

## **ESRC seminar series on Complicating the Debates about the Sexualisation of Culture**

### **Seminar 3: Representations, power, pleasure and leisure**

*November 5th 2010 King's College, London*

#### **PROGRAMME**

10.15-10.30 **Registration**

10.30-10.45 **Introduction and welcome**  
**(Rosalind Gill, Meg Barker, Jessica Ringrose, Emma Renold)**

10.45-11.45 **Tim Kurz**

**Empowerment and the pole : the reinvention of pole dancing as a recreational activity**

11.45-12.45 **Kaye Mitchell**

**Raunch vs. Prude: Contemporary Sex Blogs and Erotic Memoirs by Women**

12.45-2.15 **LUNCH at Thai Square Restaurant**

2.15-3.15 **Julia Long**

***'The most important battle': Pornification as a motivating factor for young feminist activists***

3.15-4.30 **Workshop: Creatively engaging with sexualisation debates**

**Facilitated and led by Meg Barker**

4.30-4.45 **Refreshments**

4.45- 5.45 **Sharif Mowlabocus**

***"Get Paid for Showing Your Naughty Bits": Amateur Pornography and the Rhetoric of Social Media***

5.45 -7.00 PM **WINE RECEPTION**

**Launch of *Gaydar Culture* (Ashgate, 2010) by Sharif Mowlabocus and *me maskuline exhibition* (curated by Alex Brew)**

# Abstracts

Kaye Mitchell

## Raunch vs. Prude: Contemporary Sex Blogs and Erotic Memoirs by Women

This paper analyses two contemporary erotic memoirs by women, Belle de Jour's *Intimate Adventures of a London Call Girl* (2005) and Abby Lee's *Girl With A One-Track Mind* (2006), both of which began life as blogs. Situating them, briefly, in relation to previous erotic memoirs and fiction by women such as Pauline Réage's *Story of O* and Catherine Millet's *Sexual Life of Catherine M*, I consider questions of genre and materiality in the move from blog to book, and examine the texts in the light of recent popular feminist writings on the sexualisation of girls and young women. The apparently polarized notions of 'raunch' and 'prude' are shorthand for what I'm positing as the continued 'double-bind' of female sexuality. This double-bind takes various forms – in fact it may amount to multiple double-binds: the inexplicability of female sexual agency (and hence its transformation into more obviously 'masculine' forms which may then be self-defeating); the simultaneity of desire and shame in both the acting out and representation of female sexuality; and the lack of available sexual subject positions in mainstream culture aside from the reductive, polarized positions of virgin/whore – or, in contemporary parlance, 'raunch' or 'prude', 'slag' or 'drag'.

The paper also looks at the positioning of these stories (and, by extension, of female sexuality and its expression) in relation to capitalism/the market. This goes beyond arguing that female sexuality is, or has been, increasingly commodified in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century; suggesting that it has become increasingly difficult to conceive of and experience sexuality aside from its commercial manifestations and forms (e.g. pornography and prostitution), and that some notion of consumption is involved even in so-called 'private' expressions of desire. Desirability is markedly part of an economy of exchange and these books comprise further evidence of the penetration of capitalism into the sphere of personal life.

Having analysed both texts' engagement with feminism, and their treatment of romance, lesbianism, and the regulations governing female sexual conduct (both memoirs provide 'rules' or sex 'guides' for the reader to follow), the paper then evaluates the extent to which the boom in women's erotic memoirs (in book or blog form) is symptomatic of a persisting belief in sexuality as the *truth of identity*. Sexuality, as it is figured here, is still being positioned as 'the secret', as the essence or core of subjectivity, which perhaps explains why *the memoir*, as an attempt to communicate and constitute a 'self' through writing, has for women increasingly become the *erotic memoir*. The books acquire their titillation factor from the 'exploitation' and revelation of this 'secret' and, I argue, this amounts to both an *under-valuation* of sex, transforming it into discourse, and an *over-valuation* of sex, particularly as far as women are concerned.

The paper concludes by offering an alternative to the mainstream, commercial, compliant depictions of female sexuality in *Girl* and *Belle de Jour*, considering the Bitchy Jones and Purrversatility blogs as presenting alternative angles on female sexual agency, power and desire in a space and format that resist automatic assimilation into the confessional 'market' of the erotic memoir. In this way I find some grounds for optimism in the potential of the sex blog to facilitate the discussion of female sexuality in a popular, public forum.

**Dr. Kaye Mitchell**

English and American Studies

University of Manchester

Oxford Road

Manchester M13 9PL

Email: [kaye.mitchell@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:kaye.mitchell@manchester.ac.uk)

Tel: 0161 306 1784

***'The most important battle':***

**Pornification as a motivating factor for young feminist activists**

*[Pornification] is the most important battle that I want to be involved in. I mean, that is the key to everything.* (Roberta; Activist, London Feminist Network)

The first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen a resurgence of feminist anti-porn activism in the UK, with groups such as OBJECT, Anti-Porn London and EM Fems launching campaigns against Playboy, lads mags and the proliferation of lap-dancing clubs. This resurgence of UK activism is driven largely by young women in their twenties and early thirties, motivated by their anger and distress at what they see as the impact of the mainstreaming of pornography and the sex industry within their everyday lived experience.

This paper examines the motivations of this new generation of anti-porn feminists. In particular, I will look at what activists say about the ways in which pornography and the sex industry permeate and influence their experience of leisure and intimacy, in relation to public space, entertainment, technology, consumerism and personal relationships. The paper utilises social movement literature and feminist theory in order to explore how these

young women describe and theorise their own experiences, and to development an argument as to the significance of their activism.

