

The Encyclopedia of Porn or Diderot's Pornhub

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Porn gets called a lot of things—"information" isn't one of them. According to all manner of moment and movement porn is art, porn is devilry, porn is just porn. Yet wherever and whatever it is, it seems always to exist, it seems always to exist in excess, and it seems always to be considered as a social problem. The genesis and growth in the digital era of online porn has heightened the extent to which the preceding claims are true while increasing cultural attention to the problem of porn, on which Evangelicals remain united and academics as fractured as ever. The study of online porn, despite its relative novelty, serves as rich battleground for feminist thought: on the one hand, as recently reiterated by digital humanities scholar Rebecca Inez Saunders, the anonymity and easy access associated with online porn may be "considered...as the definitive beginning in a teleological chain that ends with sexualized children, increased sexual violence towards women, culturally vitiating obscenity and the commodification of the female body" (Saunders 236). As a rule, Saunders and others in her infant field aim, conversely, to "recognise the cultural and academic value of online pornography" (236). This new approach—and it is mine as well—takes for granted, first, that porn is out there; second, that a lot of porn is out there; and third, that something ought to be done to analyze, define, and perhaps eventually transform the immense social role it already plays in our lives.

Pornography: The Primer

In the feminist dialogue to which both Saunders and the field of porn studies itself remain deeply tied, porn dichotomously represents either a terminal site of women's utmost exploitation or a crucial conduit for their "sexual self-expression" (Saunders 236). Porn's social role in the popular consciousness is seldom so extreme, except where it is imagined by some conservatives as a scourge upon society; online porn, for most people, is just there to be looked at, sometimes tittered-over or jerked-off-to, but never read and rarely understood.¹ Porn, then, is only information when it acts as the *de facto* sex talk, or the natural supplement thereto, for pubescent boys (and girls) curious about what sex is. This is a scenario so far from uncommon as to be considered by sociologists Sabina, Wolak, and Finkelhor as "a normative experience" (*The Nature and Dynamics of Internet Pornography Exposure for Youth* 1). Conducting a survey of approximately 600 undergraduates at the University of New Hampshire in the spring of 2006, Sabina et al. gathered that "ninety-three percent of boys and 62% of girls were exposed to online pornography during adolescence," that "most exposure began when youth were ages 14 to 17," and that "boys were more likely to be exposed at an earlier age, to see more images, to see more extreme images (e.g., rape, child pornography), and to view pornography more often, while girls reported more involuntary exposure" (1). In these "normative" instances, porn's social role as information is made clear and significant. Porn is teaching young people, but especially young men, about sex, about power, about women.

¹"Porn," for the purposes of this paper, refers specifically to that which is online and videographic.

With this attitude toward online porn's social and educative role, Rebecca Saunders directs her focus in "The Pornographic Paratexts of Pornhub" toward "the biggest porn portal on the Internet" (Chafin 1). Though any scholar attempting a comparative analysis of the Internet's some four million porn sites will encounter "obvious variation in layout, content, rhetoric, objectives, and so on," says Saunders, "numerous aspects of Pornhub have become well-known and widely used, their consumer success establishing some of their prominent features as the mark of a professional porn site" (237). These features constitute the primary text to which Saunders devotes her analysis, culminating in her conclusion that Pornhub's "maturing paratextual elements" ultimately work against any meaningful shaping or reshaping of porn's social and/or feminist function. The question which remains in the wake of Saunders' close reading is this: If porn is information and Pornhub an archive—albeit, as Saunders deems it, a decentralized, anti-educatory, artless, essentially confused archive—how, then, should porn be organized?

For the answer I look not to the digital future but to a papered past, to the seventeenth century and Denis Diderot's *Encyclopédie*. In what follows I will work through Pornhub's structural, organizational, and feminist failures as outlined by Saunders and propose in their stead an *Encyclopedia of porn* (or, *Diderot's Pornhub*), based on the strategies of categorization—namely, alphabetization, editorial cross-reference, and expert curatorship—put forward in his 1755 article on the *Encyclopédie*. In keeping with Diderot's civic-mindedness, this proposal frames porn as information and the encyclopedization of Pornhub as a social project which centers and empowers women, both those actively involved in porn production as well as those affected by

emphasis and brackets my own).

