

## **Courting consumers and legitimating exploitation: the representation of commercial sex in television documentaries**

### **Introduction**

As numerous commentators have noted, there has been an explosion of sexually explicit imagery in popular culture since the early 1990s. On television, this has led to the birth of a new genre, a pornography-documentary hybrid---or “docuporn”--- that has come to dominate much late-night scheduling on Britain’s terrestrial channels. Indeed, Jane Arthurs (2004) notes that in 1999 alone, 230 sex documentaries were shown on Britain’s five main channels (p. 156) and that, post-9pm, the vast majority of these programmes could be categorised as “sex industry ‘docuporn’; that is, they are intended to be sexually arousing” (p.94) (1). Despite this proliferation, Arthurs is one of the few feminist academics to have seriously considered these programmes, yet she too shies away from the “sex industry ‘docuporn’” that dominates the late-night schedules using current affairs and “auteur” documentaries as her case studies (pp.101--109). This article is a response to and development of Arthurs’ work focusing on the kind of stories about commercial sex that emerge in the docuporn format. I am defining docuporn as a reality-based entertainment genre that takes the sex industry as its subject and offers sexual display and sexual talk as its key attractions. My analysis of this genre seeks to denaturalise the equation of women with commercial sex that is apparent both in the programmes themselves and in Arthurs’ response to them, and makes the case for retaining a central focus on gender (rather than on women) in feminist responses to both television and commercial sex.

I begin by briefly sketching the classic feminist positions on pornography and considering how recent shifts in pornography research towards an analysis of the pornographic text have limited the nature of feminist enquiry in a way that is broadly consistent with the normalising of pornography in mainstream culture as just another form of representation. This provides the context for an analysis of docuporn that is concerned not with sexually explicit content per se, but, rather with the stories these programmes tell about commercial sex and, specifically, with the absence of the “john”---the buyer of commercial sex---in these stories (2). One of the implications of this, I argue, is that these programmes court the viewer as a present and future consumer of commercial sex. My central argument is, therefore, that divorcing supply from demand---as these programmes do, and as certain shifts in academic thinking and research about pornography and prostitution advocate---involves the negation of the gendered inequalities and exploitation that make commercial sex, in its currently dominant forms, possible.

### **Feminism and the sex industry**

The nature of the relationship between commercial sex (pornography in particular) and violence against women has been debated and contested within the feminist movement for more than twenty years and remains a deeply divisive issue.

For anti-pornography feminists, pornography is violence against women---literally, not metaphorically---and it is this assertion that has made pornography central both to media / violence debates and to feminist anti-violence work. Anti-pornography feminists have also mapped the relationships between pornography and other forms of commercial and non-commercial sexual exploitation: prostitution, lap-

dancing, domestic violence, rape, child sexual abuse. Choice---or, rather, women's lack of meaningful choice within patriarchy---has been a central concern and anti-pornography feminists have documented the experiences of women coerced into and harmed by their (or their abuser's) participation in pornography and other forms of commercial sex. Women's personal testimonies of abuse in and through pornography have been central to anti-pornography activism and writing (as to feminist anti-violence work more generally), the experiences of the woman formerly known as "Linda Lovelace" being perhaps the most famous and oft-cited example (Lovelace with McGrady 1981). However, there has always been a concern to link the experiences of women in pornography and prostitution with a more general analysis of the position of women under patriarchy, to make these personal narratives political. Of particular importance here, anti-pornography feminists have made the link between pornography and prostitution explicit, understanding that pornography, at least in its audio-visual formats, is nothing more or less than filmed prostitution. The camera legitimates the prostitution, according it constitutional protection as "speech" and rendering invisible the harm done to women used, abused and consumed in its making and to those harmed by male consumers who internalise a pornographic view of sex.(3)

In contrast, the "anti-censorship" umbrella shelters feminists concerned that the anti-pornography movement shuts down the possibilities of female pleasure and agency, and, if successful, would increase state-censorship. For these feminists, violence and exploitation are not key concerns. Rather, this work typically focuses on questions relating to freedom of speech, women's rights to sexual self-expression and fulfilment, fantasy, and desire. Where anti-pornography feminists have focused on coercion and harm, anti-censorship feminists have documented women's active and

consensual participation in the sex industry, similarly utilising personal narratives in support of their analysis. The contexts and intertexts that are of most importance here are other forms of sexual representation, entertainment, leisure, and women's work. Indeed, the reframing of prostitution as work (and of prostituted women as sex workers)---which Arthurs (2004) also adopts in her discussion of sex industry documentaries---has been one of the central repercussions of this approach. From this perspective, the blurring of boundaries between the pornographic and the mainstream demonstrates the difficulty of defining and regulating pornography and commercial sex, particularly as the platforms of delivery become more varied, providing a range of possibilities for consumption but also creating possibilities for women as producers, consumers, and participants in an increasingly diverse sex industry.(4)

