

Chapter 2

PLEASING INTENSITIES: MASOCHISM AND AFFECTIVE PLEASURES IN PORN SHORT FICTIONS

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The escalation of sexual consumerism across multiple sites has been identified as a 'striptease culture' of 'self-revelation' (McNair, 2002: 81); essentially a good thing, sexualization frees up sexual feeling and offers a 'democratization of desire' through its expanded opportunities for sexual understanding and pleasure. Those products still institutionally regulated as 'pornography' figure in these arguments as the perverse 'other', occasionally capable of liberating sexual attitudes in their own right, but generally identified as the benchmark of 'undemocratic' media against which newer mainstream sex media are to be judged and designated good or bad 'representation'.

In this context it might seem rather perverse to turn to a more traditional sexual form - the top-shelf magazine - in order to examine its fictional characteristics. But that is what this chapter will do, focusing on stories in *Forum* magazine, one of the few spaces on the top shelves of UK newsagents still devoted to the written word rather than images.¹ Published since 1968, *Forum: The International Journal of Human Relations* was, until the recent sell-off, part of the Northern and Shell portfolio. Originally conceived 'to take the overspill from the *Penthouse* letters pages, which were dominated by a debate on whether or not one should spank one's wife' (Coldwell² quoted

in Veitch, 2004), *Forum* offers in-depth features on what might be termed 'fetishistic' sexual practices alongside readers' letters, advice and fiction. My examination is necessarily truncated; there is only space to explore two stories from the 2000 volume of the magazine. My intention is to revisit erotic fiction and examine the ways in which it might be said to speak to its readers.

As theorizations of sexual media expand, problems remain in the implicit designation of pornography as an already too well-known category. Its forms of production, representation and consumption are too often assumed to perpetuate the objectification and fragmentation of sex and, most especially, women's bodies. This essentializing is made possible by the constant insistence on porn's 'phallic origins' (Williams, 1989), as if there is a quantifiable 'maleness' to its production, presentation and consumption. This is a key theme of Pamela Paul's recent discussion of 'pornified' culture and her claim that 'pornography is not about desire and fantasy; it's about hostility and shame' (Paul, 2005: 273) – a compounding of earlier rejections of porn on the basis of its aesthetic poverty and simplistic assumptions that porn narratives are *just* about fucking to spur male masturbation. The alleged narrowness of characterization and plot and the exaggerations of sexual prowess and anatomy in porn fiction are supposedly clear indications of their 'harmfulness' or, if we reject moralizing, their unimportance as a form of human expression because they are so goal (orgasm)-directed (Richard Dyer, 1992). Where connections are made between porn stories and other literary forms, it is generally only to reiterate the singular intentions of porn so that 'there is no need to examine individual books' (Sontag, 1969/2003: 403) unless they rise above the mass and do something new and innovative:

The singleness of intention often condemned by critics is, when the work merits treatment as art, compounded of many resonances. The physical sensations involuntarily produced in someone reading the book carry with them something that touches upon the reader's whole experience of his humanity – and his limits as personality and as a body (Sontag, 1969/2003: 410).

Sontag looks for the particular prick³ and innovative surprise of the obscene, capable of inspiring more than masturbatory impulse. This

kind of account relies on the idea of the critic as a knowing scholar who can uncover the true meaning of stories and enable readers' perception of the 'radical' nature of texts they thought were just for titillation! Clearly issues of *quality* are being invoked here, and while there may be much to say about different forms and styles of storytelling, Bourdieu's (1984) critique of the social distributions and functions of taste should make us wary of citing quality as a guarantor of anything.

FORUM MAGAZINE

Forum claims an interesting status for itself, clearly signposting its interests in the 'scientific' exploration of sexuality and sexual practices – its board of consultants includes various health professionals, academics and sex educators. Its intentions to enlighten its audience are highlighted in each issue:

Forum ... believes that because of ignorance, fear and guilt, the great majority of people in our country are today enjoying only a fraction of the potential joy and pleasure they could receive from their relationships ... by sharing the experiences of others, our readers gain a greater understanding of themselves as well as others through realising that no one is alone in their fears or frustrations or unique in their problems.

