentions and motivations are, what histories led up to their being where they are, or if either the male or the female actors are expressing the truth of their desires. What Williams does not see in her repeated references to these so-called “involuntary confessions of pleasure” is that, confessionally-speaking, pleasure is not nearly as important as desire, and meat shots and money shots do not tell us about desire – or, in a point to which I shall return below, at least not about the desires of the actors.

Significantly for Williams’ argument, I also do not think that most consumers of pornography are concerned about the authenticity (or truthfulness) of the actor’s pleasures and desires, and this again indicates that they do not consume porn as a confessional genre or out of a “will to know” about the sex(uality) of those on-screen. One indication of this is that although there is a widespread belief that many actresses in pornographic films are sexually exploited and abused, this does not seem to change the experience of viewers, indicating that they are not interested in what the porn star’s *true* desires, pleasures, or psychic states are, as long as she performs well and the sex is real.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> In *At Home with Pornography: Women, Sex, and Everyday Life* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), Jane Juffer discusses the case of one porn film in which the porn stars are supposedly performing their own desires. The marketing gimmick for this work is that it is allegedly undirected, and so provides viewers with a rare opportunity to see porn stars expressing their true sexualities and pursuing their actual fantasies. Juffer writes:

In *Venom*, a popular selection produced by Vidco Home Video, ten porn stars perform a vast number of sex acts in what is billed as an expression of their authentic and outrageous sexualities. Says producer Henri Pachard before the MTV-style video begins, ‘You’re going to see something different – exhibitionists given the freedom to expose nasty sexual urges that will amaze a viewer. This extremely personal approach causes the performers to become very vulnerable... They’re not fucking for you.

My experience of watching porn with men who are frequent consumers has indicated that they notice – and are not favorably impressed – when a porn actress diverges from the standard porn script, for instance by looking directly into the camera rather than at her partner(s) in the scene. Of course, the direct gaze of the porn star may be experienced as a challenge to the voyeuristic pleasure of the viewer, or as a reminder of the presence of a cameraman at whom she really looks, but when my viewing companions have said “she isn’t supposed to look at the camera” at moments such as these, or when they even more frequently comment on whether the actress is doing a “good job” or a “bad job,” this has made me realize that they do not want an authentic performance or a genuine encounter with the actress, that they do not want windows into her soul or her sexuality, but a well-performed adherence to a standard pornographic script. If the direct gaze is any indication of what she is really thinking, they do not “will to know” this truth.

Finally, as seen above, Williams does not just argue that consumers watch porn out of a “will to know” about pleasure (rather than, more obviously, to *have* pleasure), but out of a will to know about *female* pleasure in particular. Williams convincingly demonstrates that in contrast to the stag films that preceded it, mainstream hardcore pornography makes some efforts to problematize and represent female pleasure. Indeed, men interviewed in *Pornified* stress that they enjoy pornography because the women are more enthusiastic and pleased by sex than women are in real life. As Pamela Paul writes, “Of all the requirements for enjoyable pornography, men most commonly cite the appearance of a woman’s reciprocal pleasure as key.”<sup>41</sup> As “Ethan” says, for instance: “Women in porn tend to act like sex is earth-shattering

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They’re not fucking for me. They’re fucking for themselves.’ We’re thus positioned before the video begins to view pornography as something performers do for their own pleasures; they are at heart exhibitionists, not victims, as governmental discourse would have it. Furthermore, you, the viewer, are the invader on what is essentially a private act; says Pachard, ‘If you begin to feel that you’re invading their privacy, you are.’ Pachard appeals to the illicit thrill of voyeurism and yet legitimates pornography as a private, fully consensual act. (Juffer, 60)

We may be skeptical, as Juffer seems to be, about whether even this video shows the authentic sexuality of the porn stars, or that many viewers accept this. Importantly, however, it is presented by the producer himself as “something different,” indicating that in other porn the actors are *not* expressing their true sexualities or pursuing their real fantasies, or are not fucking for themselves but for the director and the viewer. By presenting this particular video as confessional, there is an acknowledgement that normally what porn actors are doing is *not* confessional, or is not a performance of their own personal fantasies, but those of the intended viewers.

