Porno-Graphics and Porno-Tactics: Desire, Affect, and Representation in Pornography

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In a channel for amateur pornographic videos online, an odd video bobs into view titled “Crowded Bus.” This video has about 6,900,000 hits. A person sitting in the front section of a bus has shot this video, and its lingering, intrusive gaze passes over various women seated and standing around. One or two of them notice the camera and give irritated glances. Most ignore it and continue talking or staring into the distance, the banality of their daily commute undisturbed by this almost idiotic and perverse sexual gaze on bodies packed into a bus. Buses and trains are spaces in India where women are often harassed; hence the separation of the bus into gendered zones so that women can sit safely in the front. But these are also spaces in which myriad consensual yet covert sexual encounters are taking place between people.

The camera in this video could almost be a prosthetic extension, acting like a hand passing over the different bodies. Yet it is also the presence of the camera as a technological device and its ability to capture from within and yet separated from the encounter, that sexualizes this moment — a moment in which, technically speaking, nothing overtly erotic takes place. Perhaps the pornographic in this video also is in encountering the video in a collection of other far more obviously sexual videos. The viewer is possibly encased in a private space, whether watching on a mobile phone, in their room on a laptop or computer, or in the booth of a musty cyber cafe. The context of the encounter with the video,
whether private or not, is another point at which the ordinary becomes sexualized, and the bodies of women caught in the routines of their daily life become available as video pornography.

Pornography is a genre of visual material that is defined by certain characteristics that have become fixed and even predictable with time. Pornography is sexually explicit and has semi or total nudity. Amateur pornography in India may often escape or defy the characteristics of the genre. In one video that is described as *kaand* (which could loosely translate as scandal or scandalous), the man behind the camera is heard serenading a woman with an old film song, and she looks coyly into the camera as she loosens her clothes at the end of her day, removes her shoes and rubs her feet. The video ends with an embrace between them, as the camera is turned to capture them both. These almost romantic or subtly erotic videos are definitely the exceptions in the stream of fairly obviously sexual videos. They also could be stubs that refer to more sexual videos. The genre of conventional or Western pornography has evolved a fixed rhythm and pattern that mimics or caters to human arousal and climax, and it must include specific sexual acts like blowjobs and penetration to be recognizable as pornography. In the context of amateur pornography in India, these ‘markers’ of course could be present in the video clips, but often are not. This could be because of the clandestine or hurried way in which such videos are shot. The clips capture a moment that is not staged – sometimes a person switches off the camera between sexual acts as if to mark a moment when the camera must now exit. Often clips are 10 seconds to a minute long and are just glimpses into a sexual act.

While some videos are leaked images of celebrities or public figures such as godmen or gurus, politicians, actors, but an overwhelming number of these amateur porn videos show ordinary lives and people. These are shot on low-resolution cameras, and the grainy texture of these videos is speckled with the hazy suggestion of bodies and body parts.
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Porno-Tactics

The beginnings of amateur video porn in India can be traced back to 2001, when a private video of a couple was leaked into public circulation (Mysore Mallige). In 2004, a boy (school student in Delhi) made a MMS clip that suggested a blowjob, and this also got leaked. Since the early 2000s and advent of various digital technologies of image making and distribution, there has been a thriving network of the exchange and production of amateur porn, between local search engines, torrent services and piracy markets – exactly the same apparatus that makes citizen journalism, autonomous archives and independent online video possible. Amateur video porn is thus a distinct product of a wider contemporary and digital turn. It is made using cheap digital equipment, ranging from the mobile phone camera to handheld digital cameras. Online and offline networks of distribution allow for circulation that avoids the state’s attempts to strictly govern media circulation. Can this mode of circulation, production and distribution that is independent, outside of State control and tactical in its use of available technology, of people and of other resources, be described as a sort of porno-tactics?

Pornography is a blind spot for the Indian State. Since independence in 1947, the courts in India have adjudicated on the matter of obscenity – this has included short stories, scenes in movies that are suggestive but not explicit, nudity in paintings and art. Thus there are stringent standards of obscenity for what circulates in the mainstream (newspapers, television, cinema etc.), even while a robust circulation of semi-pornographic and salacious books, magazines and soft porn films continue to thrive. Pornography as a specific category is not mentioned in Indian law, except under recent amendments to the Information Technology Act, 2000. Paradoxically obscenity is the legal category within which pornography is subsumed and also left out.

Recent decisions of the courts sensibly alter parameters of what can be called obscene to suit contemporary standards and that the courts must judge the work as a whole, whether it is a painting, art, film or book, rather than only parts of it. For instance, in a
recent judgment about a painting by the famous artist, M.F. Husain, it was argued that nudity per se is not enough for a work to be declared obscene because in certain forms of art, nudity conveys meanings other than the sexual which must also be taken into consideration by the court.

The Scandal of Nether Networks

In the incident regarding school students and the circulation of a MMS clip mentioned before, there was also an attempt to sell this MMS clip for approximately 2 dollars. The clip contained conversations between the boy and the girl that suggested sexual activity and minimal nudity (only the girl is visible in the clip). A college student (not connected to the school students) attempted to sell the video clip on a website called Bazee, which was then a subsidiary of eBay. A case was filed against the CEO of the website. The judgment laid down preliminary standards, which gave a very high level of responsibility to intermediaries i.e. those who provide the space onto which others can upload content. All those who provided open spaces online such as webzines, bulletin boards, hosting services and so on, were swept under this umbrella term of intermediaries who could be held responsible for content uploaded by others. This effectively ensured a high degree of control over how the internet was used and concomitantly authorized the shrinking of public spaces for free speech and discussion outside the purview of the State. Later these standards for intermediaries were passed as an amendment to the IT Act.

