

# ‘DETACHED DESIRES’ - RESITUATING PORNOGRAPHIC AND CELEBRITY PERSONA ONLINE

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Celebrity and pornography are dominant features of late-capitalist consumption, and both serve to influence and bolster the performance, curation and construction of a sexualised and/or sexually explicit persona online. More so, a range of social and networked spaces such as Twitter XXX, Instagram, JustFor.Fans and onlyfans.com have enabled ‘ordinary’ subjects to assimilate and adapt elements of celebrity and pornographic representation in ways that have permitted them to explicitly and publicly present (and profit from) their private sexual persona. Individuals create and sustain their individual profiles through boundless processes of self-branding, self-promoting, self-objectifying, and the self-management of their sexual personas as “an ideal typification of the neoliberal self, emphasising how demotic neoliberalism, with the aid of celebrity role models instructs” not only their own, but also their viewers desires (McGuigan 2014, p. 224). This enigmatic discourse of sexual self-presentation as a form of empowerment, entrepreneurialism, and an aesthetic mode of influence may well function as an apex of neo-liberal and late capitalist ideology. It is here that the meticulous construction of sexual authenticity and tropes we connect to the banal and everyday are refined and embodied to tactically produce amateurish porn content that followers and fans identify with, algorithmically rate, consistently follow, prolifically share, and (of course) economically subscribe.

The rise and ubiquity of micro-celebrity as both an individualised identity and a broader socio-cultural process also seems to embrace and offer up a way for this sexual persona to flourish. These sexual subjects cultivate a persona that exploits the “growing agency, enterprise and business acumen of everyday media users” (Khamis et al. 2017, p. 197) by consistently curating, customising and personalising their sexual interactions with subscribers/followers. In this way the persona of the sexualised micro-celebrity relies upon a micro-public of those subscribers/followers who constantly request, require, and demand private access to their sexual persona through methods of “networked personalisation” (Marshall et al. 2020, p. 19). This kind of exchange also points us towards the ways in which the terms and broader epistemologies of ‘celebrity’ and ‘pornography’ need to be reconfigured. New ways of developing and resituating the established structures of celebrity seem to be apt here, and terms such as celebrification which “comprises the changes at the individual level, or, more precisely, the process by which ordinary people or public figures are transformed into celebrities” (Driessens 2012, p. 643) connect to these kinds of modifications. In addition, terms such as pornification (Paasonen 2007) consider how changes in media technologies, media regulation, and the broader sexualisation of culture have accompanied the “mainstreaming of pornography” (p. 1), and help us to see how the visual and linguistic codes associated with pornography have permeated the everyday lives and personas of neo-liberal subjects.

We most obviously see these pornified and celebrified codes in the mediated “attention-economy” (Marwick 2015, p. 138), where conspicuous and attention-grabbing forms of self-improvement, self-exposure, self-worth, and self-surveillance are upheld as alluring features of neo-liberal capitalism and its incessant stylisation of individualised success, meritocracy,

competition, aspiration, autonomy and agency. More specifically, this need for attention is captured in Marshall's mapping out of the "private self for public presentation", and the ways in which a public, public private self, and a transgressive intimate self (2010, pp. 44-45) now combine and splay the established parameters of the public and private sphere. As a result, we find that the intersections between the celebrified persona and persona's we might position as pornified can be aligned to some of the established tensions between public and private spheres of the self, the concepts of a personal and impersonal persona, as well as ideas around the construction of intimacy and distance in sexually explicit (re)presentation. If "the pedagogy of the celebrity in the twentieth century can be read as a very elaborate morality tale that mapped a private world into a public world" (Marshall 2010, p. 37) it did so by creating a powerful index of eroticised fasciation, fantasy, and arousal at the private sex lives of public figures. An earlier (or pre-social media) example of how this occurs may be found in the example of the celebrity sex tape, which is reliant on the "contradictions between the ordinary/extraordinary, public/private, inauthentic/authentic dynamics of sexual activity and revelation in porn" and which offers up a visual space in which "the private sex act and the public personality of the celebrity intersect" (Longstaff 2018, p. 187). The sex tape potentially captures something of how the 'celebrity-as-pornographer' functions because it draws attention to the ways in which the private production and public consumption of persona overlap. In this way the sex tape "reifies a situation in which the accepted codes of celebrity and sexual identity as private and/or distant overlay" (Longstaff 2018, p. 184) and informs the ways in which celebrity and pornography are renegotiated in online space.