The anti-pornography and anti-censorship positions are typically constructed as an opposition, a “tired binary” (Jane Juffer 1998) that has dominated feminist debates about pornography, and commercial sexual exploitation more generally, since the 1980s.(5) Damagingly, this opposition has been too often constructed in personal terms, either in relation to the feminist critics themselves (much of the literature on both sides is almost vitriolic in its personalised attacks on the “other” side) or in relation to the women within the commercial sex industry whose experiences are pitted against each other rather than being used to construct a complex and multi-facted picture of the reality of the industry. As a result, pornography and commercial sex more generally have been conceptualised as issues for and about women in relative isolation from men. Outside of debates focused specifically on pornography, radical feminists have sought to rectify this by refocusing on the demand, rather than supply, side of the equation. Perhaps the most successful outcome of this has been the

criminalising of the buying of sex in Swedish law, and on-going academic work by Melissa Farley, amongst others, has also sought to shed light on the nature of demand.

However, in relation to pornography, the consumer still remains fairly invisible. The shift in academic work on pornography has instead been a textual one and this has two significant implications for this article. Firstly, in analyses such as those produced by Juffer (1998) or included in the anthology Porn Studies (Linda Williams 2004a), “pornography” as a textual category is allied with, and understood in relation to, other cultural artefacts. So, for example, the essays in Porn Studies collectively point to the permeability of pornography by examining its links with other, more legitimate, texts from the Starr report to avant-garde film. In collecting detailed readings of individual texts, Porn Studies constructs its object of study as a text---rather than, as anti-pornography feminists like Susan Cole (1989) advocate, as a practice---divorced from gendered exploitation and commercial imperatives. This is despite the fact that Williams’ introduction suggests that it is precisely pornography’s broad-reach and gigantic profits that make it worthy of scholars’ serious attention (Williams 2004b, pp.1--2). Secondly, in foregrounding the text and questions of representation, pornography’s links to other forms of sexual practice and exploitation are downplayed. Abusive production and consumption practices (key concerns for anti-pornography feminists) largely disappear from the agenda in this context. This has also resulted in the marginalisation of any kind of structural analysis of the existence and practice of pornography. The fact that the vast majority of pornography is of women slips below the radar at the same time as the buyers, and often even the producers, of pornography increasingly escape scrutiny in academic writing. With the emphasis on connections to other forms of representation and the marginalisation of connections to other forms of real-life violence and

inequality, the object of study also becomes sanitised as pornography that is violent, degrading, or dehumanising in content, that depicts real or imagined rape, or that is of children, is largely ignored (Boyle, 2006).

Part of the reason for this shift in academic responses to pornography has been the increasing sexualisation---some would say pornographisation---of mainstream culture that makes it increasingly difficult to define the boundaries of pornography and so of “porn studies”. In this context, we might think of the mainstreaming of soft-core in men’s magazines such as Loaded, FHM, or Zoo; the dominance of erotic dramas, thrillers, and reality shows on late-night TV; or the use of real (i.e. non-simulated) sex acts in art-films including Shortbus (2006), Nine Songs (2004), Intimacy (2001) and Romance (1999). At the same time as the mainstream has become more sexualised, the acceptability of pornography and commercial sex is heralded by everyday media references. Alongside the proliferation of television documentaries about sex and the sex industry (the focus of this article), hard-core pornography is an increasingly legitimate subject in mainstream film (e.g. The Girl Next Door [2004]), mainstream sitcoms and dramas are peppered with sniggering jokes about strippers and pornography (Friends is perhaps the most obvious example), and porn stars’ celebrity is becoming increasingly crossover.(6) In other words, the pornographisation of the mainstream can be seen both in the widespread visibility of sexually explicit representations outside what we normally recognise as pornography, and in the fascination with commercial sex and those who sell it in mainstream shows.

While the boundaries between pornography and the mainstream may be increasingly permeable there is, nevertheless, little doubt that “pornography” continues to function as both a conceptual and commercial category in popular discourse. For example, in May 2005, the UK men’s magazine Front published a

“Porn Issue”. While Front certainly makes use of the codes of pornography and takes an explicitly enthusiastic approach to porn in articles and advertising, the “Porn Issue” only works because Front is not made and sold as pornography. The use of porn as the subject-matter for a themed issue underlines this: Front may be about porn, but its more mainstream position allows the reader to consume Front publicly, legitimately, while “real” porn remains a “smutty secret”.(7)