<sup>41</sup> Paul, 45.

even though in reality, sex isn't like that all the time. Unfortunately..."<sup>42</sup> This citation shows that consumers of pornography do not think that pornography represents reality, even if this fantasy may come to construct their desires and even their expectations in "real life." It also shows that many consumers of pornography want to see female pleasure represented (even if they know it is faked), and the pornography industry caters to this desire. Unlike sexual scientists such as Kinsey, however, the mainstream heterosexual pornography industry that Williams is discussing did not solicit confessions from women about their pleasures and then go about trying to capture true or even real female pleasure based on this information. It did not direct male porn stars to perform the acts that real women (or the female porn stars themselves) say they like in lieu of the usual anal penetration, fellatio, and money shots, for instance, which is what we might have expected had Williams' thesis been true, or had pornography really been participating in the will to know and to tell the truth about female pleasure. Instead, the acts represented in mainstream heterosexual pornographic films did not change very much – there is still a great deal of fellatio, in some numbers this is just about all there is, and very often it occurs as the climactic scene, compared to far less frequent and shorter ("foreplay") scenes of cunnilingus (and this usually only in films marketed as "couples' porn"), while the "money shot" remains a near-constant. The male orgasm and not the female orgasm is the conclusion to almost all pornographic numbers (even in "couples' porn"), even if now the female stars seem to enjoy receiving the product of the male orgasm as much as the male stars enjoy producing it.

As Julie Lavigne has argued, this is equally true of amateur pornography, which, today, we might have expected to be the confessional sub-category of porn if ever there was one.<sup>43</sup> In fact, as Lavigne points out, amateur pornography for the most part emulates the professional mainstream. This suggests that amateur pornographers with their home videos are not interested in revealing the truths of their individual sexualities any more than their professional counterparts, but are instead engaged in performing according to the standards, norms, and expectations established by the professional pornography into which they are thoroughly assimilated – as, perhaps, *most* of us now are. Pornographers, then, whether professional or amateur, have gone on representing the same things as always, but now they bother to insist that these acts give women pleasure too. If pornography produced primarily for men is interested in representing female pleasure, it is not *the*

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>43</sup> Julie Lavigne, "Érotisme féministe en art ou métapornographie. Le sexe selon Carolee Schneemann, Annie Sprinkle, et Natacha Merritt," *Symposium: Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy*, 11 (2), (Fall 2007), 364.

*truth* or even *the reality* of female pleasure that it is after, but rather the *fantasy* according to which female pleasure results from the same acts that give men pleasure.

The paradigmatic example of this point is of course *Deep Throat*, in which a woman's clitoris is located at the bottom of her throat such that she can only attain orgasm by fellating men. The film is ostensibly about a woman's quest for sexual pleasure, and yet, as a result of an anatomical peculiarity that no viewer takes as "scientific fact" or as a "true confession" on the part of Linda Lovelace, that female pleasure corresponds to male pleasure in being fellated. In films like *Deep Throat* this is a silly and self-conscious fiction, while the "sexual scientist" in the film appears as a buffoon, and yet Williams reads the film and the role of the sexual scientist within the film to be an instance of pornography as sexual science in pursuit of truthful knowledge of female pleasure via confession.<sup>44</sup>

Along these lines, Williams interprets the pornographic representation of rape, in which the victim eventually "confesses" to pleasure "despite herself" (or appears to enjoy the rape), as arising from the greater confessional value of an involuntary admission of pleasure. However, as Williams herself writes, scenes such as these "vindicate [the male viewer's] desire to believe that what he enjoys, she enjoys,"<sup>45</sup> much like the plot of *Deep Throat*. The fantasy world of much pornography produced for men is one in which women enjoy doing or having done to them what gives men pleasure. Such a fantasy is surely soothing in an era when women are demanding their own pleasure (which may not necessarily correspond with what brings men pleasure), and are judging men on their performance with the option of shopping around for better lovers should men fail to perform.<sup>46</sup>