The Worst-Laid Plans

In her contribution to 2014's *Examining Paratextual Theory and its Applications in Digital Culture*, Saunders nods to recent commentary from feminists, digital humanities scholars, and activist porn stars alike, which "offer[s] alternative, nuanced, and often positive interpretations of online pornography" (236). While she insists on online porn's feminist potential, Saunders does not locate that potential in Pornhub as is, and in fact, deconstructs the site's paratextual failures to live up to the anti-misogynistic, sex-positive ideal imagined by the likes of Sasha Grey. Maintaining that mainstream cultural condemnations of pornography interfere with porn's feminist potential, Saunders further argues that these "monolithically negative definitions of pornography may derive not from the hardcore content itself, but from the way in which the films are framed online" (237). It is Pornhub's failure to properly frame its porn films, regardless of their status as "hardcore" or otherwise, with which Saunders primarily takes issue.

Perhaps the most pressing problem with Pornhub's visual and philosophic organization is that it is visually and philosophically indiscriminate. Eighteen porn production companies supply the bulk of Pornhub's "seemingly infinite cache" of films, allowing Pornhub to host five-to-fifteen-minute excerpts from their full-length professional films in exchange for loose advertising rights (Saunders 237). Aiming to establish brand familiarity and lure viewers to their pay sites, these and other companies turn Pornhub into Adhub, where even in the films themselves block-lettered brand logos underline bobbing bodies. Rather than seek to limit or control the types of advertisements it hosts, Pornhub welcomes cross-promotion relatively undiscerningly. In a press release from 2014 spokespeople declared the site had "helped to boost the branding and exposure of content partners from all niches" transforming "traffic into monthly earnings!" (Saunders 239).

What might be called Pornhub's *laissez-faire* attitude toward advertisement is evident in its visual composition. While longtime users might build up preferences which narrow the types of ads they see to their specific tastes, new and newish viewers encounter ads which may seem disjointed, misdirected, or jarring. A novice visitor to the Pornhub homepage will encounter ads "from all niches"—but especially hardcore ones—well before he has clicked anything to suggest his interest in them. Far from attempting to mitigate the fundamentally discordant and distracting arrangement of these ads, Pornhub seems rather to favor the chaos. "Pornhub users are being centrifugally drawn away from the central visual text of the particular, chosen film," writes Saunders of the mishmash: "Many of Pornhub's adverts are for pay sites which offer more extreme, more apparently thrilling films, a sample of which are played on looped videos at an accelerated pace" (Saunders 246). Whether by accident or design, Pornhub's indifference toward to whom it sells ad-space and where on the site it situates those ads inadvertently focalizes violent, potentially misogynistic porn.

Pornhub articulates this indiscriminateness not only in its advertisements, nor indeed in how it juxtaposes those advertisements against its videos and other paratextual elements, but in its paratextual elements themselves. Saunders describes the details of this structural confusion:

"The hyperlinks which line the top of the homepage encourage users

to browse the categories, become a member, visit a related site, chat to other community members or see a live show via webcam. The rows of enthusiastically titled thumbnails which make up the bulk of Pornhub pages also push the user to exchange their existing text for something better, giving an enticing preview of their content as the cursor passes over them. Thus, seeking satisfaction in a single, feature-length film is discouraged. Adverts, hyperlinks and unceasing rows of thumbnails urge the user to be constantly, restlessly searching for something more exciting." (246)

Saunders does not likely intend the words "enticing" or "exciting" here—"extreme" or "hardcore" elsewhere—to read interchangeably with "misogynistic." But the crux of her argument relies on the implication that she does, at least in an overarching sense. Her emphasis on gratuity, excess, porousness, and indistinguishability as primary features of Pornhub's paratextual makeup is articulated, ultimately, as a feminist criticism, for she concludes that "Pornhub's construction of its films as individually valueless, as uniform, and as texts to be rapidly consumed and disposed of, facilitates the deeply embedded, sociohistorical notion that filmic pornography is culturally worthless" (247). This culturally engrained notion of porn as "worthless" is one she has previously castigated as unproductive and consequently antifeminist. She fails, however, to provide any viable proscriptions either for how Pornhub ought to change its anarchic structure on economic, philosophical, or feminist grounds, or for how feminists ought to approach the organization of Internet porn in the future.