Similarly, television documentary programmes about sex and the sex industry show pornographic sex (or a soft-core version thereof) but---even in their most exploitative forms---frame it within a discourse of investigation or education and make it available in cultural spaces not explicitly marked as pornographic. As noted above, the mid- to late-1990s saw a proliferation of late-night documentary programming about sex and the sex industry on British television. This context is slightly different than that in the US, where docuporn has been concentrated on subscription channels with these programmes then finding their way onto British free-to-air television. Shows imported from the US, such as G-String Divas (HBO 2000, screened in the UK on five), Family Business (Showtime 2003-2006; screened in the UK on Channel 4), and Cathouse (HBO 2002, 2003; Channel 4) take their place in the British schedule alongside commissioned series of more or less serious purpose: five’s Sex and Shopping (1998-2001); Channel 4’s Pornography: The Secret History of Civilisation (1999); BBC2’s Sex Empires (2003); ITV’s Personal Services (2003) or Sky One’s Porno Valley (2004). The variation in tone can partly be explained by Britain’s public service regulations that require that terrestrial broadcasters include in their schedules a certain proportion of “serious” factual programmes. Nevertheless, as Arthurs notes (2004, p.94), in the late-night schedule sexually-arousing docuporn usurps any more serious intent. I will return to the claim that sexual arousal is the

main goal of these programmes later, but for now I simply want to underline that the infotainment context encourages us to see commercial sex in relation to the leisure and entertainment industries and that recent academic work on pornography---with its emphasis on the permeability of the boundary between the pornographic and the mainstream and its use of textual analysis as its preferred method---is broadly in line with this.

The contemporary context is, therefore, characterised by a number of potentially contradictory factors. Explicit sexual representations and transactions are becoming more mainstream and pornography and other forms of commercial sex are marked as “legitimate” by their enthusiastic embrace in a variety of mainstream texts and contexts. Partly as a result of this, the violence and exploitation involved in (some) pornography and other forms of commercial sex is rarely visible in popular or academic accounts. Yet, mainstream texts still need to emphasise their own respectability by differentiating themselves from “pornography”. This context provides the backdrop for my analysis of docuporn.

However, it is important to stress that these are not the only representations of commercial sex on British television and not all television documentaries about sex and the sex industry are celebratory.(8) Arthurs (2004, pp.101--106) suggests that accounts critical of commercial sex (on British television at least) tend to concentrate on the web of links that connects the national sex industry to foreign “others” who invade national boundaries bringing violence, exploitation and disease with them. In this respect, the violence of the sex industry---and, indeed, its gendered power relations---are always kept at one remove from British society. Yet, even programmes critical of the sex industry---such as those in Channel 4’s The Dark Side of Pornography seasons (April 2005; May 2006)---struggle to sustain a critical tone in



the current climate. Partly, this is due to the overall scheduling context. For example, on 27th April 2005, Debbie Does Dallas Uncovered, a programme in 4's Dark Side season, was followed on the schedule by a late-night re-run of HBO's Cathouse, an unproblematically celebratory account of a legal brothel in Nevada.

Moreover, critical documentaries, like docuporn, also blur the boundaries between what is documentary and what is pornography in a crucial respect: that is, they equate women with pornography and pornography with sex. The framing of the sex industry as a women's concern has become so pervasive as to be virtually unquestioned and so the critical analysis of the sex industry provided in television documentaries can typically only go so far. Further, even the critical documentaries insist on interviewing the women in the spaces and costumes of the sex industry and include clips from pornographic films in an often decontextualised fashion that does little to further the documentary narrative. They also uncritically adopt the normalising and still highly contested language of "sex work" (see Jeffreys 1997 for a fuller discussion). What is particularly interesting about pornography-documentary hybrids, then, is that these programmes offer a commentary on commercial sex yet are themselves implicated in commercial sex practices. As I will go on to argue, this is particularly explicit in docuporn which typically functions as an extended advert for specific sexual products or "services". However, by adopting the conventions of other reality-based genres---in particular, the docusoap---and by focusing solely on the supply side of the equation, docuporn disguises this commercial imperative.

### **Supply and demand**

As noted above, docuporn displays a relentless focus on the supply side of the equation: that is, docuporn focuses on women and on women's bodies as though it is possible to understand commercial sex by understanding the motivations of those who sell it. This has become an almost commonsensical framing: in thinking about prostitution, the focus is the prostituted woman and, indeed, this emphasis is replicated in some feminist responses to media representations of commercial sex, including Jane Arthurs' otherwise valuable work (2004, 2006).

Moreover, this is an entirely individualistic understanding of supply. Supply is equated with the women who sell sex, and the broader "industrial" context in which men continue to dominate the positions of control (as brothel owners; as porn-directors/ producers/ distributors) and reap the largest financial benefits acts simply as a backdrop to the women's individual aspirations. Even when "pimp" characters appear---Dennis in Cathouse, Steve in Porno Valley---they are presented as benevolent patriarchs or shrewd but legitimate (and wealthy) businessmen and the power structure is never explicitly commented upon unless, for example, to emphasise porn-actresses greater earning power compared to their male co-stars.

