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Keywords: Italian porn studies, porn studies, eroticism, normalization of pornography

Abstract: The Guest Editors introduce porn studies in Italy and discuss the contributions of the Themed Section. Marini-Maio details a current scholarly collaboration in the Collaborations section. Paola Bonifazio presents the rationale of the Invited Perspectives.

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Italy Talks Porn: Porn Studies in Italy.

Journal Editorial

GIOVANNA MAINA, SERGIO RIGOLETTO, FEDERICO ZECCA

Guest Editors

It has become common place in some academic circles to assume that the most ground-breaking approaches to the study of Italian media culture come from scholars who work outside of Italy. Contradicting this assumption, this special issue builds on the rich scholarly production on pornography coming from the Italian academy. Publishing this special issue on one of the most prominent US-based venues dedicated to the study of Italian politics, culture and society represents much more than an attempt to give international visibility to the important scholarly debates that have been taking place in Italy during the last few years. It also represents an opportunity to challenge, and perhaps reverse, an established narrative, which assumes that scholarship coming from the Anglophone academia—especially when dealing with gender and sexuality—is always more advanced than research being carried out in Southern Europe.

A brief excursus on the intellectual work on eroticism and pornography in Italy demonstrates the weakness of this assumption. The gradual normalization of pornography in the Italian public sphere has been accompanied since the 1970s by the emergence and development of scholarly studies dedicated to the social meaning, the ideological implications and the expressive specificities of sexually explicit content. The first significant study of pornography was published in 1974. Edited by Vittorio Boarini, the anthology *Erotismo eversione merce* consists of the proceedings of a conference that took place in Bologna the previous year. With essays authored by intellectuals of the caliber of Pier Paolo Pasolini, Fernanda Pivano, Félix Guattari, and Ado Kyrou, the volume adopts a political approach and is primarily concerned with the cultural function of eroticism in a post-sexual liberation society. In 1980, Alberto Abruzzese and Laura Barbiani published the edited volume *Pornograffiti*. Providing a mapping of the vast range of adult comics published in Italy, this anthology covers themes, narrative structures, styles and contexts of production and reception. None of these earlier studies dealt with pornography as an audiovisual genre. It is worth remembering that in Italy until 1978 screening pornography in movie theaters was illegal and the first domestic film productions would be released in the early 1980s.¹

The first scholarly publications focusing on audiovisual pornography were published in 1982. Framing porn as a film genre, these studies approached porn as a “normal” cultural object, one that deserved to be investigated and understood as such. That year, the journal *Filmcritica* devoted an entire issue to pornography, proposing a philosophical reflection on its nature and on its relation to different media. This special issue has a remarkable historiographic value since it also contained a provisional filmography. That same year, in *Lo schermo impuro*, film scholar Marco Salotti traced a history of pornographic cinema covering a period that goes from the early “stag” films to the narrative revolution of the 1970s.

The period between the end of the 1980s and the early 1990s brought new interpretative challenges as a result of the spreading of hard core consumption following the advent of video technologies and the beginning of the digital era. Addressing precisely this shift in consumption practices, Renato Sella’s *L’osceno di massa* inaugurated a new tendency in sociological research on pornography, adopting a less politicized scholarly approach than previous studies, and grounding its observations in extensive field work. While inaugurating the study of audiovisual pornography

¹ On the birth of Italian printed and cinematic pornography, see Maina and Zecca, 2021.

in Italy, this scholarship could be still considered “niche” research, as it appeared in an academic context that regarded pornography as aesthetically abhorrent or morally dangerous.

Since the mid-1990s, partly because of the unprecedented access made possible by the internet, scholarly debates on pornography have increased significantly. It is possible to identify three distinct yet complementary strands of research. The first strand reproduces the well-known US-based debate between anti-porn feminists and liberal scholars throughout the 1980s. In Italy too, scholars have raised the question of whether pornography may be an expression of patriarchal domination or an “erasure” of the individual; while others ask whether pornography may simply be a legitimate aspect of the entertainment industry and of popular culture.²

The second research strand has been shaped by the work of cinephiles, collectors, and B-movie critics. These writers have been mainly interested in historical, philological, and aesthetic questions concerning porn production on film and video. Within this vast and far from homogenous strand, it is worth pointing to the important endeavor to reconstruct the complex production history of Italian pornography and its practices conducted by the magazine *Nocturno* and by *Schermi (H)ardenti*, a 2012 anthology edited by Saverio Giannatempo. The 2014 volume *Luce rossa* authored by Franco Grattarola and Andrea Napoli represents another important contribution within this strand.