As seen, Williams uses Foucault's account of Diderot's tale, "The Indiscreet Jewels," to describe pornography; however, if mainstream hard-core pornography gets the female genitals to speak, as Williams herself realizes, it is only to have them say what men want to hear. Most mainstream pornography, unlike some sexual scientists and unlike the prince in Diderot's story, does not express a genuine interest in what the female genitals would have to say. Proof that the pornography industry as well as viewers are aware of the fact that pornography is catering to the desires of viewers, rather than revealing the desires of actors, is that when the pornography industry began to target a female audience (or heterosexual couples),

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<sup>44</sup> Williams, 112-113.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 164-165.

<sup>46</sup> See, for instance, Anne Koedt's article, "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm." in The CWLU Herstory Website Archive (1970), for a classic feminist challenge to phallic sexuality and intercourse which is contemporary with *Deep Throat* (1972).

the films it made were somewhat different. If pornographers really believed that women have the same desires and pleasures as men, the idea of making heterosexual couples' porn different from men's porn would not have occurred.

Williams acknowledges that in most hard-core "confessions of pleasure" it is the men who have done the talking and what we see is merely the "illusion" of a female confession. But is it even that? On what understanding of "confession" does Williams make these arguments? As seen, it is not Foucault's understanding of confession, although it is Foucault's account of confession on which she is ostensibly drawing, and it is not that of literary and legal theorists of confession either, and it is not even our "everyday" understanding of the term. Contra Williams, mainstream pornography is not *The Vagina Monologues*, and most men do not watch pornography primarily to know about women's truths or women's pleasure or men's pleasure either, but to have their own pleasures. The medium of this pleasure is understood by consumers to be fantasy rather than quasi-scientific non-fiction or confessional autobiography, and their objective is orgasmic rather than epistemological, self- rather than other-oriented.

### **The Perverse Implantation and the Proliferation of Sexualities**

Until now I have argued that pornography is not confessional, by which I have meant that the sexual performances that we *see* in pornographic films are almost never marketed as or understood as revelations of the sexual truths of the actors, or as sexual truths at all. Now, however, I want to argue that there *is* a quasi-confessional aspect to pornographic practices, but that it does not occur on the side of what is produced by the pornography industry or what we see on the screen, as Williams argues, but on the side of the viewer. If anyone does anything like confess in the realm of pornography, it is not the actors but the consumers. In fact, this is what *should* have followed from Williams' comparison of pornography to the sexual sciences. After all, what the sexual sciences do is *not* to provide us with sexual confessions but to *elicit* them from us. By her own logic, then, if pornography were like the sexual sciences, it would not *give* us confessions but would *extract them from us*. As seen above, confessions, for Foucault, are individuating and subject-forming, and are more about desires than acts or pleasures. While I do not think that pornographic films are individuating, revelatory, or constructive of the sexuality of the actors, other than in so far as they constitute them *as sex workers*, and while I do not think that they are consumed as revelations of the true desires of the actors either, I will now suggest that they *are* revelatory and constitutive of the desires and sexuality of those who consume them.

I have said above that the educative role of pornography, such as it is, is closer to that of the *ars erotica* than the sexual sciences, because porn stars, as "sexual experts,"

teach viewers (especially younger viewers) techniques in the mastery of bodies and pleasures – even if, in fact, and due to the constraints of their profession rather than to personal failings, they are often *bad* experts or provide a *bad* education, as I have also argued. This is to be contrasted with the kind of knowledge provided by the sexual sciences, which consists of individuating, confessional truths about the confessant's sexuality or desires. I now want to argue that there is a manner in which pornography educates us about individuated sexualities and desires in a manner comparable to the *scientia sexualis* after all; however, the sexualities or desires in question are not on the screen, nor are they related to “female pleasure” in general, as Williams argues. The desires and sexuality in question are those of the consumer, whether male or female. The pornography that viewers choose to watch, and the acts and actors that arouse them, reveal to viewers their desires and thus contribute to the identification and constitution of their sexualities. I am suggesting that something comparable to confession *is* found in pornography, but that it is found in the experience of consumption. This consumption, like confession, participates in the perverse implantation and the proliferation of sexualities.