In *Forum*, sexuality is constructed as a repressed force to be liberated. Its stories and confessions of sexual experimentation and pleasurable possibilities are discursively staged within a 'progressive sexual politics' (Juffer, 1998: 123), and the invocation of a shared sexual community is articulated around the therapeutic good of educating and exploring desire. *Forum* claims 40 per cent of its readers are women, a statistic that challenges the received wisdom that top-shelf magazines can only cater to single-sex readerships. Articles, features and stories in *Forum* are aimed at a mixed readership and because of this the magazine offers an opportunity to think about the possible pleasures offered to men *and* women within its pages and how those may be similar rather than distinct gendered pleasures. In the analysis that follows I want to examine its stories' possible address to male *and* female readers

through the invocation of bodily affects and a masochistic sensibility.

A cursory reading of *Forum* suggests a preoccupation with themes of power, focusing on experiences of bondage, domination and spanking. Other themes surface but the cover image of a woman in soft bondage costume, the editorial page outline of a safer sex code and articles on fetishist practices proclaim *Forum's* focus on non-vanilla sex practices. Of the 24 stories examined for this chapter, 19, mostly told in the first person, featured women as the main protagonist. The remaining five focused on male characters (narrated in the third person, possibly reflecting a general scepticism about the reliability of men's sexual accounts⁴). Most featured some form of interaction between two or more people, often heterosexual – although five stories focused on women with women and no male protagonist; one story featured no sexual action, just flirting ('Prime Numbers', issue 5); one centred on masturbation ('Water of Life', issue 7); and in seven stories practices such as caning and spanking were described.

As with any other publication seeking nationwide distribution, *Forum* has to stay within the distributors' guidelines⁵ which forbid any representation of banned sexual practices as outlined in the 1959 Obscene Publications Act and in the distributors' further interpretation of 'problematic' or 'unacceptable' sexual proclivities. Certain practices, including watersports, coprophilia, underage sex, and sadistic pleasures, are banned. However, many of *Forum's* stories rely heavily on dramatizations of a masochistic sensibility: the erotic play of coercion, humiliation and pain and their interplay with sexual pleasure.

To describe the stories in *Forum* as masochistic need not be to re-enter the space of anti-porn theorizations of subordination. Instead, what I will argue is that expressions and descriptions of bodily discomfort, pain or shame are used in the stories to produce an emotional experience of sexual pleasure centred on bodily sensation. Where such experiences are explored in mainstream media – *9½ Weeks* (1986), *Crash* (1996), *Quills* (2000) and *Romance* (1999) – they are generally labelled 'sado-masochistic' representations, reflecting the traditional linkage of sadism and masochism. This linkage is predicated on the notion of a power relationship where one person inflicts pain on another. In Freudian thought this is an infantile form of

sexual communication, inferior to properly mature forms of sexual conduct. Freud's assessment of masochism denies the link between its practice and sexual pleasure. As Phillips writes, 'Freud seems to be seeing ... the masochist ... [as] the willing victim, the person who docilely accepts punishment rather than standing up for himself' (1998: 27). The desire for other forms of connection – for example, stimulation of the skin – not tied to vaginal penetration is to be transcended in order to achieve fully adult sexuality. Thus psychoanalysis infantilizes physical and embodied experiences of sexual pleasure.

However, for practitioners, masochism is a form of human expression drawing on sexual dissidence, pleasure, escapism, transcendence and the refusal of normal genital sexuality, allowing for safer sex explorations of the lived body and its transformative potentials (Beckman, 2001). Such transformations need not be the exclusive property of one sexual identity and may well offer pleasures to those readers who would identify themselves as without masochistic tendencies. Unfortunately, the problematic conception of masochism as a passion for pain, submission and self-abnegation which is naturally aligned with femininity remains steadfastly alive in feminist debates and cultural theory. Because of this, feminist sexual ethics have often focused on the need for women to excise their 'incorrect' fantasies of submission (Bartky, 1990). As Grimshaw observes, this suggests:

that somewhere there might be an 'authentic' female imagination, free of all the influence of male domination ... It also supposes that we have some clear means of telling what is and is not politically 'correct' – that the meanings of desires and fantasies are, as it were, written on their face, and that we can clearly separate those which are authentically feminine from those which are masculine, or the effect of social subordination (Grimshaw, 1993: 157).

I hope that an emphasis on feeling and affect, 'the corporeal intensifications' (Grosz, 1995: 199) of experiencing discomfort and pleasure, may help to explore the ways in which some pornographic fictions animate readers' responses without falling back on the claim that male readers have an inherent sadism and women an infantile desire to be punished. In the analysis that follows, I reject the fundamental

misunderstanding of masochistic encounters as exclusively desirous of the receipt of pain, although that might form a part of some people's practices. I've chosen two *Forum* stories, 'Supermarket Slut' and 'The Ring', from volume 34, issues 2 and 1, 2000,⁶ which demonstrate the importance of understanding how 'feeling' rather than power is conveyed in these fictional sexual imaginaries.

