

WOMEN & PORNOGRAPHY

BY BETTINA ARNDT

What is porn for women? Is it the sexual material that appeals to men or are we more interested in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*?

A FEW YEARS ago a group of Cambridge women photographers put together a clever book called *Porn for Women*. It was filled with racy images but not exactly what you might imagine. Instead of full-frontal hunks, the book mockingly featured men doing household chores. There were great-looking guys saying things like: "Well, I can't offer you any solutions but I am a good listener."

A nice joke, but it raises the question – what is porn for women? Well, for many of us it clearly isn't the sexual material that appeals to most men. Just look at what happens when a wife stumbles across her husband's secret cache of internet porn. Last year a British journalist from the *Daily Telegraph*, Lesley Garner, published a letter from a mother who was horrified when she discovered what her husband was looking at. Garner was swamped by letters from other women appalled by what they had seen. "They were shocked, insulted and angry," she says.

But it's not just what they saw, it's the fact their partner was looking at it. Here's Irene, a woman taking part in my current sex research project, writing about the horror she felt when she found her husband's internet porn collection. "The images made me feel vulnerable; fearful he was comparing me. I constantly feared my performance wasn't good enough for him." Instead of enjoying the sexual images, all they did was remind her of her own self-perceived inadequacies.

And she felt betrayed: "It definitely felt like it was worse than adultery because there wasn't a real person there. I thought there must be something seriously wrong with our relationship and possibly his thinking about sex." As it turned out, like most men, her husband wasn't looking at illegal pornography, only explicit photos of men and women having sex. Despite all the talk about porn consisting of violence against women, most male porn users are simply interested in sweaty naked adult

bodies and lots of eager, willing women. According to *The Porn Report*, a 2008 analysis on porn use from a group of Australian academics, (Allan McKee, Katherine Albury and Catharine Lumby), mainstream porn is largely free of violence or other degrading material.

But many women find it offensive. What's fascinating about Irene's story is that she couldn't look at the stuff until she discovered she had low hormone levels, went on testosterone treatment and found herself drawn to it. "My ideas on sex have changed – I have sexual thoughts I never had before. I fantasise and watch and read porn when I am in the mood, or when he is tired. Not that I find porn tasteful – just helpful. It is no longer the enemy."

How fascinating that with testosterone she acquired a taste for the visual titillation that appeals to so many men. These days she certainly isn't alone, particularly

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with female producers creating sexual material appealing to women. Back in the '70s I met Candida Royalle, a former porn star turning her hand to producing films. Candida was convinced women wanted something other than the piston mechanics that dominated male porn. They want tenderness, more than bodies, she told me. Her company, *Femme Productions*, led the way to producing tasteful women's and couple's porn.

According to *The Porn Report*, nearly half of all porn users now watch this type of movie with their partners. Even more surprising are the numbers of women

getting involved in the booming industry of DIY porn, where ordinary men and women bare all in front of webcams – becoming the new porn stars next door. Here's a woman writing for me about her first taste of DIY: "I would get bored, so I would log on to Yahoo Chat. I became involved with a man obsessed with masturbating for me and I became obsessed with masturbating for him. Cybersex became a daily encounter, enhancing sex between me and my

partner because he would watch without the guy on the other end knowing; we would have hot sex when I logged off."

Not your cup of tea? Well, such adventures are not to most women's taste. We're far more likely to prefer the occasional steamy passage in our steady diet of romance novels. *Bodice rippers* are the real female porn, with romance literature pushing worldwide book sales to stratospheric heights. But it makes sense. Women are raised on the minutiae of connection and emotional expression. Of course we want a plot: twists and turns of heady dramas complete with melting moments that end in flying lingerie. The what-ifs, the exquisite tension – that's what lights our fire. How can watching a man on webcam playing with his bits compete with that? ■