The third strand is directly connected to the final legitimization of pornography as a proper object of academic study. This strand is characterized by two main disciplinary approaches: the first one is grounded in the field of cultural history and media sociology, while the second comes from the area of film and visual studies. In both cases, scholars have published a considerable number of monographs, edited collections, and articles in some of the most important national and international academic journals (such as *Porn Studies*, *Journal of Gender Studies*, *Cinergie*, and *Between*, to name but a few). The first attempt at drawing a cultural history of porn dates back to 2004. In his book *Il porno di massa*, Pietro Adamo connects the legal, cultural and social developments that contributed to the “normalization” of pornography in the West, to the radical changes related to the so-called sexual revolution of the late 1960s, and to the spread of countercultural values and practices in the United States and Western Europe. Adamo further develops this historical reconstruction in his 2021 book *Hard Core: Istruzioni per l'uso*, in which he focuses on the new languages of online pornography.

In 2016, Renato Sella published a study that further developed the kind of research conducted in the early 1990s. Deploying a qualitative sociological methodology, this volume focuses on the modalities with which young people consume digital pornography. Among the studies carried out in the field of sociology during these years, it is worth mentioning Cosimo Marco Scarcelli’s book on the relation between pornography and adolescents (2015a; 2015b; 2017), and the studies conducted by Claudia Attimonelli and Vincenzo Susca on the multiple online manifestations of porn (2016). Entirely dedicated to feminist and queer pornography, Mariella Popolla’s *Eppur mi piace...* (2021) adopts an ethnographic methodology based on participant observation in porn sets and dedicated festival. In this study, Popolla looks at porn as an instance of sex work.³

Within the field of film and visual studies, Ando Gilardi’s *Storia della fotografia pornografica* (2002) identifies the close link between the emergence of tools for the mechanical reproduction of images and the formalization of a distinctive visual language for porn. In 2006, Emanuela

² Verza, *Il dominio pornografico*, 2006; Marzano, *La fine del desiderio*, 2012; Adamo, *La pornografia e i suoi nemici*, 1996; Regazzoni, *Pornosofia*, 2010.

³ A reconsideration of pornographic work from a gender and queer perspective is also the theme of a special issue of the journal *AG-About Gender*, which Popolla co-edited with the US based sociologist Lynn Comella in 2019.

Ciuffoli wrote the first book on the so-called *netporn*. Her research, grounded in a philosophical tradition that goes from Jean Baudrillard to Slavoj Žižek, and in gender studies, analyzes the developments of amateur and indie porn in the context of gift economy and participatory culture. In 2009, Peppino Ortoleva devoted two chapters of his media history book *Il secolo dei media* to the process of liberalization that pornography has undergone during the twentieth century, with a special focus on Italian society. Ortoleva sees such a process as a “flow” rather than as a series of interrelated singular events, framing this gradual transformation within the media system as a whole and in relation to the wider historical and social context. Entirely dedicated to the anti-normative and liberatory implications of amateur porn, Sergio Messina’s *Real Sex* (2010) has been enthusiastically received within feminist and queer activist circles.