This framing places prostitution (including pornography) as a job or lifestyle choice made by women. In some ways, this is itself a legacy of the feminist movement, as discussed above. However, while women's testimony was indeed an important aspect of early feminist work---particularly in relation to experiences of violence and sexual exploitation---feminists initially used such testimony to identify what women shared and used this collective understanding to build broader analyses of society. In other words, by bringing the personal into the public sphere, by making it the focus of discussion and analysis, feminists sought to understand its political and structural nature. In contrast, in docuporn the tendency is to resist explicitly political

(and, certainly, feminist) analysis in favour of personalising the political: taking a political issue (prostitution, pornography) and making it a personal story (Jenna's ambition to become the porn industry's biggest star). What is particularly pernicious about this from a feminist perspective is that this depoliticisation is itself legitimated by the genre's selective adoption of a liberal feminist discourse of agency, choice and empowerment. The logic appears to be that if this woman enjoys her participation in the sex industry---if she actively chooses to be involved and accrues personal benefits in terms of sexual pleasure, stardom, job satisfaction, and/or financial gain---then the question about who buys commercial sex is irrelevant.

Whilst docuporn is typically more explicit---both in word and image---than other fact-based television, the emphasis on the seller of commercial sex is shared by other formats. In particular, feminist critiques of the talk show offer a model for understanding the personalising of the political in docuporn. Feminist critics have, for instance, noted that the talk show creates a public space for women's speech, a space where women share their experiences and desires in a format that, in some ways, mirrors the consciousness-raising group (Lisa McLaughlin 1993, Sujata Moorti 2002). Moreover, the emphasis on personal experience in the talk show establishes women as the experts of their own lives. Both these arguments could also apply here. Arthurs (2004, p.92), for example, asks whether docuporn and related television documentaries may have feminist potential in that (like the talk show) they provide a voice to marginalised women and allow them to counter negative and victimising stereotypes of sex workers. Certainly, it is the women "workers" who are presented as the experts here: the programmes set the women up to act as "guides" bringing the uninitiated viewer/ john into their world and providing sex education along the way.

However, both in the talk show and in docuporn, these personal experiences are divorced from context, relentlessly focusing on the prostituted woman herself.

Importantly, this renders the demand side of commercial sex invisible, an issue that Sheila Jeffreys (1997, p.142) tackles in relation to academic literature on prostitution more generally:

“In the literature which concentrates on showing how women “choose” the johns are rarely mentioned at all. Prostitution appears to exist as a benign industry created to answer women’s need for a remunerative occupation, which continues to exist because women continue to “choose” it.”

Docuporn is, in many ways, an extension of the literature showing how women choose prostitution. Numerous individual documentaries and series provide portraits of women in prostitution, portraits in which men’s demand for commercial sex and the financial profits men accrue through their management and control of the industry are rarely explicitly examined.

The 2003 six-part ITV series Personal Services provides a fairly typical example of this process. In the words of the ITV press-release:

“Dispelling the myths behind prostitution, Personal Services discovers what life is really like for some of the thousands of women who sell sex for money. The programme meets the women behind the lace curtains of their suburban homes and discreetly located parlours, and provides an insight into a different type of “working-girl”. Six women who have turned their backs on conventional careers reveal what really goes on inside Britain’s sex industry.”

In this press-release, as in the programme itself, it is the women who bring prostitution into being: they are the ones who “sell sex for money” and who “turn their backs on conventional careers”. Framing commercial sex in these terms means

that the fundamentally unequal nature of the transaction---which depends upon a john seeing another human being as an object to be bought and sold---is invisible. Indeed, the johns are largely invisible in the genre and on the rare occasions when they do appear their anonymity is protected by distorting their image or voice. As an unidentifiable presence, these men---unlike the women they buy---are not held accountable for the decisions they make and their decisions are unquestioned, naturalised: their demand for a particular sexual “service” is not at issue, but the women’s willingness to supply it is. The virtual invisibility of johns is particularly striking when set against the role played by clients in docuporn’s close relation, the docu-soap. Whilst the emphasis in shows such as Airline (ITV, 1998--) may be similarly on the “workers” within the industry, nonetheless the personal stories, demands, complaints or requests of clients are often integral. As such, clients are not simply abstract problems to be solved by the regular cast but are identifiable and specific, though not recurring, characters whose demands (reasonable or otherwise) are certainly not above scrutiny and comment.

Further, the contrast between the individualised representation of supply and the diffuse and generalised implication of demand in docuporn suggests something of the inevitability and naturalness of buying sex. As in Williams’ introduction to Porn Studies (2004b), it is the sheer scale of consumption that is emphasised. So, for example, the opening voice-over of Porno Valley provides statistical evidence of the scale of consumption. In one episode we learn that porno valley “produces adult movies that are shown in half of all US hotel rooms and watched by half of all business travellers”, in another that it is “the production powerhouse behind the roughly 700,00 adult videos rented by Americans every year”. Yet, in these programmes the acts of consumption and the lives of the consumers are of little

interest beyond the occasional glimpses of anonymous fans at adult film conventions. Even in Cathouse, where the johns achieve a rare degree of visibility, it is notable that the men's desires---however unconventional---are not interrogated. Instead, the show most often returns to the women: who does what; why they do it; how much they charge for it; how much they like it; how many orgasms they have; what their families think about what they do. As a result, the gendered dynamic of consumption is rarely explicitly acknowledged and so questions about power can be evaded. Whilst it is unrealistic to expect a structural analysis of inequality to emerge in an entertainment format, it is nevertheless striking that programmes which are explicit in their detailing of women's sexual performances are so vague about who these performances are for. Note the gender-neutral language in the Porno Valley voice-over, for example---these are "adult" video watched by "business travellers" and "Americans"---and, indeed, the framing of commercial sex as "adult entertainment" is a common feature. It is the selling not the buying of sex that requires explanation and understanding; and so it is women, not men, who are typically the objects of investigation.