A Diderotian Dialysis

The heretofore untackled feminist project which lies dormant in the space between Pornhub's slipshod thumbnails seems, if anything, an obvious move. Chaos calls out for order; information demands to be made sense of; Pornhub is practically screaming, not in the ecstasy it promises but in the panic it produces, for a remodel. The attempt to organize disorganized information (in this case, porn) concomitantly bestows upon its endeavor a heavy burden and a remarkable power. Writing in 1984, cultural historian Robert Darnton noted that she "who attempt[s] to redraw the boundaries of the world of knowledge would be tampering with the taboo" ("Philosophers Trim the Tree of Knowledge," 193). The taboo for this proposal is a foregone conclusion. But the prospect of reimagining and enforcing its subjects and borders is no less foreboding, its potential for social change no less pressing, than it was for Denis Diderot and Jean-Baptiste d'Alembert when with the *Encyclopédie* nearly three centuries ago "they undid the old order of knowledge and drew new lines" (Darnton 193). They did not take their power lightly. For Diderot the *Encyclopédie* was inexorably a social project with an ultimately pedagogical thrust; I have previously noted Diderot's assertion that the aim of an encyclopedia is to collect, structure, and transmit for future generations the preexisting archive of knowledge, "in order... that our grandsons, as they become better educated, may at the same time become more virtuous and more happy" (Diderot 291). Our grandsons' virtues remain, somewhat counterintuitively, a principal focus in the encyclopedization of porn, which will corral them ever so gradually out of (major aspects of) misogyny and into a feminist future. Diderot and I therefore share a social objective in our respective projects of molding better citizens. He attends with his "enormous task" to "man's curiosity, his duties, his needs and his pleasures"; so do I, with perhaps a greater emphasis

on the pleasures (Diderot 291). In order theoretically to “fix,” to functionally encyclopedize Pornhub, I will thus transpose three of Diderot’s most important strategies of Encyclopedic categorization onto the pornographic archive, namely, alphabetization, editorial cross-reference, and expert curatorship.

The first of these strategies is also the simplest. In “Philosophers Trim the Tree of Knowledge: The Epistemological Strategy of the Encyclopédie,” Robert Darnton maps out the ideological impetus behind the “tree” or “globe”² of human knowledge upon which Diderot and d’Alembert eventually alighted, while maintaining the ultimate arbitrariness of any such system. Although entries in the Encyclopédie were organized alphabetically rather than by subject, Diderot and d’Alembert nonetheless worked from a revised model of the tree of knowledge which attempted, like the versions put forth previously by Bacon, Chambers, and Locke, to organize the supposed fields of human knowledge into headings and subheadings all deriving from whatever its authors deemed to be the most fundamental phenomena of knowing.

And yet to determine what constitutes knowledge’s most fundamental phenomena is an impossible task which announces again and again its own illogic. The Encyclopedists as well as Darnton were conscious of this fallacy. “The very attempt to impose a new order on the world made the Encyclopedists conscious of the arbitrariness in all ordering,” notes Darnton—“What one philosopher had joined another could undo” (195). Describing their hesitance to favor any one formulation of the tree over another, Diderot admits in the Encyclopédie’s Prospectus that “The difficulty was greatest where it involved the most arbitrariness,” before launching into a philosophical lamentation:

“But how could there not be arbitrariness? Nature presents us only with particular things, infinite in number and without firmly established divisions. Everything shades off into everything else by imperceptible nuances. And if... there should appear a few [objects] that seem to break through the surface and to dominate the rest... they merely owe this advantage to particular systems... that have nothing to do with... the true institutions of philosophy” (Diderot, via Darnton 195).