In 2011, Enrico Biasin, Giovanna Maina, and Federico Zecca edited the book *Il porno espanso*. The volume has contributed to the definitive institutionalization of porn studies in the Italian academic context. Drawing on film, media and cultural studies methods of enquiry, the book reconstructs the complex intersections between the expressive forms, the production models and the consumption practices of contemporary pornography. The book also investigates the reciprocal influences between pornography and conventionally legitimate forms of cinema, television, fashion and music—a process that may be understood as a mainstreaming of pornography. In 2014, Biasin, Maina, and Zecca edited the volume *Porn After Porn*, which attempted to provide an exhaustive mapping of alternative pornographies. Both projects are the result of the productive intellectual exchanges coming out of the Porn Studies section of the Gorizia International Film Studies Spring School.⁴ Having begun in 2010, the summer school has been a fundamental reference point for the international porn studies community for 10 years

Biasin, Maina, and Zecca have further developed their engagement with these scholarly questions, both in individual and collective projects. Among them, we would like to mention Maina’s two monographs dedicated to the Italian adult magazines of the 1960s and 1970s, and two volumes authored by Biasin and Zecca (co-authored with Stephen Maddison): the former focuses on the US porn industry and the latter on the stylistic models of contemporary porn.⁵ More recently, Tomaso Subini has published a book titled *La via italiana alla pornografia*, which focuses on the process of sexualization that has transformed Italian cinema throughout the twentieth century. Demonstrating significant historiographical rigor, Subini’s book delineates the gradual loosening of the censorship restrictions regulating Italian film production between the end of WW2 and the 1980s.

Themed Section

GIOVANNA MAINA, SERGIO RIGOLETTO, FEDERICO ZECCA

Guest Editors

Bringing together scholars working in areas as diverse as philosophy, film and media studies, legal studies, and sociology, this themed issue of *gender/sexuality/italy* examines pornography as a nexus of practices, knowledges, institutions, and economies primarily concerned with bodily pleasure. It considers pornography as a rich cultural field: a terrain within which an ongoing struggle over the

⁴ The Gorizia international Film Studies Spring School (established in 2003) is a prestigious intensive school for MA and PhD students and early career researchers, organized by the University of Udine in collaboration with a cluster of international universities and film archives.

⁵ Maina, *Corpi che si sfogliano*, 2018; Maina, *Play, men!*, 2019; Biasin, *Oscenità di brand*, 2013; Maddison e Zecca, *Gli estremi dell’hard*, 2013.

politics of representation, the social legitimacy, and the cultural visibility of desires, bodies and intimacies takes place. In pornography, consumption practices often intersect with participatory spheres of culture production and community-making dynamics. This intersection tests the thin line between social practice, representation and fantasy within which pornography operates as a cultural and media domain.

We remind our readers that pornography first emerged in Italy as a significant cultural phenomenon in the mid-1970s, with the proliferation of adult magazines and the first hard-core films by directors such as Joe D'Amato. In the 1980s, Italian media (print, cinema, and for a while even television) were flooded with sexually explicit images, the production and circulation of pornographic materials paralleling and sometimes exceeding the exploits of North-European countries such as France or Germany. During these years, a significant process of deregulation and legitimization of sexually explicit materials transformed what had largely been seen as a predominantly Catholic country prone to censorship into a libertarian paradise for pornographers and their publics. From the 1980s onwards, this process contributed to the blurring of the boundaries between porn cultural production and mainstream culture, with eminent representatives of the Italian porn industry who were able to cross over to mass entertainment and even politics. Over the last 30 years, no other country around the world seems to have embraced porn icons (e.g., Rocco Siffredi, Moana Pozzi, Jessica Rizzo, and Valentina Nappi) so enthusiastically within its mainstream cultural fabrics. This peculiar relation between pornography and the mainstream represents one of the major objects of inquiry that this special issue considers.

In one of the essays included in the themed section, Sofia Torre analyzes this relation through the engagement of actresses Ilona Staller (aka Cicciolina) and Moana Pozzi in parliamentary politics. Cicciolina was elected member of the Italian Parliament between 1987 and 1991, while Pozzi ran for a seat in the Italian parliament in 1992, and the following year she ran again in the Rome mayor election. Torre's essay examines the strategies of political communication deployed by Cicciolina and Pozzi and their complex relation to feminist politics. The second half of the essay turns to the social media activism of today's most globally known Italian porn actress, Valentina Nappi, and her controversial anti-feminism stance.

