

How does *Deep Throat* Reflect Cultural Ideas about Female Sexuality?

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Key Words

Pornography, porno-chic, feminism, Stag film, Women against Pornography, Hollywood, censorship, female sexuality, *Deep Throat*, Linda Lovelace

Abstract

This piece of work is looking at how the pornographic film *Deep Throat* (Damiano, G.1972) reflects feminist debates and cultural ideas surrounding the debate on pornography and female sexuality, and how these ideas have interacted with each other at different points of time in which the film is being discussed. These will include the initial release and how the film is talked about from this point in time. I have chosen this particular film as it was the first feature length pornographic film and for this reason it has been thought of as the film which introduced pornography into the mainstream.

Introduction

The cultural landscape of America approaching the 1970s was going through drastic change: "In the 1960s and 1970s, cultural attitudes towards sex in North America changed and entertainment changed along with them. The introduction of the birth control pill and the ensuing sexual revolution, partnered with the disintegration of the Hays code that had tightened Hollywood's chastity belt since 1930, brought sex into everyday discourse in a way it had not been before." (pg.643, Simpson, N. 2004) As Simpson outlines, the breakdown of the Hayes code appeared to be ushering in a new age for sex in cinema, and it was around this time that what is not referred to as an era of porno-chic began, ushered in by the film *Deep Throat*(Damiano, G. 1972). This film combined both the explicit sex of the stag film, and also the narrative and feature length nature of the skin flick. This was a new and novel concept within the medium of pornographic film and brought this genre into the mainstream.

Deep Throat

Deep Throat presented new forms of sexuality in the format of a feature length film, and captured the energy of the changing attitude to sex on screen: "What deserves emphasis here is that the film takes for granted a premise that is quite rare in the stag film: the possibility that sexual pleasure is not the same pleasure for everyone. Linda's older and wiser female friend puts it in terms of the well-known cliché of the seventies, "diff'rent strokes for diff'rent folks," but the point is significant. It suggests a toleration-even a welcoming and encouragement-of a variety of sexual practices that is typical of the new seventies attitudes toward sexuality and of the pornographic film in particular." (pg.211, Williams, L.1989)Williams states here how this was the first time that different kinds of sexualities were being addressed in pornography, setting it apart as a novel and new approach to adult film. Through this *Deep Throat* encapsulated new attitudes towards sexuality of 1970s culture, and particularly female sexuality, as the focus of the film is on Linda Lovelace's journey to achieve orgasm in a less than traditional way, as the story centres around the discovery that her clitoris is located in the back of her throat, and this is why she is not satisfied by her previous sexual activity.

The popularity of the film and its reflection on current ideas of female sexuality are also present in the persona of Linda Lovelace herself in the 1970s. Although not typical of previous adult film actresses, character development was almost entirely focussed on her in the film; "Linda Lovelace is no raving beauty, but in *Deep Throat* she is a *character*, whereas Harry Rheems remains a caricature." (pg.8 Rollin, R.B 1982) Her role in the film in combination with her public persona brought represented female sexuality in a new and open way, as Linda frequently spoke of her open attitude to sex, and stance of anti-censorship--"I don't think sex is taboo, you know. I would be very uninhibited and very open-minded. No restrictions really. " (pg187, Lovelace, L. 1974).

In combination with the star of the film was the way in which the film itself was directed which brought echoes of authorship and artistic cinema, most notably the use of a soundtrack and how the film was edited; "Gerard Damiano edited the film to its music, so the actions would match and the beat would match ... like up and down strokes on the old shaft ... it was pretty clever." (Jeremy, R. 2007) The matching of the music, which was written and recorded for the film, to the explicit acts depicted on screen presented the pornographic film in an entirely new way, meaning that the medium was comparable to cinema.

Reaction to *Deep Throat*

Attitudes to the film changed with both the intervention of the anti-smut campaign in the late 1970s which led to the film being pulled from many cinemas, and also the publishing of Linda Lovelace's book *Ordeal*, in which she stated "Everyone that watches "Deep Throat" is watching me being raped." The book documented her abusive relationship with husband Chuck Traynor and stated that she was essentially being held at gunpoint for her entire career within the adult film industry.

The anti-smut campaign controversy now attached *Deep Throat* was in fact encouraging ticket sales for the film and appeared to bring into context how out of touch the government was in relation to the new openness now attached to sexuality, particularly female sexuality. This can be seen in the anecdotal story talked about in documentary *Inside Deep Throat* (Bailey, F. 2005) in which the judge was in fact unaware of both the purpose and location of the clitoris, suggesting that the government reaction to the film was completely opposite to the mainstreaming of sex in cinema currently happening in American culture.

When *Ordeal* was released however, feminist group Women against Pornography intervened and used Linda's story to promote the message of pornography as damaging to women and reinforcing sexist ideals and gender stereotypes. The switch of Linda Lovelace from empowered sex icon to victim complicated the previously positive reading of a new open attitude to sex in cinema.

Looking back to *Deep Throat*

Today this complicated discourse surrounding the film *Deep Throat* is further complicated, as pornography has become even more prominent in our culture. This attempt to make sense of how female sexuality is represented in our culture today can be seen from the numerous documentaries on the subject of *Deep Throat* and also the representations of the era of porno-chic in Hollywood cinema. The conflict is most present in the recently released biopic *Lovelace* (Epstein, R. 2013). Feminists such as Gloria Steinem and Catherine MacKinnon were involved in the production of the film, which meant that Linda Lovelace was presented primarily as a victim, however some critics were not satisfied with the representation of the pornography industry in the film arguing that it "risks

normalising exploitative pornography, sending the wrong message to children and young people”(Goldhill, O.2013) This suggests that demonizing the entire pornography industry would be too complicated in our current cultural landscape, as it is now even more present and mainstream in our society today, and the addition of more forms of pornography as well as more voices within the debate. Placing the blame upon Linda’s abusive relationship means that the issue would not have to be directly dealt with within a narrative of Linda’s life.

Linda Williams addresses why it is that the pornography debate is still ongoing in our society, and why it is that the debate has become far more complex: “Where it once seemed necessary to argue vehemently against pro-censorship, anti-pornography feminism for the value and importance of studying pornography [...] today porn studies addresses a veritable explosion of sexually explicit materials that cry out for better understanding. Feminist debates about whether pornography should exist at all have paled before the simple fact that still and moving image pornographies have become fully recognisable fixtures of popular culture.” (Boyle, K. pg. 2, 2006) From this it can be seen that pornography has become so relevant and stable in our culture that attempting to deconstruct its possible positive or damaging influences on ideas of female sexuality is almost impossible, as the word pornography is far too restrictive. This is why our culture attempts to make sense of its presence by returning back to its initial mainstreaming in 1972, with the release of *Deep Throat*.

Conclusion

Deep Throat and the changing discourse surrounding it from 1972 up to now, demonstrate the problematic debate of feminism in pornography and also the changing nature of how it represents female sexuality. While it has been shown as positive to female sexuality in some cases, the controversy surrounding its star also presents a view as women in pornography as victims. The negative connotations attached to feminists such as Angela Dworkin mean that there is a backlash against the idea of pornography being an oppressive force against women today.

In conclusion, *Deep Throat* is seminal in pinpointing the beginning of pornography being absorbed into mainstream culture and discourse surrounding the film today reflects current ideas about female sexuality today.

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Filmography

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Inside Deep Throat (2005), Directed by Bailey, F. Barbato, R. USA, Imagine Entertainment

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