Diderot and d’Alembert confronted these questions without much apparent resolution. Their decision to organize the entries of the Encyclopédie according to what Darnton calls “the innocent order of the alphabet” allowed them to avoid the pitfalls of organization by subject, which would have exposed their inescapably arbitrary tree. Behind the guise of “innocent” alphabetization, the Encyclopedists were also able to perform more subversive countercultural work than would otherwise have been possible (the alphabet obscured, for example, their model’s privileging of man over God). In its perfect arbitrariness, alphabetization was for Diderot less arbitrary than any other organizational model.

It is worth noting that Pornhub already has categories, which are, held up against the Encyclopédie’s, relatively explicit. Assuming a user manages to slip past the web of a dozen or more unrelated ads and videos vying for his attention from the homepage

² “Mappemonde,” notes Darnton on page 194, “was a crucial metaphor in [Diderot and d’Alembert’s] description of their work.” The metaphor was upheld by their project’s very name: “The word encyclopedia... derived from the Greek term for circle, signifying ‘concatenation of the sciences.’ Figuratively, it expressed the notion of a world of knowledge, which the Encyclopedists could circumnavigate and map.”

alone, he might click on the “Categories” tab and see them ranked, by default, according to “Most Popular,” and then, with a second click, alphabetically. It remains unclear, however, in what ways these established genres represent the fundamental phenomena of porn, or which great porn philosopher long ago decided so.³ Nor does it appear to matter much which category the user selects: regardless, the accompanying ads and suggested videos lean toward what Saunders describes as “more exciting” or “more extreme” (i.e., “up” rather than “down” the hardcore/softcore scale). Hence alphabetization alone is not enough to properly encyclopedize Pornhub.

The second Diderotian strategy of categorization vital to this proposal—editorial cross-reference—was hailed by Diderot himself as “the most important part of our encyclopedic scheme” (Diderot, *The Encyclopedia*, 310). In keeping with the project’s overarching civic-mindedness, Diderot acknowledges the cross references’ power to “suggest common elements and analogous principles,” but more important in his estimation is their ability to “confront one theory with a contrary one” and to “attack, undermine and secretly overthrow certain ridiculous opinions which no one would dare to oppose openly” (Diderot 310). Cross reference was, in its editors’ eyes, the Encyclopédie’s most compelling gesture toward social progress. Like carefully arranged hyperlinks on a webpage, cross-references represented for Diderot the perfect “method of putting men on the right path,” the right way “to lead people, by a series of tacit deductions, to the most daring conclusions” (Diderot 311). These “daring conclusions” often shared an antiestablishment thrust, with Diderot fashioning irony and insinuation into weapons against the church, the crown, and the aristocracy. Diderot famously linked “Anthropophagy” with “Eucharist,” “Communion,” and “Altar” (Darnton 200) and redirected readers of an entry on how to farm sugar to one which sweepingly condemned the institution of slavery (Werth 1). These examples are overshadowed in popular consciousness by the infamous “Capuchon” jab (which Diderot goes so far as to explicate in his article Encyclopédie), deciphered here by philosophy historian Colas Duflo:

“...The entry on Capuchon... appears at the end of the eulogy of the Cordeliers in the article Cordelier. The reference is an allusion to a ridiculous quarrel concerning the shape of the monks’ cowl that had divided this monastic order. The intention of the allusion is to tear the previous eulogy to pieces, but without printing a single reproachable word.” (Duflo 128)

So long as the cross references were “carried out artistically according to a plan carefully conceived in advance,” Diderot believed they would “give the Encyclopedia... the power to change men’s common way of thinking” (Diderot, “The Encyclopedia,” 311). While he insists that this elaborate subversive web functions only “when the author is impartial,” what he means is precisely the opposite. Only