More generally (or perhaps conceptually), pornography also functions in this way. It tantalisingly allows access to the personal space of the self and the sexualised body and act, but it only permits you to see things at a mediated distance. Here the explicit and simulating desire for the porn performer, scenario and fantasy (Longstaff 2013) are instantaneously framed by experiences of both detachment and intimacy. In her ground-breaking book *Hardcore - Power, Pleasure and the 'frenzy of the visible'*, Linda Williams locates pornographic representations in terms of a "hard-core knowledge-pleasure" which functions "as a logical outcome of a variety of discourses of sexuality that converge in, and help further to produce, technologies of the visible" (1989, p. 36). She uses the explicit and aggressive process of male ejaculation or the "phallic money shot as pleasure's ultimate 'frenzy of the visible'" (1989, p. 180) to demonstrate how pornography allows the viewer to voyeuristically 'see' more than they should, to feel both socially and sexually aroused by the visual text, and to be allowed into a sexually explicit spectacle of staged and performative persona that draws attention to itself 'as pornography'. Here the overexcited and arousing images that we understand as pornographic are allied to a form of spectacle which simultaneously demands and regulates sexual conspicuousness. Just as Williams also asserted that pornography was, in some way, linked to "the principle of maximum visibility" (1989, p. 48), there is also space here to suggest that a celebrified and pornified persona involves a similar politics of excessive public visibility, which operates as a "call to authenticity" (Marshall et al. 2020, p. 18) and thus produces a form of self-presentation and persona that allows the subject to negotiate, sustain and visualise a self-promotional and monetising 'pornography of the self'. More so, and in online settings such as Instagram and JustFor.Fans where we see the micro-celebrity both as pornographic performer and 'content creator', these ideological (and idealised) aspects of celebrity and pornography begin to fold into one another.

On this point, and if it is the case that in "any pornographic image, subjects can only express themselves through a series of representational constructions that rely upon impersonal and metonymic contiguity" (Longstaff 2019, p. 171), we see that the pornographic persona and its alignment to celebrity is a potentially (and perhaps fundamentally) an

impersonal one. Celebrity and pornography are reliant on desire; that is the subjective desire we have to connect to the person / personality / persona of the other. Yet this desire is reliant upon the emphatic anxiety that you can't ever attain or maintain that personal connection. In my forthcoming book *Celebrity and Pornography: Psychoanalysis and the Politics of Self-Representation* (2021, Bloomsbury) these potential connections are unpacked further through the lens of and lexicon of psychoanalysis and the impersonality of desire and persona. It may be that the pornographic and/or celebrity persona only ever manifests itself as a strategically mapped and commodifiable object, one which seduces, allures, speaks to and affects us, but ultimately one which we never come to grasp personally. Increasingly personal and seemingly individualised means of self-expression may well open up the potential to consider how persona is impersonally constructed, regulated, instilled, and only ever rendered a persona through the platform that an individual subscribes to, and the symbolic, discursive and ideological systems that exist beyond their reach. In this way the sexually explicit and arousing persona which has so many narcissistic and voyeuristic uses, may also be a foundational instrument for de-personalising our relation to persona. Just as networked spaces offer up simultaneously inter-active, inter-personal and inter-passive ways to desire, we also find (and in parallel to the unconscious practices embedded in narcissism and voyeurism) that just as we are drawn to personally participate in this field of sexual desire, our detachment and anxiety are also impersonally confirmed.

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