A further implication of the john's anonymity is that the women on-screen seem to be presenting themselves to the viewer rather than to a specific john. Indeed, it is a convention of docuporn that the viewer is invited into a specific sexualised place, whether it is "behind the lace curtains" of Britain's sex industry (Personal Services) or "over the hills and through the bush" to the San Fernando valley (Porno Valley). The programme provides the viewer with the means to travel without censure, to become an armchair sex-tourist at the invitation of women who are always ready and waiting for whatever kind of sex the john requires. Indeed, the emphasis on waiting is another convention of the genre: we are shown the women waiting by the telephone or in the brothel for the arrival of clients; waiting to go on-set; waiting for

the male lead to get an erection. Arguably, this “behind the scenes” access to the sex industry registers the fundamentally mundane nature of the women’s lives, positioning this as a “job” like any other while the generic debt to the docu-soap---a genre that has often focused on workers within the service sector (airline and hotel staff, vets, holiday reps)---lends the work, workers and workplace a patina of respectability. However, the waiting scenes are part of the broader invitation to the viewer that these programmes typically pose and have to be understood in relation to the way that---as television---they always withhold something that the viewer can only gain access to if they take up the offered real-world position as a john and, so, rescue these women from boredom. Indeed, the viewer---like a john---is inducted into the commercial sex world: offered a tour of the brothel or porn set; introduced to the “girls”; presented with a list of services, prices or scenes; instructed in technique or in the use of particular products. At the same time, the programmes provide sufficient detail to locate those products and services (websites, brothels, videos, sex toys) should the viewer choose to take on the role of the john in a more literal sense. As Gareth McLean (2001) puts it, “After all, in what is quite literally showbusiness, it pays to advertise”.

Indeed, many of the programmes function as extended adverts for specific commercial sex ventures of which television, by its very nature, can only offer a glimpse. (9) These ventures are made tantalising by the foregrounding of what Williams (1990) refers to as ob-scenity: that which is, in this case, literally kept from view. Both in voice-over and mise-en-scene there is continual reference to what is must be kept out of the television frame because it is too explicit or too tasteless. So, for example, images of genitals and penetration are kept centre-screen but are blurred or explicitly censored; the paraphernalia of porn-production---the camera, sound

recording equipment, crew members---gets in the way, blocking our view of the porn-scenario being acted out; props are shown in lingering close ups but not in use; fragmented bodies give fleeting glimpses of what is on offer (a lingering shot of a foot while the action goes on elsewhere); montage sequences from hard-core porn are so rapidly edited that individual images barely register; and the camera retreats as the bedroom door closes. These aesthetic choices, combined with detailed verbal description from narrators and participants of bodies, actions and effects, work to continually highlight pornography's (or prostitution's) ability to deliver the real thing, the thing that television cannot deliver. However, if television cannot deliver, it can and does provide the details to facilitate future consumption and the ad breaks on commercial television particularly underline this with adverts for sex chatlines and television channels appearing regularly.

As the uninitiated viewer is made comfortable in the virtual brothel of the living room, the women on-screen offer repeated reassurances about the legitimacy of present and future consumption. The use of docu-soap conventions individualise and domesticate the women and men in the sex industry as we are invited to get to know the characters and become familiar with the locations and situations which structure their days. (10) In Showtime's Family Business and in ITV's Personal Services, for example, the participants are introduced in the credit sequences as named individuals, "workers" in a specific industry. The use of first names throughout creates a sense of familiarity and closeness as does the repeated return to specific domesticated, spaces--their homes, brothels, favourite shops---and the development of story-arcs across the series: will Adam find love; will Paula open her own brothel; will Charlie publish her book? Moreover, the sex industry is frequently presented as an aspirational lifestyle particularly, though not exclusively, for women, that brings material rewards---good



food and wine, clothes, luxurious homes, expensive beauty products---and the earning power of women, their pimps and producers, their relative celebrity and connections to legitimate entertainment and businesses are continually emphasised.