³ They are as follows: 60FPS, Amateur, Anal, Arab, Asian, Babe, Babysitter, BBW, Behind the Scenes, Big Ass, Big Dick, Big Tits, Bisexual Male, Blonde, Blowjob, Bondage, Brazilian, British, Brunette, Bukkake, Cartoon, Casting, Celebrity, College, Compilation, Cosplay, Creampie, Cuckold, Cumshot, Czech, Described Video, Double Penetration, Ebony, Euro, Exclusive, Feet, Fetish, Fisting, French, Funny, Gangbang, Gay, German, Handjob, Hardcore, HD Porn, Hentai, Indian, Interactive, Interracial, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Latina, Lesbian, Massage, Masturbation, Mature, MILF, Music, Old/Young, Orgy, Parody, Party, Pissing, Popular With Women, Pornstar, POV, Public, Pussy Licking, Reality, Red Head, Role Play, Romantic, Rough Sex, Russian, School, SFW, Small Tits, Smoking, Solo Female, Solo Male, Squirt, Striptease, Tattooed Women, Teen, Threesome, Toys, Transgender, Verified Amateurs, Verified Couples, Verified Models, Vintage, Virtual Reality, and Webcam.

enlightened individuals (preferably with a capital 'E') who shared Diderot's own specific scientific, anti-nationalist, humanist, anti-classist sentiments would make proper cross-referencers.

It is with this deliberate emphasis on a highly editorialized cross-referencing system that I suggest the tactic be implemented in the Encyclopedia of Porn, whose general structure I will now propose. Just as Diderot moved implicitly and subversively within a semi-conventional model of human knowledge (the tree), this project will work within the framework of Pornhub's already-established categories⁴ to foster, first, a semblance of unity among the chronically disjointed films, and second, a trail of hyperlinks which purposefully guide the viewer toward less misogynistic and more socially constructive content.

The homepage of Diderot's Pornhub, then, will feature a sparse white background with only the hundred or so alphabetically-ordered categories and a small, expository thumbnail for each one displayed. Clicking on a category will bring the viewer to a primer vid: the most representative, straightforward (i.e., vanilla), professionally-produced video embodiment of said category, selected by editorial staff. Beneath the primer vid⁵, between three and five links to suggested videos will appear, each with a simple, descriptive title and thumbnail. Apart from the primer vid, the suggested video links, and the main "Pornhub" banner with its toggle of essential tabs (Home, Language options, Login/Sign up, Search, and Categories), no other content will appear on the screen. Advertisers interested in buying space on any one of these pages would submit their ad to a review process run by editorial staff, which will determine whether the content would be relevant and constructive on the proposed page—if it is, the advertisers may buy the spot; if it isn't, editorial staff may offer an alternative page on whose placement the content would be relevant and constructive, or simply reject the ad altogether.

Rather than orient the viewer "up" the hardcore scale by inundating him with ads and links to the "more extreme," the three to five suggested videos (cross references) would instead link to some equally kinky, some slightly less kinky, and some slightly kinkier related content in a gradual and not necessarily linear path to the extreme, should the user choose to seek it.^{6,7} Cross references in some cases would even, like Diderot's, connect unconventional concepts and material, thereby creating an impression in the user's brain of potentially new, socially constructive, progressive ideas through porn. Current Pornhub users who select "Anal" from the list of categories are instantly bombarded with links to videos like "Smoking bitch with awesome big tits takes it in the ass," "Banging Beauties Ass Fucked Sluts Kelly Divine Alexis Ford," and "Anal Revenge" (Pornhub, "Anal," 2018). Most are, to borrow

⁴ Future projects might work to curb or even eliminate some of Pornhub's more controversial categories, like racial fetishes, the sexual and cultural politics of which will have to be dealt with by a better-equipped author in a different paper.

⁵ In actuality, editorial staff will be continuously curating a range of primer vids for each category, such that frequent, even daily users aren't forced to watch the same videos and follow the same trail of hyperlinks every time they visit the site. The dog who plays Beethoven is actually seven dogs; the primer vid is actually seventy primer vids.

Saunders' verbiage, "triumphantly" degrading toward women, and all are heterosexual.