Nowadays, the Italian porn industry has been engulfed and somehow erased by the processes of global conglomeration and delocalization that have reshaped pornographic production world-wide in the digital age—significantly, important national players like Rocco Siffredi and Mario Salieri have offshored their operations to Eastern Europe. In other words, much of what we may call Italian porn nowadays is inextricably linked to the distinctive global networks of cultural production, distribution and consumption within which pornography operates. Nevertheless, the idea of a nationally specific porn imaginary still seems to occupy a peculiar position in the globalization of pornography, one that self-consciously marks its imagined national boundaries, while also shedding light on their permeability. In their essay for the themed section of this special issue, Gaia Peruzzi and Angelica Spampinato turn to the advent of digital platforms such as Pornhub and XNXX and the revolution that such platforms have caused in the production, circulation, and use of pornography. Their essay sheds light on a significant reshaping of Italian sexual and gender imaginaries which may be evinced through an analysis of the two most visited porn tubes in Italy in 2020.

While pornography has for long been the object of censorship and surveillance, these days it has now become a central sphere of intervention for queer and feminist activists, and for radical political work. In his essay for the themed section, Roberto Paolo Malaspina writes about the dissident practices of post-pornography of the Italy-based performing duo Rosario Gallardo. Focusing on their live performances, their films and their published volumes, Malaspina looks at the duo's practices of parody and their re-signification of the family form.

This themed issue contains an essay that is likely to become an important reference point for understanding these historical developments from the point of view of the Italian law. Here, Silvia Rodeschini examines the changes to the meanings that the law has attached to the notion of obscenity—from the Penal Code of the 1930s to more recent court sentences that have accompanied the liberalization of pornographic material in Italy. To consider these transformations, Rodeschini points to the different criteria under which juridical texts have codified “the common sense of decency” (“il comune senso del pudore”). Presented for much of the second half of the 20th century as a matter of public concern, more recently, the notion of decency has been removed by the Italian law from the realms of “common” and social, and has been recast as a matter of personal freedom.

Collaborations

NICOLETTA MARINI-MAIO

We continue to document academic collaborations in various fields. In this issue, we are delighted to publish an article by Romana Andò (Sapienza University of Rome) and Danielle Hipkins (University of Exeter), who discuss their long-standing collaboration and the creation of *A Girls' Eye-View*, an academic project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) in the UK in 2021. They present the history of the project, its motivations and its theoretical framework, but also pinpoint the serendipitous findings that led to relevant changes to their field research, involving the teens' media consumption habits, the impact of Covid-19, and the potential inclusion of male teens in their surveys and interviews. With their inter-institutional and intergenerational network of scholars, teachers, students, and female practitioners in the field of Italian media productions, Andò and Hipkins' collaborative work is a ground-breaking project that will raise great interest among scholars in the fields of Italian Studies, Girlhood Studies, and Visual and Media Studies.

Invited Perspectives

PAOLA BONIFAZIO, GIOVANNA MAINA, SERGIO RIGOLETTO, FEDERICO ZECCA

We are thrilled to include in this issue Marta Cerretti's interview with Teresa Ciabatti, one of the most unconventional writers in today's Italian literary scene, not only for her style but as a woman publishing in a still very conservative industry. In her conversation with the author, Cerretti discusses several of Ciabatti's novels, including *La più amata* (2017), a dense work of autofiction that delves ferociously into a father-daughter relationship, against the politics of a family, and a society, that has strong ties with the past and present of fascism. Touching upon questions of style and poetics, as well as feminist debates (on maternity, for example), Cerretti's dialogue with Ciabatti is a stimulating reflection on the author's work and its relevance in today's Italy and beyond.

The other invited perspectives center on this issue's main theme and shed light on the ideological substratum of porn. Pietro Adamo looks at the work of two of the most important directors of the golden age of Italian porn, Mario Salieri e Silvio Bandinelli, examining the opposite political values of their films, in particular in relation to the representation of the body and women's desires. Turning his gaze to the present, Bruno Surace critically investigates new online forms of production, distribution, and consumption (exemplified also in Italy by platforms such as *OnlyFans*), and interrogates the correlation between porn self-entrepreneurship, the liberation of one's desire, and the imperative of a neoliberal culture.

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