Foucault argues in *The History of Sexuality* that far from there having been a repression of sexuality and perversions in the modern West, there has been a *proliferation* of sexualities and an *implantation* of perversions. Indeed, it is precisely those practices and discourses that were aimed at repressing perverse sexualities – those of the sexual sciences in particular – which led to this proliferation and implantation. In order to control perverse sexualities, modern Western societies believed that they had to first understand them, and thus set out to discover, categorize, and study individual sexual perversions. Ironically, the consequence of these activities was not a reduction of perversions but their explosive deployment. Studying sexual perversions meant studying the people who engaged in perverse acts and identifying these individuals according to their desires. In the process, according to Foucault, sexual identities were not so much revealed as discursively produced. This was an unanticipated but not entirely negative effect of the sexual sciences. Only by being identified by their so-called perversion, and by taking on this identity for themselves in the process, could sexual sub-cultures be established, giving their own meanings to the sexual identities according to which they had been categorized. Despite this result, Foucault is troubled that we are now each fixed to a specific sexuality and that this sexuality is taken as our identity, supposedly structuring everything that we do. For Foucault, discovering one's sexuality is not liberating: on the contrary, there is a lack of sexual freedom once a particular sexuality is implanted as who we are.

Importantly, Foucault's claim is *not* that sexualities or perversions proliferate within an individual's life, such that we as individuals now enjoy multiple and fluid

sexualities. On the contrary, Foucault's argument is that while sexualities proliferate at a society-wide level, each of us is tied down to a single sexuality. This means that there are now more options with respect to the sexual identities that we take on, but each of us tends to be reduced to just one of these options. Moreover, most sexualities are understood as "abnormalities" situated in relation to and with respect to their divergence from the norm: this norm is monogamous, heterosexual, romantic, and vanilla. Some of these divergences, such as male heterosexual promiscuity, may be more tolerated than others, such as pedophilia, however all are situated with respect to a norm that they thereby affirm. For Foucault, by identifying with any sexuality, whether the norm or any one of its variations, we reinscribe that norm.<sup>47</sup> This – and not straightforward homogenization – is how normalization works.

I stress these last points because Williams has misunderstood what Foucault means by the perverse implantation. For Williams, because the modern era is implanted and proliferating with perversions and sexualities (partly through the deployment of pornography), each of us inhabits multiple perversions or sexualities:

there can no longer be any such thing as fixed sexuality – male, female, or otherwise – [...] now there are proliferating sexualities. For, if the 'implantation of perversions' is, as Foucault says, an instrument *and* an effect of power, then as discourses of sexuality name, identify, and ultimately produce a bewildering array of pleasures and perversions, the very multiplicity of these pleasures and perversions inevitably works against the older idea of a single norm – an economy of the one – against which all else is measured.<sup>48</sup>

As a result, according to Williams, modern sexual identity has become multiple and fluid, undermining the notion that there is a single sexuality determined by a phallic "one" or norm. For Williams, the perverse implantation is to be understood as a positive Irigaray-esque disestablishment of sexual normalization, and she urges that we embrace "the liberatory potential contained in the very idea of an 'implantation of perversions.'"<sup>49</sup> The perverse implantation is positive for Williams, results in fluid sexualities, and opposes normalization, whereas for Foucault it is largely negative, results in fixed sexualities, and imposes a norm through the very implantation of abnormalities. While Williams states that the perverse implantation produces new pleasures and opposes the fixing of sexual identity, Foucault is clear that it does the very opposite of this, stating, on the same page where he mentions pornography and prostitution, that "the West has not been capable of inventing any

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<sup>47</sup> Ladelle McWhorter, *Bodies and Pleasures: Foucault and the Politics of Sexual Normalization* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999).

