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Pornography

Abstract: This chapter explores the impact of pornography on contemporary culture and attempts to position women's erotic memoirs in the nebulous space between “pornography” and “erotica”. It argues that while women's erotic memoirs are inherently concordant with erotica, postfeminist culture and the mainstreaming of pornography have coopted and colonised the genre. The chapter suggests that the memoirs under discussion inhabit a space that is both progressive and regressive – a challenge to and an affirmation of conventional femininity – the former by forcefully expressing a postfeminist female agency in their (visual) consumption of male and female bodies, and the latter by adhering to the ideological and aesthetic conventions of male-produced pornography.

The history of pornography has largely concerned the written word, yet the genre remains predominantly understood in terms of both visual culture and mass consumption. In contrast, erotic literature, or “erotica”, is usually understood to be non-visual and produced for a comparatively narrow audience. In visual culture, pornography remains essentially unconcerned with character development and human motivation as representing the details of sexual acts and bodily sensations are of primary importance. To locate contemporary women’s erotic memoirs in debates concerning the definition of pornography and erotica entails the negotiation of a number of divisive, intersecting and nebulous territories. It is, in fact, often highly difficult to position women’s memoirs when attempting to understand them as works of either “pornography” or “erotica”, primarily due to the fact that neither of these terms – nor their corresponding associations – are entirely appropriate in describing the form and function of the non-fiction genre. Erotica is usually defined as a fictionalised literary genre understood “as a realm of fantasy, play, and experimentation” and is “linked to aesthetic notions of quality”, while the definition of pornography rests on detailed yet hyperbolic depictions of sexual arousal, scenarios, acts, and sensations with the purpose of eliciting arousal in the audience. The affective power of pornography depends on the authenticity of these explicit representations, while the affective power of erotica revolves around the characters’ articulation of sexual desire and their emotional and psychological investment in sexual encounters. Such aesthetic divergences are further complicated by Dana Wilson-Kovacs’ comment that “Erotica is associated with women while porn is associated with men”, marking pornography and erotica as distinctly gendered spaces. Pornographic formulas are often perceived by women as, if not offensive, limited in scope, full of reductive meanings and predictable action, while erotica is seen as catering to women in a more “approachable” and “understanding” manner. As Clarissa Smith astutely notes, despite the fact that pornography is occasionally produced for a female audience, there remains widespread theorisations of pornography “as a field of representation and consumption inimitable to women’s experiences of sexuality”.

For this reason, sexually explicit memoirs written by women are by default positioned as inherently concordant with erotica – a genre that is textual rather than visual, primarily female-authored rather than male-produced – and when approaching the genre readers could be forgiven for not only expecting a certain attention to both characterisation and