The women also actively solicit the gaze, legitimating our voyeurism. This is particularly obvious in those series focusing on the pornography industry where women's physical appearances are continually scrutinised and modified by themselves and others. In both Family Business and Porno Valley, for example, there are storylines focused on plastic surgery and on the different venues for marketing the women's bodies: strip clubs; fan conventions; merchandising. In Personal Services, which focuses on the arguably more "private" consumption of women in indoor-prostitution, this solicitation of the gaze is nevertheless set up in the title sequence which shows the six women preparing themselves for display by dressing, putting on make-up, posing, looking in the mirror, and, finally, kissing the camera lens to the show's theme tune "Call Me" (sung by Nancy Sinatra). Lyric and image reinforce one another in presenting the women as actively soliciting a generalised gaze justifying both the viewer's voyeurism and the john's purchase.

The "insights" docuporn offers into the sex industry are typically provided via a mixture of apparent observational documentary and to-camera interviews with those involved in the industry (mainly, but not exclusively, the women). In the majority of these latter sequences, the women are shown ready and waiting for johns or for their next scene in front of the pornographer's camera: dressed or undressed to sell sex; filmed in the brothel, in the bedroom, on the set; stained with sweat, semen or urine. The filmmakers/ interviewers remain invisible, reinforcing this sense of women doing it because they want to, because they enjoy it, rather than in response to a specific demand.

While the television image is generally soft-core---with cameras or crew strategically positioned to frustrate the viewer looking for something harder---the detailed descriptions of sexual positions, activities and pleasures leave little to the imagination. Unsurprisingly, the behind-the-screen access these programmes deliver is to women's bodies: women porn stars are interviewed naked on-set and are shown performing; they talk repeatedly of their love of sex; and their bodily functions and responses are described in detail. There are parallels here with the hard-core porn-text itself which, Williams influentially argues (1990), anxiously returns to the problem of visibly authenticating women's sexual pleasure. The programmes frequently tap into these anxieties as a means of legitimating both the television show and commercial sexual practices, as, for example, when the characters reframe the sex industry as sex educator (a recurring claim in Family Business, Porno Valley and Cathouse). However, as in hard-core porn this goes hand in hand with the objectification of the female body, albeit here given a new legitimacy by its association with a feminist discourse of empowerment.(11)

Family Business provides an interesting example here. Although the programme has a male central figure---porn star/ producer/ director Adam Glasser (a.k.a. Seymore Butts)---his motivations for involvement in the sex industry are rarely scrutinised. The position of his mother---who is his book-keeper---is, however, repeatedly questioned and a number of episodes in the first two seasons introduce new porn-actresses and investigate and comment upon their motivations and pleasures as they follow their first days in the industry. More tellingly, Adam/ Seymore himself is not shown performing sexually whilst each episode is punctuated by brief montages of images of anonymous naked and sexually performing women, accompanied by sounds of female sexual pleasure. These montages bring us back into the action after

an ad break or provide a bridge between scenes separated by time or place---a function typically fulfilled by location shots in a sitcom or drama series---and so establish the female body as the location of commercial sex.

However, by definition, docuporn does not go “all the way”: it continually withholds pornography’s signature shots of spread labia, penetration and ejaculation, and typically hovers at the brothel bedroom door. As a result, there is an emphasis on “talk”: the woman’s voice confesses what her body cannot or, at least, cannot on television. Indeed, it is not only to-camera address that is important here: the sounds of the porn set can be (and are) rendered on the television soundtrack, again pointing to that which remains just out of the television viewer’s vision. The dislocation of sound and image further contributes to a sense that commercial sex has no concrete socio-political location and that purchasers are free of censure.

In summary, then, docuporn naturalises men’s buying of sex and sexual services but this naturalisation is dependent upon ignoring the moments of purchase to concentrate on the decision to sell and on replicating some of the conditions of consumption for the television viewer. Whilst the decision to sell sex may be portrayed with some ambivalence it is, nevertheless, this decision---and not the commercial transaction, the buying of sex---that defines docuporn’s representation of commercial sex.

### **Violent Entertainment?**

If, as Arthurs (2004, p.95) suggests, the “legitimacy of documentaries about the sex industry can never be assumed, but has to be achieved”, then the prostituted

woman/ porn star's enthusiastic embrace of the industry is key to that legitimacy. The bottom line would appear to be that no matter how physically or psychologically damaging something may appear to be to the television viewer, it is not exploitation or violence if the woman on-screen tells us that she chooses it or enjoys it. However, it would be misleading to suggest that these programmes never deal with the issue of violence and exploitation. As noted, documentaries critical of the sex industry do exist, though their borrowing of the conventions of docuporn compromises the clarity of their analyses somewhat. In the docuporn programmes themselves, there is often a fleeting acknowledgement of the dangers of the industry for women but it is notable that those dangers are typically located outside of the programmes' familiar locations. Most often, these dangers are located on the street (most docuporn focusing on prostitution is set in or around brothels) but they may also be located in foreign countries, on underground/ unregulated porn sets or in a different era. Notably, like the purchase of sex in general, danger generally remains diffuse and non-specific, in sharp contrast to the very precise detailing of the selling of sex and, even on occasion, of the women's experiences of threat. In other words, when danger is acknowledged it is as something the women face (sometimes because of the il/legal conditions in which they "work") rather than a danger posed by men (either as individuals or as a class). Yet, the most persistent danger for the women in docuporn is being judged by others outside the industry. This, combined with the personalising of the sex industry observed in the previous section, makes an anti-commercial sex position difficult to take as it re-constructs such opposition as individual prejudice: you're not anti-porn, you're anti-Jenna; not anti-prostitution but anti-Charlie.