The legal response to the MMS incident should have focussed on the violation of privacy and trust of the girl captured in the video. In 2012, when a girl was gang raped and murdered in Delhi, a slew of legal reforms took place that altered sexual assault law and it was in these changes that finally there was specific recognition of the offence of taking or circulating a video without the consent of the people whose image has been captured.

But till these legal reforms in 2013, the legal response to the scandal of the circulation of this particular MMS clip involving school students and all other kinds of pornographic material has ulti-
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The state has been provided with new mechanisms to control speech through website managers, internet service providers, social media services, and the companies that provide them. The state’s anxiety about free speech is not so much about the content of the material or the images in them, as about the networks through which it can be disseminated. This is most evident in such legal responses to the illicit circulation of pirated and pornographic material, which includes the occasional banning of mobile phones in schools, shutting down or restrictions on messaging services, raids on piracy stores, detailed regulations for cyber-cafes and so on.

While the state attempts to fix responsibility and liability, the circulation of a slippery object like a short MMS clip on the internet makes it difficult to fix blame for transactions, for they keep extending and transferring through nodes in the network. These could be described as porno-tactics – the anonymity and multitude that characterizes covert consumption of pornography and the tacit agreements that allow for mass circulation to take place, away from the public eye and legal gaze.

Someone Like You

At a cheap Chinese restaurant, a friend of mine leaned across the dirty white tablecloth and in a hushed, urgent voice said - “That really young girl at the next table, I think I’ve seen her in a porn video.” There is something amusing and uncanny about this moment. The pixelated nature of mobile phone porn makes it hard to fix on a person in a porn clip, for they are simultaneously nobody you will ever know and everyone you will ever meet. In the Indian context the images are often grainy because cheap mobile phone cameras are used for recording, and often people in these videos deliberately turn their faces away or keep it an angle so only certain rather obvious features like skin or hair color and slight details of the face are apparent. Identity is cloaked and if inadvertently, identity is leaked, then these videos ferociously circulate as scandal and porn.

Scandal is actually used as a category of Indian pornography – a specific entry in the lexicon of online pornography that usu-
ally lists categories in terms of acts or bodies (such as threesomes, multi-racial, Asian, gay, anal). Scandal and kaand, as it is sometimes colloquially referred to, is a specific kind of video where it is likely the girl is either unaware of the existence of the camera or trusts her lover with it. Some of these videos are no bigger than 200 pixels in resolution and the hidden, stationary camera barely captures the conversations or “action.” It is the knife-edge of duplicity that makes these videos compelling.

Often video porn reveals the nastiness of gender, caste and class related dichotomies in direct and personal ways. A young girl is forced to reveal her name during a blowjob, another has her kurta (shirt) pulled off too abruptly, rapes are recorded and shared, vulnerable girls from lower castes are targeted and their images and bodies are trafficked. The vast majority of the everyday pornographic reflects and reveals how the configurations of caste and patriarchy are enacted on the body of a woman, particularly one who might be in need of livelihood or money.

A few video clips accidentally escape these configurations—a man struggles to keep a hard-on for a bored woman, who flings her hair over her shoulder in a gesture of feminine superiority and disdain at this profoundly ordinary moment. In Mysore Mallige, the gaze of the camera lingers on the girl’s body before and after she bathes, while she changes clothes or just walks around the room. Her naked body and her longing gaze are both centerpieces for the camera that shoots everything in night shot mode, giving it a greenish tint that simultaneously renders it ghostly, amateur and intimate.

These gritty videos are the under tow of illicit media circulation, and can be summoned from the darker, intestinal cavities of the internet with keywords such as <scandal> <desi sex> <kaand> <hostel> <porn> <naked> <nude> <savita bhabhi> <hot aunty> <hot pictures> <nityananda> <tiwari> <sting> <sex tape> <dps mms> <debonair> <hidden camera> <changing room> <human digest> <surveillance camera> <web cam sex> <cyber café sex> etc. These videos cannot make any claim to radical politics around gender, sexuality and ethics, and like most pornography they work for heteronormativity rather than to destabilize it. Amateur pornog-
Everyday Pornography pose troubling questions about ethics, trust and the power relations within which they are made, but legal questions about consent and privacy are rarely raised in public discourse, while those regarding culture and women’s roles are. Several videos that form part of these subterranean pornographic video cultures are of harassment, even rape or other kinds of sexual assault. Pornographic tactics are that which allow even such invasive and unethical material to evade the stranglehold of law and technology on circulation.

Pornography is popularly considered to be the easy response to desire and frustration – it is simply about masturbation and sexual pleasure, and unlike cinema it doesn’t complicate with narrative and subjectivity. It could be staged or performed and as a genre it is about depicting and evincing real corporeal pleasure (arousal and climax). Amateur pornography is also ostensibly about the same – about giving pleasure by capturing the real. But it also cannot evade the real and carries with it the divisions of the society and its most entrenched hierarchies. While watching we feel we know these people who are seemingly like us, and so we are caught between the cinematic pull of these images and the corporeal pull of pornography and arousal. It is reality television, it is intimate and it is often a betrayal of someone’s trust, someone just like you and even sometimes a horrific violation. Amateur video, in contrast to large-screen cinema, is on a small or miniature screen that feeds into and off desire and fear. It is a parasitic or symbiotic beast that exchanges and sucks (bandwidth usage for pleasure, money for gratification), leaving a trail of dread and fascination about the “realness” of its uncanny images.