<sup>48</sup> Williams, 114-115.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

new pleasures, and it has doubtless not discovered any original vices. But it has defined new rules for the game of powers and pleasures. The frozen countenance of the perversions is a fixture of this game.”<sup>50</sup> What the perverse implantation does, through the workings of the sex industry as well as the sexual sciences, is to “fix” or “freeze” the face of our sexualities, circumscribing the kinds of pleasure that each of us can have by tying us down to specific sexual identities as taxonomized by the sexual sciences.

But how do pornography and prostitution implant perversions and contribute to the proliferation of sexualities? *Not* by being confessional, as Williams has claimed in the case of pornography, while setting aside the question of prostitution. Rather, I am claiming that the implantation, fixation, or freezing of sexual perversions and identities occurs in pornography *and* prostitution through the subject-forming practice of consumption. Consumers interviewed in *Pornified* indicate that porn consumption exposed them to a range of sexualities and allowed them to figure out what they were “into.” As one 20-year-old, male university student puts it: “I was able to learn what ‘my type’ is by looking around online – thin women with C- or D-sized breasts and long dark hair. Porn gave me a sense of what’s out there and exposed me to the kind of stuff I enjoy in real life.”<sup>51</sup> In this way, pornography educates viewers in the proliferation of sexualities from which they can choose, but then they *do* choose (or “discover”) their sexuality according to an analysis of their desires, as demonstrated by their consumption of pornography. Pornography thus allows viewers to realize a sexuality or taxonomical sexual type, providing them with the opportunity to identify with one of many kinds of sexuality. Each man interviewed in *Pornified* quickly states what his type of pornography is, and often what his type of porn star is. Now he knows the sites that specialize in the things he likes. Every time he types in what he wants to see in his search engine, he self-consciously reaffirms and reinscribes his sexual type. It therefore seems that pornography allows consumers to experiment with different kinds of pleasures that might not otherwise have been available to them and thus allows for a proliferation of sexualities; however, pornographic consumption also contributes to an identification with one kind of sexuality. Consumption, like confession, is thus productive of ontologies, or is one of the many ways in which we identify who we are.

Other pornography-consumers say that they only ever consumed a particular type of pornography because of the sexuality with which they already identified or wished to identify by the time they had access to pornography. One man with whom I spoke consumes pornography on a daily basis and told me that he has only ever watched heterosexual mainstream pornography. He too states that he has a

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<sup>50</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 48.

<sup>51</sup> Paul, 16.



“type”: heterosexual pornography featuring women with large, natural breasts. From the start, he was wary of looking at any other kinds of pornography for fear of being influenced by them. If anything “abnormal” comes onto the screen when he is consuming pornography – such as a transsexual, or male homosexual activity – he immediately closes the window and searches for something else, not so much because the image turns him off but because he does not want to be turned on by it. This consumer does not want to explore alternative sexualities or to identify with anything other than “normal” and “straight,” and thus vigilantly avoids non-“normal” pornography sites. This man’s exclusive consumption of heterosexual mainstream porn is informed by his identification with and desire for normalcy. At the same time, his preference for straight porn probably does more than simply reflect his sexual identity, but shores up and reinscribes it. The act of shutting the window when anything “abnormal” comes on screen surely reaffirms his sense of himself as “normal” and “straight” every time. Likewise, a person with “abnormal” desires who consumes non-mainstream pornography engages in an activity which causes him to self-consciously identify with what he himself will understand as an “abnormal” sexuality.