With this in mind, the excesses that are shown---or, more accurately, described---are constructed as the excesses of women's sexuality. Again, the question

“who would buy this, and why?” never enters into the equation as the women are shown as ready and willing to perform and, indeed, as actively seeking men to perform with / for. I have already noted that there is a great deal of emphasis in these programmes on detailing exactly what the women do, how often, with whom, and for how much. What is significant about many of these sequences, however, is that they seem to be constructed not for the purposes of arousal but of disgust as women are reduced to lengthy checklists of increasingly extreme acts that they will or will not do or have done to them: a list that begins with “girl-on-girl” may end with double-anal or strangulation. Indeed, there are numerous moments when the women’s bodies and, by implication, their desires are rendered freakish and disgusting as, for example, when women talk to camera about rectal or vaginal damage, directors recall fecal leakage on-set, or a woman describes the experience of having many men cum all over her face and body simultaneously.

This is a trend that has been observed in the porn-industry itself where, as porn-director ChiChi LaRue comments:

“It’s not about sex anymore or sexual eroticism, it’s about grossness. Some college kids in their dorm room are watching it and going ‘oh man, oh dude, can you believe what they’re doing to her man, oh man’.” (12)

In very different veins, feminists Rebecca Whisnant (2004) and Constance Penley (2005) have also noted the “grossness” of much contemporary porn. For Penley, this points to the transgressive potentials of the genre, particularly in relation to disrupting middle-class constructions of “taste”. The possibility of transgression Penley points to here is, I would argue, a reading strategy: that is, it is the viewer who is transgressive, who rejects the middle-class construction of “taste” in openly celebrating “trash”. On television, the promise of transgression is, of course, never entirely fulfilled: we hear

of the bodily injury or degradation, of bodies pushed to the limits of physical endurance in gang bangs or double penetration scenes, but we do not see these bodies or what is done to them for ourselves. Seeing is of course the very thing that pornography can offer and so the viewer always has to consume more if they want to see whether and how these women really do “it”.

In contrast, Whisnant points to the very real damage done to women’s bodies in the production of mainstream pornography that is not explicitly violent in theme. She notes that there is enormous pressure on women to engage in activities that can, particularly when performed frequently, be damaging to their bodies. The examples she gives---anal sex, “double penetration” (of vagina and anus simultaneously), “double anal” (more than one penis penetrating the anus at the same time) and gang bangs---are all routinely described and discussed in docuporn. To this list we might add surgical procedures to enhance or repair the sexualised body. Indeed, visits to the cosmetic surgeon, usually for ever larger breast implants, are routine in docuporn (13), as are visits to sexual health clinics where the woman’s body is examined for signs of disease, while in other sequences women talk about the reparative surgery they will require in the future. Nevertheless, the sexual functions in these programmes as a kind of alibi. If despite everything she still says that she enjoys it, to condemn these practices within the parameters set out by these programmes means condemning the individual woman. This only works, of course, because we are focusing on her desires and experiences in isolation. Even if we accept that these desires are honestly expressed---which is difficult when the same lines, lines which closely resemble a pornographic script, are repeated time and time again---it leaves the question of what it means to pay to take pleasure in another person’s pain unasked.

While the programmes normalise these acts on these women's bodies by their repeated to-camera expressions of consent and pleasure, the quotation from ChiChi LaRue suggests that the pleasures on offer for the male john are not necessarily sexual but may be connected to an abusive homosociality: a sharing of women among men as a means of reinforcing the power of the male group vis-à-vis the degraded, female "other". Yet, because the john has vacated the landscape and the viewer has been invited to take his position, there is no possibility of exploring exactly what might be at stake here without putting oneself on the line: something that the tongue-in-cheek, infotainment format actively guards against. Perhaps the appeal of docuporn has more in common with the fan-boy's approach to gore---the desire to see ever more, to test one's own boundaries and ability to withstand the viewing---but here, of course, the bodies on view are real and this is not an insignificant difference. However, by divorcing the bodies of those on the supply end of the sex industry from those on the demand side, the exploitative nature of the transaction is rendered invisible. In this way, docuporn provides what McLean (2001) describes as the "male post-pub audience" with a pornographic fantasy of women's sexual availability and insatiability and with an alibi for their own decontextualised consumption of others whether it is for sex or humour.