'SUPERMARKET SLUT'

Amanda's passion for flashing gets her into a sticky situation ...

'I like to tease the boys on the check-out.' With her 36DD breasts and blonde hair the female narrator of this story plays a game at the supermarket: she queries the price of her purchases, commanding the shop assistant's attention by placing the item between her breasts so that he touches them as he retrieves the item for price-checking. 'I laugh in their face and smile. And they smile as they look at my arse and I walk out of the store.' She's played this game for some time, but on returning from holiday she finds that there is a new system in place: a Client Privilege scheme has been introduced.

Amanda joins it and gets money to spend in-store, but when she next tries her price-check game, she's taken to the manager's office and told she's broken the rules. Ron shows her the contract she signed and tells her, 'You owe us privileges, my dear.' In the storeroom she finds out what her obligations are. She is told to strip off her top and climb up a pile of sugar bags. At the top, she's ordered to take off her knickers and then to come down again to fellate an assistant:

Ron, I think it was then, he wanted me on the milk trolley and licked me between my legs. I kept my eyes shut but my pussy went up to meet his tongue, I couldn't help it, and then he entered me from behind, making me bend over a cold stack of butter bricks that made my nipples hard. I don't know who came after. I heard the plastic doors flap and breathe as someone else came in. Ron came inside me with a great sigh and let go of my hips with a last squeeze of my tits. Then this other one, I think it might have been the pimply boy from aisle seven, turned me round and wanted to suckle on my breasts. He sucked me till I came and then made me kiss his cock, just kiss it once or twice, till he came

on my face. That was the first night. I still go there sometimes.

On a superficial level, this story conforms to criticisms of pornographic fictions. It is written in prose that combines 'extreme fantasy with absolute cliché - as if the fantasy, however wild and excessive it may seem, had been gone through so many times that it had long since become incapable of being anything other than a weary and hopeless repetition of itself' (Marcus, 2003: 389). According to writers like Marcus, sexual couplings in pornography are a form of 'organ grinding' (Marcus, 2003: 392) in which language is limited to a constant reiteration of 'more, more, more', devoid of metaphoric power or emotional exposition. But, as in critiques of formulaic commercialized popular fictions like romance, this is condemnation, not analysis. The pleasures of reading become a pathological *use* of pornography, with little space for understanding *how* it works effectively upon the pulses.

There remains the necessary task of examining the text - not to get at its 'true' meaning, but to explore the ways its particular repetitions might be understood as enabling perception, and affective and physical engagements. This is not simply to challenge those accounts stressing porn users' passivity and an insistence on reader activity in the porn narrative. Instead I'm arguing that we need to understand the proposals of a porn story as more than a catalogue of particular kinds of stereotypical representations. This is especially true where analysis makes claims about the direct relation between representation and the male sexual psyche and its eroticization of female vulnerability.

The pathologizing of sexual relations between men and women as always turning on women's vulnerability is a key trope of anti-porn theorizing and is often replicated in 'analyses' of porn. The terms 'subordination', 'objectification' and 'stereotyping' have been used to explain the sexual pull of pornography, but these descriptive terms are not politically neutral and their status as tools of analysis has not gone undebated. They issue imperatives to the analyst to search for evidence of 'harm' or the reduction of individuals to the status of objects, thereby sidelining the idea of fiction as a dramatic expression of emotions, sensations, frustrations and pleasures. For example, in his analysis of the UK publication *Men Only*, Simon Hardy (1998)

uses the insights of radical feminism to make the claim that the unequal power structure that is patriarchy is reflected, embellished and eroticized in the magazine's fiction.⁷