What if these weren't the first titles available to viewers interested in anal? Instead, a suggested video underneath the initial Anal primer vid might link, if not to good old-fashioned gay porn, to content in which a woman pegs her male partner, or, for that matter, her female one. A suggested video underneath the Interracial primer vid might link, unlike Pornhub, to something other than historically problematic and enduringly popular porn featuring black men "debasing" white women—instead, the hyperlinks could, for example, highlight films which depict interracial couplings where neither participant is white; where one or both are biracial; where both are women. Diversifying the content of suggested videos will particularly allow editors a unique opportunity to incorporate queer and trans pornography into the mainstream—to vanillaify it—rather than relegating it to a disproportionately stigmatized, ostensibly "deviant" niche in the pornographic landscape.

On the whole, these cross references will help porn perform its ideal social function as imagined by Rebecca Saunders, to render users "able to more actively contribute their own sexual self-expressions" and to "assert the validity of marginal sexualities" (236). Thus, where Diderot seized upon irony in his cross references in order to tear down corrupt institutions of power, to "snatch off the masks from the faces of certain grave personages," cross references in the Encyclopedia of Porn on the contrary will lift up marginalized voices, cultivating

positive associations with the oppressed rather than negative associations with oppressors (Diderot 311).

One obvious question this proposal has not yet answered relates to the composition of the new Pornhub's so-christened "editorial staff"; this, too, has to do with the third encyclopedic strategy I've borrowed from Diderot: expert curatorship. I have already outlined a few of the proposed responsibilities of these expert editors, but in order to highlight the crucial role they play in Diderot's social project and in my feminist one, I will here define who they are and how they are important to Diderot, and subsequently to the Encyclopedia of Porn.

When it comes to defining words, processes, and things, Diderot emphasizes that the lexicographer or encyclopedist must necessarily consult experts in the fields to which those terms pertain. For Diderot these "experts" are not limited to men of letters—although they, too, are included—but rather the craftsmen, artisans, and laborers of the world who daily perform the rituals

⁶ This assumes, of course, that the user in question is in fact looking for extreme/hardcore porn. Early site visitors might seek it [hardcore porn] out, at least in part because previous iterations of Pornhub have normalized and centered it. Some might be initially frustrated by its relative inaccessibility here. My hope is that gradually, as the encyclopedic system replaces Pornhub's current one and hardcore porn is deemphasized and denormalized, younger generations of viewers might not naturally gravitate toward violent porn.

⁷ The starting level of kinkiness for each page, and to a lesser extent the kink level of the accompanying links, would depend on the selected category. For example, the primer vid for the "Lesbian" category will likely be substantially more vanilla than the primer vid for the "Bukkake" category.

“...when it comes to questions, which this ultimately feminist project will center and will ask, of what makes porn good for women and what makes it bad, it's women, not their male directors, who should answer.”

which make a thing or a process what it is. His emphasis throughout the Encyclopedia remains rooted in the notion that no one man can cultivate enough knowledge to undertake such an ambitious project on his own, that collaboration is always imperative: “And who will furnish an exact definition of the word congruent unless it be a geometrician?...of the word epic unless it be a man of letters? of the word exchange unless it be a merchant?...of the word gouge, unless it be a man well-versed in the manual arts?” (Diderot 294). Refusing to privilege the contributions of the intellectual over those of the working man, Diderot instead posits a mutually beneficial partnership for and through the Encyclopedia, whereby each can learn from the other. Using his protocol, men of letters would commission “memorandum” (rough sketches of what would eventually become the Encyclopedia’s entries) from tradesmen. Though these working men’s memorandum will not be stylishly written, Diderot insists that they will “contain an infinite number of things which the most intelligent of men would never have perceived unaided, would never even have suspected, and hence could never have asked about” (Diderot 318). Diderot’s objective both in the creation and distribution of the Encyclopedia focused on building bridges between these two types of experts, unifying them into a progressive republic, educating them, letting them educate each other. “This is a work,” he puts forward, “that cannot be completed except by a society of men of letters and skilled workmen ... all bound together solely by their zeal for the best interests of the human race and a feeling of mutual good will” (Diderot 298; emphasis my own).

