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Linda Williams: hard Core. Power, Pleasure anmd the "Frenzy of the Visible"

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**Linda Williams: Hard Core.
Power, Pleasure and the „Frenzy of the Visible“**

London: University of California Press 1999, 380 p., ISBN 0-520-21943-0,
\$ 15.95

Linda Williams' *Hard core – Power, Pleasure and the „Frenzy of the Visible“* was first published in 1989 to much acclaim. Its academic, neutral and above all honest approach to moving image pornography sidestepped the entrenched political positions about whether pornography should exist or not, to try to answer questions about what pornography is and what it does. She applied cultural, Marxist, feminist and psychoanalytical models to this popular, but socially unacceptable, body of work which until that point had never really been treated seriously as a genre like any other, with its own particular elements, iconography and history. She restricted her study to comparatively „mainstream“, readily available (in 1989), heterosexual hardcore for reasons of practicality and because she felt a generic discussion should deal with the general stereotype. In doing so she came to the opinion that censorship was not a 'solution' to such a misogynist discourse, because any form of censorship – regardless of how liberal it might be – would always be based on the premise of acceptable and unacceptable sexualities, that by „attacking the penis rather than the phallus, anti-pornography feminism evades the real sources of masculine power“ (S.267). This new edition has been published with the original text unchanged but with an additional chapter called „On Scenities“ dealing with the proliferation of pornographies in the private and public spheres, partly driven by the electronic revolution in recent years. However, this chapter is the weakest as it clearly shows her lack of familiarity with the new electronic media. This final chapter contains a number of hard-core images, which were missing from the original publication, to illustrate the points made in the previous chapters.

Williams offers this broad definition of pornography „visual (and sometimes aural) representation of living, moving bodies engaged in explicit, usually unfaked, sexual acts with the primary intent of arousing viewers“ (S.30). Foucault's idea that the pleasures of the body are subject to historically changing social constructions which are produced within configurations of power that put these pleasures to particular use, influences her thinking. Hard-core film-video porno-

graphy is one of the main discourses which speak about sex and sexuality, which elicits the 'truth' or offers knowledge about the pleasure of sex, and, as is often the case, it is from a male perspective with a male ideology in a dominant male economy. Williams traces its history and its meanings.

Of the two primary ways of organising sexual knowledge *ars erotica* (the ancient/non-Western practice of passing knowledge from the experienced to the initiate without classifying it) and *scientia sexualis* (modern society's desire to find the scientific truths of sexuality), cinematic hard-core emerges from the latter. And that the pleasure that comes from the knowledge of sex fits perfectly with the pleasure that the cinematic apparatus affords us, that is, of simply looking. She argues that from the beginning of cinema with Muybridge's classic studies of bodies in motion, women have been constructed as the objects rather than the subjects of vision (as well as objects not subjects of pleasure). „Cinema implanted these perversions (fetishisation and voyeurism) more firmly, normalising them in technological and social „ways of seeing“ (S.46). Cinema also afforded us the opportunity of maximum visibility of the act of sex as if Muybridge's measurement grids were still in place. The great irony is that although the representation of male sexual pleasure can be easily shown, erection and ejaculation, female pleasure occurs in an invisible location. The history of hard-core could be seen as a project to make the invisible visible: „Hard core desires assurance that it is witnessing not the voluntary performance of feminine pleasure but its involuntary confession.“ (S.50) Hence the rape/ravishment scenarios of early hard core where the woman's pleasure is elicited involuntarily. This also explains the poor acting, narrative incoherence and low production values of much hard core which makes it seem more real! However, the pleasure depicted is always measured against the standard of the phallus and the single male orgasm.

The first hard core was the stag film, usually one reel, up to fifteen minutes in length, resembling films of the actual primitive era (circa 1896-1911) although they were available up until the 1960's. There was no sound, colour and story, just a series of often unconnected scenes of sexual activity. The „meat shot“ was prevalent i.e. a close-up of penetration, and this was presumed to be satisfying to both man and woman, although the woman's pleasure was never addressed these illicit stags were watched secretly by groups of men with the intention of informing themselves about sexual difference, or arousing themselves, a foreplay before they went off in search of satisfaction.

The transition from illegal stags to legal, feature-length narratives came in the early seventies with the arrival of *Deep Throat* (1972), which was exhibited publicly and seen both by men and women, after such documentaries as *Censorship in Denmark* (1970) had led the way. „A wide variety of medical, sexological, psychological and juridical discourses“ constructed sex as a problem (S.95), that any discourse about sex had „redeeming social importance“ which is difficult to ban under the then legal definition of obscenity because it was difficult to isolate which aspect of

sex was obscene. It is with the rise of the hard-core feature that the „money shot“, that is, external male ejaculation which extends the visibility of the heterosexual act, signalling the climax of that act and authenticating (the man's) pleasure, becomes important. It is a common narrative conceit that the woman prefers a „shift from a tactile to a visual pleasure“ (S.101) and tells the male protagonist to let her „see that big hard cock“ and „come all over her face.“ Not only is phallic mastery asserted but the clitoris is effaced. Williams concludes that the fetish of the hard core money shot compensates for scarcity and loss, the castration fear in the male consumer, offering a real penis to substitute for Freud's mythic phallus.

Chapters five and six deal with hard core as genre. Williams lists the sexual „numbers“ that any self-respecting porno could not do without, and applies Steve Neale's thinking about the musical (categories of utopian solutions, the performance aspect of porn). The pleasure of the female becomes more important when compared to the stags but narratives are often built on the paradox that the pleasure of sex is self-evident except in the cases when it is not. However, sexual pleasure (more frequent sex and more variety), from a male perspective, is offered as the best solution to problems in the sexual realm. Chapter seven talks about the recent developments in hard-core films which are aimed at couples and women, sometimes made by women, which clearly address the issue of female pleasure, where the penis is no longer king.

The next chapter is aptly named „Power, Pleasure and Perversion“ and opens, but doesn't delve too deeply, into the can of worms for feminists that is, of S M and power relationships. In any case, her tone contrasts nicely to that of Andrea Dworkin who believes even the act of heterosexual penetration is an act of violence. Williams does highlight the common misconception that a lot of the violence against women is found in the horror genre, not in hard core, and that the (male) spectator's identification with the victim of his penis (or chainsaw) is fluid and even possibly masochistic.

Unfortunately, the new chapter fails to update the book effectively because of the author's insufficient awareness of what is available on the world-wide web and how it is consumed. However, she should be commended on moving the debate on pornography away from the political to the academic, although many aspects of that debate are uniquely American and not always applicable to a country like Germany where the mixed, naked sauna is taken in its stride and *Wath)re Liebe* is normal TV programming.

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