The **NEW PORN**

*More and more women are watching it. Are you?* By Hannah Betts

Time was, a woman probably knew what she thought about pornography – and knew that it wasn’t her thing. Porn was, if you’ll forgive the expression, an in-your-face, male-orientated phenomenon – a world of ugly shoes and uglier sexual politics – in which women were object rather than subject. Many, like me, were theoretically pro-porn, being liberal and wary of censorship. But, in practice, porn remained an unvisited world: something our menfolk might indulge in that retained an unappealing, if not unsavoury status.

Yet something is shifting in pornography, and that is the arrival of a genuine female presence – something considerably beyond Sam Taylor-Johnson’s cinematic version of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, released this month. Porn filmmakers such as Petra Joy and former Lib Dem candidate Anna Span have been at work for 10 years, making content that is “female friendly”. That label, by the by, is much resisted. Enthusiasts prefer *artcore, indie porn, fair trade or real sex* – wags opting for free range.

Women are appreciating porn, and talking about it: take Kitty Stryker, a 30-year-old American writer and performer, who founded the Ladies High Tea and Pornography Society, which has chapters in Britain and America. Or Professor Feona Attwood, of Middlesex University, and Dr Clarissa Smith, of the University of Sunderland, editors of a brand-new academic journal, *Porn Studies*. So far the journal has had more female contributors than male. Not only are women directing and producing this porn – let’s call it New Porn – but, as I discover, they’re watching it. One acquaintance tells me that she and her friends are addicted to the unabashedly titled *Nubilefilm.xxx*, from which a typical clip might be titled “Romantic Couple >
Makes Passionate Sex”. Averagely lasting 10 minutes, it usually stars an urban, if tacky, couple performing in this order: smiling, kissing, penetration. My friend explains: “It works because it’s not as violent as trad stuff; slower, more aesthetic, smaller booted, not obsessed with anal. You’re not worrying about her getting an injury.”

For the consumer of the New Porn, romantic, real and French (?) are apparently key search terms, as is lesbian. A colleague recently attended a dinner party at which two comrades – one in art, one fashion – openly shared their enthusiasm for SapphicErotica.com (real breasts, beige sofas, exposed brickwork, a lot of cunnilingus), much to the astonishment of the assembled company. “Although straight, they prefer the female nature of this material as it is less aggressive, with better colours and interiors. Both are in their late thirties, married, with children. It fills a space in their sex lives.”

For women, there may be straightforward biological reasons why one might find oneself suddenly interested in dirty downloads. My 37-year-old sister reveals that pregnancy upped her pornography intake: “You’re hornier, but you need to feel in control of your body. Then, it’s a godsend if you’ve been through a difficult birth because it lets you reclaim your vagina on your own terms.”

Journalist Clover Stroud (39, married, four children) caused a sensation when she confessed to porn usage in *The Times*. In the article, she wrote, “I know porn can be degrading, so I’m careful about where I buy it in much the same way I do my best not to buy clothes produced in sweat shops… When I met my husband… talking about porn seemed normal… So in much the same way that he knew that *Some Like It Hot* was my favourite film… he also knew that… I sometimes watched porn.”

Stroud maintained that she is by no means alone: “When I ask most of my closest girlfriends – a teacher, a mother, another journalist, an artist and a lawyer – they say they watch it regularly, alone or with their partner, and some more frequently than their partners.” Celebrities also number among the New Porn’s audience. When *Lovelace*, the biopic of porn actress Linda Lovelace, was released, its star Amanda Seyfried declared herself an adult-movie fan – specifically namechecking Kink.com, a site that caters to “alternative sexuality” and fans of female-friendly porn. “Some of it’s produced in a way that’s safe and positive, like Kink, run by women in San Francisco,” said Seyfried. “That’s a beautiful thing. Why not?”

Why not, indeed? The women I discuss the subject with view porn online for solo pleasure. Evie, 33, an ethereal-looking businesswoman, lives with her boyfriend. “We tried watching together, but found it cringeey. I watch it on my own to masturbate, also to fantasise about while having sex. All of it involves public humiliation. I look for a video that shows women being submissive in a very public forum and enjoying multiple partners (mainly male). I am envious of how liberal these women are. From what I gather, it’s not scripted or staged. These women sign up for the experience and then are a ‘submissive’ almost for the day. I would love to do that in my head, but in reality I would never have the balls.”

“I use Redtube,” Evie goes on, “I have no idea how you would define it. The only thing I could liken it to would be the TV series *Rome*. It’s pretty women-friendly, in that the majority of films have a female dom. Porn lets me imagine my sex life to be far kinkier than it actually is, and makes me feel I’m not too vanilla. I’ve told close girlfriends, but the only time I tried to talk about it with the BF he reacted negatively and thought my choice was weird!” Evie’s “gateway” to porn was “smutty books” – fiction superior in quality to what the aficionados I speak to refer to as the “insultingly poor quality” *Fifty Shades*. Still, in terms of a sea change in acceptability, EL James’s book played its part, as did mass vibrator ownership.

The greatest popularising factor behind the New Porn has, of course, been the internet. Where once hardcore was confined to top shelves, today more than a third of the net is made up of adult material. Britain may just have introduced rules prohibiting the online representation of female ejaculation, and certain modes of oral sex upon a woman (cue a mass “face-sit-in” protest outside Parliament in December), but the global internet porn industry is unlikely to be affected. Porn sites boast more monthly visitors than Twitter, Amazon and Netflix combined. It was inevitable that female-focused projects such as Xconfessions and Lustcinema would spring up. This looks destined only to increase. An analogy would be the gaming industry: 30 years ago a test-bedroom-only zone, now broadly 50-50.