Inverting Diderot’s linguistic default to the masculine, we can imagine, in a feminist context, the collaboration of two types of experts—adult film actresses like Nina Hartley and the feminist academics like Rebecca Inez Saunders who study their profession—in the genesis of an Encyclopedia of Porn. Women like feminist porn star and entrepreneur Ela Darling, whose identities refute that binary, are especially welcome applicants to the editorial staff at Diderot’s Pornhub. “This is a work,” Denise Diderot might say, “that cannot be completed except by a society of women of letters and skilled working women ... all bound together solely by their zeal for the best interests of womankind and a feeling of mutual good will.” Who can supply a precise definition of the difference between bukkake and cumshot porn if not the actress whose specialty is one, the other, or both? Who better to define what maketh the MILF than a MILF? If primer pages (consisting of both the primer videos and suggested further reading) are this project’s equivalent to the Encyclopedia’s entries, then porn actresses are the tradeswomen and feminist scholars the women of letters—but in the ongoing, visual, digital project of Diderot’s Pornhub, the division of labor between the two is blurred, all are feminists, all are editors. This is not to say that male directors, producers, and actors in the porn industry cannot or ought not to be consulted when it comes to deciding on primer vids, deciding, essentially, what constitutes the most faithful, clear-cut filmic representation of a category like Cuckhold and what separates it from the porn genres against which it bumps up (and grinds)—merely that when it comes to questions, which this ultimately feminist project will center and will ask, of what makes porn good for women and what makes it bad, it’s women, not their male directors, who should answer.

On The Asstral Plane

What will strike many as a remarkably simple principle in 2018—that women should be consulted about things which primarily involve

women—was radical in 1755. Through deigning to document their livelihoods alongside information more commonly associated with high culture and the upper classes, and furthermore to consult them in the documentation, Diderot sought to lend a small measure of the same cultural dignity and respect to the life of the working man which had so long been the exclusive prerogative of the rich. Cultural historian Raymond Birn traces the Encyclopedia’s editorial shift in the 1777-79 quarto edition away from Diderot’s encyclopedic vision of an honorable (French) working class which was worthy of being written and read about, toward less socially progressive goals. With a focus in “Words and Pictures: Diderot’s Vision and Publishers’ Perceptions of Popular and Learned Culture in the Encyclopédie” on illustrations in the original Encyclopedia, Birn examines which were kept and which were done away with in the truncated quarto edition. Unsurprisingly, mostly of those images that remained preserved “the facts of learned [high-brow] culture” while portraits of working-class life, which “Diderot had held so dear,” disappeared (Birn 73-74). “By rejecting the artisan’s world as a sphere of knowledge worthy of understanding and sympathy,” levies Birn, “[the quarto’s publishers] adapted the Encyclopédie to more traditional social and cultural norms” (74). The quarto edition was thus stripped of a great deal of its cultural meaning, just as the Encyclopedia of Porn would be were it to be dislodged from feminism.

The social project which had been the crux of Diderot’s vision for the Encyclopédie was abandoned. Where Diderot strove in the folio, as the Encyclopedia of Porn will, to “demonstrate truths, expose errors” and “skillfully discredit prejudices,” the quarto’s publishers strove, contrarily, to sell copies of a book to people who might buy it (Diderot 309).⁸ Diderot’s critics claimed he oversimplified, even romanticized peasant life in the Encyclopedia’s illustrations, but Birn replies that “A more fruitful analytical approach may be one sensitive to Diderot’s recognition of a hierarchy of labor and at the same time his desire to blur it in the service of dignifying the most menial of crafts” (79). As example Birn puts forward two very different illustrations of weavers which appeared next to each other in the folio that bore Diderot’s vision. The first depicts “the aristocratic art of tapestry manufacture in the royal Gobelins factory”—in this image the room is clean, well-lit, high-ceilinged; each employee occupies his own individual workspace; the subjects’ collective posture is good and their aspects are uniformly serene; “Every human, every object, has a sense of place in this controlled, sterile, hierarchical, pre-industrial environment” (Birn 79). The second illustration, of the “poverty-wracked” weavers of “laundry baskets, bread paniers, and cheap storage bins,” situates itself in a “dank and windowless” room inside which a handful of downtrodden laborers go to work. At least two are “emaciated,” one hunched over an unfinished basket, the other, “crippled or physically exhausted,” struggling up the stairs and half out of sight. These latter weavers could not look more at odds with their patrician counterparts—and yet “beside these images of surface misery,” Birn contends, “is a contrapuntal theme betraying creativity, intelligence, and imagination.”