In conclusion, while, as Arthurs' (2004, 2006) work demonstrates, there are interesting and important questions to be asked about the television representation of women involved in commercial sex, these are by no means the only questions to be asked about the way the sex industry is represented in these programmes. This emphasis does, however, mirror certain traditions within feminist research both on the sex industry and on television. As pro-sex-industry feminists have focused almost relentlessly on the agency of female performers as an antidote to what they have seen

as the victimising tendency of anti-porn feminists, the debate has endlessly returned to the status and position of women performers and, more recently, has moved to consider the continuities between pornographic and mainstream representations. Similarly, feminist television studies has focused on women behind the scenes, on screen and in the audience and, relatedly, on “the problems of feminism and femininity---what these terms mean, how they relate to each other, what they constitute and exclude.” (Charlotte Brunson, Julie D’Acci and Lynn Spigel 1997, p.1). This is an emphasis I have been critical of elsewhere, arguing that the concern with women characters and performers individualises our analyses and ensures that women are the “problem” to be solved or investigated whilst men---on-screen and in the audience---are let off the hook (Boyle 2005b). In developing a feminist response to docuporn we must seek to reintegrate an analysis of gender, of how women are represented in relation to men even if that means focusing on what is missing from these accounts of commercial sex: namely, the john. Only by considering the relationships between women and men in commercial sex and its representation can we meaningfully acknowledge women’s subjectivity whilst remaining sensitive to the inequalities and exploitation which structure its expression.

## **Notes**

1. Although Channel 5 (now known simply as ‘five’) attracted considerable controversy for its sex-scheduling in its early years, Arthurs’ study identifies Channel 4 as the most prolific sex-scheduler with 101 sex documentaries in 1999, compared to 9 on BBC1, 57 on BBC2, 27 on ITV and 36 on five. Arthurs also provides statistics



on some of the more popular digital channels: in 1999 Bravo screened 222 sex documentaries; Living had 164; and Sky One had 26 (Arthurs 2004, p.156).

2. Although this article draws on my viewing of a wide range of materials gathered from 1999-2005---including series, documentary seasons and one-off programmes---my main examples are drawn from a more extensive analysis of three docuporn series: Family Business (also known as Porn: A Family Business; Showtime 2003--2006, screened on the UK on Channel 4), Porno Valley (Sky One 2004), Personal Services (ITV 2003), and the one-off docuporn Cathouse (HBO 2002, screened in the UK on Channel 4), which later spawned a series.

3. The anti-pornography position is most commonly associated with the work of US feminists Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin (e.g. Dworkin 1981, MacKinnon 1993, MacKinnon and Dworkin 1997). For a sense of the diversity of anti-pornography & sexual exploitation feminist work, see also Susan Cole (1989), Gail Dines, Robert Jensen and Ann Russo (1998), Sheila Jeffreys (1997), Donna Hughes and Claire Roche (1999), and Rebecca Whisnant (2004).

4. Key anthologies here include Carole S. Vance (1984), Lynne Segal and Mary McIntosh (1992), Alison Assiter and Avedon Carol (1993) and Pamela Church Gibson and Roma Gibson (1993).

5. The two camps are not necessarily as opposed---or as internally monolithic---as this binarism would suggest: it is, after all, possible to be both anti-pornography and anti-censorship.

6. Ariel Levy provides many examples of this crossover in her Female Chauvinist Pigs (2006).

7. This phrase is used to describe pornography magazines in an article in Front's "Porn Issue" entitled "Beat the Porn Snatcher" (Darling 2005) which suggests a variety of places for male teens to hide their pornography collection.
8. Hardcore, written and directed by Stephen Walker, is an interesting exception. The documentary screened on Channel 4 in 2001 after having been rejected for transmission by its original commissioners, ITV, who were clearly looking for something rather more light-hearted than the story of Felicity---an Englishwoman pursuing a career in L.A.---turned out to be. Notably, however, it has never been repeated on Channel 4 though more light-hearted acquisitions (such as Cathouse) have made a number of appearances.
9. Perhaps the most explicit example of this is Channel 5's *Sex and Shopping* (1998-2001) which is discussed in some detail by Arthurs (2004, pp.47—48).
10. See Richard Kilborn (2003, pp.89—121) for a discussion of the characteristics of docu-soap.
11. Arthurs (2004, p.97) notes that the British scheduling of such programmes---particularly on Channel 4 where docuporn took the place of more overtly political and broadly pro-feminist series about sex and sexuality in the latter half of the 1990s---provides a further association with a feminist discourse of empowerment and a legitimisation for their often sexist sexualised displays of female flesh. Levy (2006) discusses the implications of this framing of sexual objectification as "feminist" empowerment in more detail.
12. Quoted in Porn Shutdown, Channel 4, 25th April 2005.
13. Similarly, porn stars and "glamour models" make frequent appearances in documentaries about cosmetic surgery. For example, "glamour model" Jodie Marsh made a guest appearance on five's All New Cosmetic Surgery Live in April 2005 and

E!'s reality show Doctor 90210 regularly features porn actresses, “lingerie models” and topless dancers seeking surgery, and, in one case, “anal bleaching”.

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