Another friend, Louisa, a 43-year-old design professional, confesses, “I started watching after I divorced and became a single mother. I only saw boyfriends every other weekend. Pornography was a distraction and a way of taking a healthy libido. I watched when I was bored, lonely, horny. I’ve never watched with my second husband and wouldn’t want to. I consider it a completely private pleasure. Family life means I’m not having sex as often or in as extreme a way as I would like. Meanwhile, porn is like a filthy weekend, right there on my laptop, that doesn’t cost anything.”

Louisa’s pornography tastes, like her fashion tastes, vary: “I like trad porn, and woman-friendly, and sometimes amateur as it’s quite funny. I don’t like nasty violence, or a sense the woman is in pain, scared, or even pretending too overtly. I don’t like a lot of over-the-top orgasmic screaming and I like the sex to seem real. I like a bit of light BDSM [bondage, domination, sadism and masochism], but nothing too extreme. I also don’t like the girls to be too beautiful – rather like in >
real life, I don’t want to think of them as a threat. I want to see myself in them. I enjoy watching a man giving a woman oral sex. I don’t really like watching anal. I like there to be a sense of some connection between the actors, even if it is faintly absurd. There is a lot of porn expressing female desire.”

One of the key players behind the New Porn is 38-year-old Erika Lust (real name Erika Hallqvist), a writer and director based in Barcelona with her partner of 15 years and producer, Pablo, and two young daughters. Although Swedish, Lust boasts a Heidi-style Alpine freshness: sassy, unaffected, with an infectious enthusiasm. Despite being pro-porn in theory, she didn’t relish any she saw around her: “I had the same reaction many women have… I didn’t identify with anything I saw. The women did not look like they were enjoying themselves, and the sexual situations were ridiculous. I wanted to know: where was my lifestyle, my values, my sexuality?”

So she made her own. Her award-winning debut, The Good Girl (2004), a skit on the delivery-man-who-really-delivers scenario, was downloaded 2 million times in its first few months. Since then, she has produced four features and three volumes of a crowdsourced viewer-fantasy project, XConfessions.com. Lust defines her genre as indie erotica: “My films are shot from a female perspective with female pleasure in mind, so I guess you could call them feminine and also feminist.”

As with other “free range” pornography producers, Lust makes films that are “positive and happy”, saying, “In production, femininity and feminism impregnates everything from set decoration to the wardrobe, hair and make-up, situations and lighting, mainly because I work with an all-female crew. Smart women need a new adult cinema free of the old clichés of desperate nannies, fuck bunnies, whores and insatiable nurses.”

Lust is in a better position than most to answer Freud’s question, “What does a woman want?” “They want a story they can engage with, relate to and imagine themselves in. They want to see real sex, real pleasure, not submissive women being bent over backwards.” Of course, women are not the only ones who feel stymied by traditional, heterosexual porn. One divorced male friend confides, “The last three women I slept with all cried ‘rape me’ or ‘hit me’ while we were having sex. I feel as if were being co-opted into something hideous.” A single male lawyer of 27 tells me, “I increasingly watch women’s porn. It’s shot and plotted better and is therefore more arousing.” (“Typical,” snorts a female friend, “they have to take over everything.”)

Here I must make a confession, and not of the XConfession variety. Despite being hotly supportive of the genre, I find the New Porn a total turn-off. There are good reasons for this: film is the medium I find least engaging; I am not a great wanker. My feeling about intercourse is much the same as my feeling about sport: very happy to do it, bored witless by watching it.

For the purposes of this feature I try, believe me, I try: I watch alone, I watch with a chap, I watch with a woman. Finally, I watch with an extremely forgiving couple. “More tattoos than a Shane Meadows film,” sniffs Ben, 41, a porn-shunning entrepreneur. “The thing is,” notes his girlfriend, Alex, a psychologist, “soft porn is so much part of advertising that this stuff seems unsophisticated.”

Personally, after three nights solid on the New Porn, I am in vagina shock. A straight – and I now realise, extremely straight – 43-year-old, I have barely looked at my own. I now understand the fruit analogy, while the oyster analogy is somewhat forced down our throats. The whole thing has the air of a natural-history programme about sea anemones. We sit, watching the computer screen from behind our hands: “Oh my god, it’s quivering. Is it going to squirt? Is it? Is it? Is it? Christ almighty, that I need to unsee.”

Others are clearly more resilient. One woman I speak to, Georgia, a London-based filmmaker, visual artist and porn aficionado, may even become part of this movement. Endless-legged, with a Mugleresque style and glint to the eye, she tells me, “Youporn is my go-to. I enjoy group sex, male/female couple sex, fetish scenes and lesbian sex. It really is mood-dependent for me. Anything from humiliation and some really filthy gang bang, via some beautifully shot lesbian scene, to some dodgy Russian video.”

But what about the “fashion”, I demand, the interiors and all-consuming naughtiness? “I find them amusing,” says Georgia with a laugh, “maybe I should go into directing porn? The fashion and art direction would be my first change, then the music, camera work, lighting and scripts. I do think something’s missing in the porn world, but I’m still working on exploring what that is.” As ever more women are, it would seem.