Arguably, when sexual initiation and exploration occurs in a more reciprocal and less consumerist context, or in the physical presence of other human beings whose services one has not purchased, the individual is more likely to respond to the desires and limitations placed on him by the other person(s) in the sexual relation. There are thus limits to what he can experience, or on the kind of sexual consumption he can identify with through his practice, but also, in a non-consumerist sexual encounter, there are other people’s desires to respond to which may go beyond what the individual thought to be his own desires, but in response to which he may experience new pleasures. In contrast, pornography – like prostitution – allows the consumer to stipulate, dictate or select exactly what he wants every time, and this facilitates falling into a specific typology. As in the prostitute-client encounter, there can always be surprises in what happens in a pornographic film, but then one can quickly shut the window, stop or fast-forward the DVD, and choose something else. The fact that the options are almost unlimited with pornography – especially with internet pornography – and that this is a consumerist rather than a reciprocal sexual activity, in which the object of sexual desire is merely a means to one’s (orgasmic) ends, means both that the individual has more options and that he can have exactly the option he wants every time and nothing but that option if he so chooses. Although the sex industry opens up many new possibilities, it may ultimately and paradoxically curtail the potential for surprise, novelty, and sexual exploration, thus limiting rather than setting free. According to Paul’s study and my own discussions with consumers of porn, men who have consumed pornography over a period of years can no longer fantasize

without it, and nor can they be aroused without pornography or real-life sexual performances which emulate pornography. Sociologist Michael Kimmel has found that “male sexual fantasies have become increasingly shaped by the standards of porn.”<sup>52</sup> I would argue that this is increasingly true of female sexual fantasies as well, or at least of female sexual behavior as it strives to fulfill the new norms of male desire. This indicates pornography’s power to shape our sexual imaginations in ways that constrain rather than open up to new possibilities.

As Foucault has shown in the case of confession, we may engage in an activity, such as the consumption of pornography, in the belief that we are liberating our sexuality, when in fact we are limiting that sexuality, binding it to just one form of sex-desire. In this sense, although in a very different manner, consuming pornography, like hiring prostitutes, really is comparable to what the sexual sciences do according to Foucault’s reading, or is part of the “perverse implantation.” In so far as pornography may also be seen as an erotic art in its offering of technical sexual expertise, it is perhaps an art which we do better to eschew in its current mainstream forms, whether professional or amateur, since the education it provides is phallogocentric, masculinist, and normalizing. Returning to Foucault’s statement, cited above, that he should have contrasted the sexual sciences not with Eastern *ars erotica* but with ancient Greek technologies of self-care, I would suggest that what we need to do is to explore sexual technologies that function as cares of the self, or, alternatively, as *ars erotica* which conjoin with *techne tou biou* rather than with the *scientia sexualis*. Although this is a subject that I must develop further elsewhere, I suspect that certain alternative pornographies already function in such a way. What I have argued is thus not an absolute critique of all pornography or of all uses of pornography, but rather only of mainstream porn and of the specific ways in which it tends to be used *not* for the exploration of bodies and pleasures but for “discovering” and satisfying supposedly pre-given sex-desire.

### Conclusions

This paper has argued that it is because the mechanism of consumption works in a manner similar to confession – and *not* because pornography is a confessional discourse or a sexual science as Williams has claimed – that Foucault listed pornography and prostitution along with medicine and psychiatry in his discussion of the perverse implantation in *The History of Sexuality*. Whereas Williams has to replace the word “prostitution” with the word “law” in her reference to this passage in order to support her view of pornography as confessional, my account of consumption requires no such manipulation and can explain why Foucault includes prostitution in his list of normalizing sexual practices. Similarly, whereas Williams needs to strain the definition of confession in order to see pornography as a

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 27.

confessional practice, my focus on consumption more easily makes sense of how both pornography and prostitution work. Understood as practices of consumption rather than confession, pornography and prostitution, like psychiatry and medicine, are part of the proliferation of sexualities and the perverse implantation: they are, in their current mainstream forms and uses, normalizing rather than liberating sexual practices. In the last part of this paper I have indicated how these processes of normalization, proliferation, and implantation might take place in the cases of pornography and prostitution. Finally, I have indicated that pornography need not function in this normalizing way, and that non-mainstream or alternative forms and uses of pornography may already function more positively as *techne tou biou* or as non-normalizing *ars erotica*.