The paper draws on my doctoral research, in which I use qualitative methods to research feminist anti-pornography activism in the 21st century. The research involved ethnographic studies of two campaign groups, and twenty-three semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted amongst activists across the UK.

### **Biography**

I am a final year doctoral student at London South Bank University, and a feminist activist. My background is in gender equality policy in central and local government, and I have also worked in the voluntary sector and education.

### **Julia Long**

#### **PhD Research Student**

#### **London South Bank University**

[longj2@lsbu.ac.uk](mailto:longj2@lsbu.ac.uk)

**07979 654440**

### **Workshop: Creatively engaging with sexualisation debates**

#### **Facilitated and led by Meg Barker**

In the academic context of this seminar series, and similar events, we tend to engage with debates (such as those around objectification and agency) at the level of spoken debate and theoretical discussion. However, at the same time, these debates evoke strong emotional and personal responses in many of us. These responses are inseparable from the 'rational', public arguments we are making, but tend to go unacknowledged. Such problematic rational/emotional and public/private splits are deeply embedded within the conventional gender dichotomy, with the former strongly privileged over the latter as 'masculine' rather than 'feminine'. Therefore these splits are worthy of some critical questioning at an event which is so invested in challenging restrictive representations of gender and sex.

The aim of this workshop is to provide a space for exploration of more emotional and personal aspects of the sexualisation debates, recognising that these cannot simply be separated off from our academic and theoretical responses, or our public presentations of our opinions. The idea for the workshops was sparked by discussions at the end the very first seminar in the series, where it

seemed that the room crackled with emotion and personal resonance which was at once both apparent between, and hidden behind, the words we were speaking.

The workshop draws on ideas from Buddhist mindfulness, social constructionism and existential phenomenology (all of which aim to dismantle dualisms like masculine/feminine, rational/emotional, and public/private). The concept of creative engagement is proposed as an alternative to *either* avoidance of uncomfortable feelings *or* unconsidered expression of them. Can such feelings be creatively engaged with to further empathic understanding of ourselves and our positions, rather than being tightly grasped, or hurled away from us? Could such an engagement enable more compassionate dialogue beyond the 'us and them' of heated debate?

In this workshop, creative engagement will be explicitly encouraged through the use of phenomenological methods. In small groups we will each create a model of our experience of the sexualisation debates, and where we feel we sit in relation to them. If we like we can also adapt that model to imagine how would might like the situation to change. Models will be shared within small groups, with an emphasis on each person being listened to and their experience understood (rather than returning to the debates themselves). This may involve some relating of our personal histories of the debates. At the end of the workshop each group will be encouraged to feed back how they found the exercise, and to share any ideas about where we might go from here in creatively engaging with this debate on different levels. Ground-rules will be agreed at the start of the session and are likely to include: commitment to listen to each person's experience, nobody sharing more than they are comfortable with, and confidentiality within the group on the day.

### **Biography**

I am a writer, therapist, lecturer, activist and researcher. My own work focuses on intimate relationships and sexualities, particularly in relation to the conventional 'rules' of these, and the representations and experiences of those who step outside those in various ways. I have written books on non-monogamous relationships, sadomasochism, and psychotherapy. I have also been involved in activist events around bisexuality and polyamory. I have a great interest in self-care practices and how these may further self-understanding and collaboration over conflict.

**Meg Barker**

**Lecturer in Psychology, and Therapist**

**Open University, and Dilemma Consultancy**

[m.j.barker@open.ac.uk](mailto:m.j.barker@open.ac.uk)

## **“Get Paid for Showing Your Naughty Bits”: Amateur Pornography and the Rhetoric of Social Media.**

**Sharif Mowlabocus - University of Sussex**

The relationship between media technologies and sexual representation is both well-established and well-documented (Macnair, 1996; O’Toole, 1999; Attwood, 2007 Hardy, 2008). Developments in communication technology (printing press, photography, cinema, telephony, television, VHS, DVD, Internet) run parallel with shifts in the production, consumption, format and aesthetics of pornographic material. This relationship continues today as technologies of social and participatory media are becoming utilized in the manufacturing, distribution and accessing of sexually explicit objects. This paper considers the (continuing) rise of online amateur pornography and critically engages with the politics of what might best be termed “porn 2.0”. Focusing on issues of labour and subjectivity it discusses the promise of a new pornographic economy, in which digital spaces provide for the articulation of a diverse range of desires, tastes, bodies and practices. This economy is marked by an increasing porosity between the established categories of “consumer”, “producer”, “performer” and “distributor” and by the establishment of new ludic interstices that allow amateur producers to play along the boundaries between such categories.

While acknowledging the political potential that this new economy offers users, the paper utilizes the work of Graham (2000), Lazzarato (2001) and Coté & Pybus (2007) to temper claims of pornographic emancipation and suggests that new forms of amateur pornography are framed by older mechanisms of production and consumption. Through an examination of *XTube* – a distribution site for amateur porn – the paper identifies the tension that exists between the rhetoric of freedom, control and play found in many of the site’s amateur homepages and the capitalist imperative found elsewhere on the site, which urges amateurs to become productive and efficient labourers by privileging the desires of their consumers over and above their own. The paper concludes by identifying how and why questions of agency and objectification must remain central to discussions of sexual representation, not least in contexts where amateurs are being offered the ‘freedom’ to engage in precarious labour, through the rhetoric of Web 2.0.

### **References**

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- O’Toole, Laurence (1999) *Pornotopia: Porn, Sex, Technology and Desire*. London: Serpent’s Tail.