How, then, in this scene of abject suffering, does beauty manage to seep through the cracks in the walls like the one beam of light slanting in from upstairs? Not how one might expect: “Three adults—we have no way of distinguishing boss from

⁸ Ironically, the quarto was supposed to be more affordable than its longer predecessor and therefore more likely to be purchased by readers outside the upper classes. It didn’t work out that way.

employee—have temporarily abandoned their customary labor to cooperate in an activity suffused with animation and creative pleasure. They are sculpting a Roman centurion in a stylized pose, thereby imitating an art of high culture comprehensible to the ENCYCLOPEDIA's leisured readership... Turned artistes, they work with naïve enthusiasm, overwhelm the misery of their surroundings, and convey to the beholder their dignity, sensibility, and artistic passion in a way that—unfamiliar with and likely contemptuous of their lives—he can understand.” (Birn 80)

Here Birn locates an almost impossible note of dignity, grace, and hope in what otherwise might legitimately be condemned as poverty porn. While he defends this potentially optimistic sliver of an otherwise gloomy scene, Birn simultaneously takes issue with Barthes' dismissal of the Encyclopedia's depiction of “the world of work” as unrealistically tame. “[Barthes] fails to convey yet another of Diderot's intentions,” says Birn, “—to win from readers a sympathetic comprehension of the dangers of mechanical labor” (81). An illustration of a miner fleeing from a potential explosion, Birn contends, “his face etched with fear of sudden, violent death” suggests Diderot was conscious of the occupational hazards—among them even possible death—which poor men confronted every day. He asks his wealthy readers, I would argue, not only to attempt to sympathize with the miner on the page before them, but to occupy, however fleetingly, however shoddily, his perspective: that fear for one's life, that fear of death, that fear of dying, that fear.

Where do porn stars and their Encyclopedia fit into these scenes of gentility and poverty, joy and fear, art and death? I have so far made little mention of how we ought to integrate the mass of low-budget, poorly-lit, thoroughly unempowering amateur porn on the Internet into the matrix of Diderot's Pornhub; porn whose leading lady smiles too much or not at all; sad porn, bleak porn, the unredeeming stuff. What I am advocating, like Diderot, is a shift in perspective. The encyclopedization of porn will help facilitate that move toward a larger feminist space within the realm of online porn by allowing women the editorial freedom to elevate porn which represents them fairly over that which does not, diminishing the harmful effects of young men internalizing misogynistic pornformation, and eventually, through the Encyclopedia's growth, creating more and more opportunities for women in the industry to produce and promote their own content. The quickest path to positive representation of women, after all, is when women are empowered to represent themselves.

The Diderotian encyclopedization of porn, equipped with its own distinctly feminist objectives and slant, can for its own purposes and within its own corner of the Internet center pornography which is not actively violent toward women, can even foster creative career spaces for women in porn to produce films which advance their own perspectives, but it cannot fundamentally dislocate the pornographic gaze which remains fixed on women as objects. It is not enough merely to pay the object better wages, let the object prioritize projects where it is made to feel like marginally less of an object than on others, make the object comfortable. If pornography is ever to be unitarily rather than fragmentedly, sporadically, anecdotally feminist, only a radical switch in perspective will do the trick. Consider as an experiment the unsmiling girl on the hotel mattress in a sort-of stranger's directorial debut. Now we must unstick ourselves from inside her co-star's bird's-eye-view and settle instead into a glassy-eyed perusal of the radiator; feel with her however briefly, however imperfectly, the pain, the embarrassment,

the rush; share whatever mindscape she is willing, for a moment, to share with us; experience with her the old emotion she and Diderot's miner know so well, the reason he's running, the reason she's not, of what it feels like to get fucked.

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