In order to sustain this claim, Hardy has to divide stories into scenarios defined as 'discrete sexual interaction between two or more people' (1998: 77). The sexual interactions turn on gender difference, 'for the Woman of pornography, to be aroused is to be powerless and to be powerless is to be aroused' (1998: 85). The Lover orders the Woman to remove clothing, threatens her with orgasm, sexual taunts and his Big Cock. The Woman usually adopts poses that stress her passivity and the 'dirtiness' of the act. Her submission to male desire is completed in her 'animalistic' and 'orgiastic' pleasure: a vital feature of the scenarios - 'the sexual conquest of the woman ... represents the conquest of the social self by natural essence' (1998: 95). Thus the narrative is assessed using 'scenario of degradation ... as the basic unit of analysis' (1998: 77). Sometimes 'scenario of degradation' draws on Andrea Dworkin's analysis of heterosex as inherently degrading for women (1981): a theoretical and methodological position which insists that any instance of sexual activity must be seen as 'damaging' to women. This analysis also claims that pornography eroticizes sexual activity as pleasurable because of its links to power and women's inability to freely choose. Pleasure comes from seeing women submit. Signs of women's submission to male sexuality are the *only* relevant indicators, confirming pornography's reflection of the real state of male/female relations. If male sexuality is conceived as dominating and bullying, and pornography 'tells the truth' about that sexuality, there is no point in looking for any other signs within the text. They are simply distractions or the disguising of real politics.

But this is a circular argument, in which 'sex scenes' are conceived as replications in print of *actual social relations*. Hardy draws the following conclusions: the Woman's verbal gestures are usually pleading in the face of the Lover's threats; her physical responses are 'forced' out of her in that she can't help but orgasm; and her appearance is submissive to the Big Cock and the effects of being fucked. Such conclusions absolutely refuse more complex conceptualizations of power as I shall go on to discuss. According to Hardy and other analysts who

approach porn fiction through the concept of 'objectification', the subordination of women in the sex act is the only distinguishable and important 'fact' for readers, and their relation to the text is entirely gendered – the male reader inserts himself into the narrative space of the male protagonist. Therefore a certain welding together of the readers' lived 'reality' with the textual 'fantasy' is inherent in the use of pornography (Hardy, 1998: 123). However, this is a remarkably over-simplified explanation of readers' pleasures, dependent upon the notion of audiences' vulnerabilities and their desire to 'identify'.

Identification is a conceptual conceit that Martin Barker has argued 'benefits by remaining unclear' (2005: 354), and which has no real ability to grasp the complexities of the relationships readers have with their chosen media. Identification with the hero of the porn story is based on the simple equation that men identify according to gender and that the male character is simply there to fuck in place of the reader. To make such claims, it is necessary to remove any other elements as important to the reader – the narrative, propositions, form, conversations, motivations, and actions. All those features which mark it as a story have to be ignored to generalize about identification.

My suggestion is that porn stories are not identificatory tools; rather they are processual, requiring of readers that they accrete elements of the story as they read, and understand the characters, motivations and actions accordingly. Moreover, as Altman (1999) has suggested in relation to film, readers 'enter' stories and agree to engage with the 'rules' of the story even where these may conflict with other cultural norms. Fictions should therefore be understood through their specific modes of inviting readers to suspend 'realities' in order that the 'rules' of the particular form can be followed. A dialogic approach to stories (Volosinov, 1973; Martin Barker, 1989) is useful here, emphasizing as it does, the proposals of story forms and their invitations to an imaginative progression through their particular forms of sequence, unfolding and resolution. It is not that the sex has no importance – these are pornographic stories and by their very nature must be explicit about sexual detail and action – but sexual material cannot be directly mapped onto sexual intercourse in patriarchy. In other words, it is subject to the 'rules' of porn narratives, not 'real' life.

In a porn narrative, readers follow the 'rules' which allow for the imaginative exploration of recognizing desire, letting go and being seduced: the transformation of the ordinary into the sexually extraordinary. Porn stories are not documents of 'real' relationships, nor are they simply fictional and therefore entirely removed from the 'real'. Instead I am proposing that they should be understood as the means by which readers can experiment with various types of feeling, including those which might be understood to be risky or 'bad'.

The fundamental principle of much debate about the problems of porn and its relations to the 'real' has been the insistence on a one-dimensional relationship between reality and fantasy. Indeed, as Barker and Brooks have argued, 'if it were possible to insist, as the standard "scare" mode of argument does, that people respect and maintain a clear line between fantasy and reality, they would lose the power to imagine transformations' (1998: 288). Ang has argued that the 'internal' realism of the world within the soap opera is combined with its 'external' unrealism (1985: 47) in order to allow viewers the possibility of *playing* with reality within the confines of a fictional world. This is a 'game that enables one to place the limits of the fictional and the real under discussion, to make them fluid' (1985: 49). Searching for 'messages' encoded in the text and their 'decodings' by readers ignores the complexities of the interactions readers enjoy in all media forms, including pornography. Audience research has shown that readers and viewers are self-conscious about their media practices and the ways in which these are understood (Barker and Brooks, 1998; Barker et al, 2001; Hill, 1997; Smith, 2007). Readers and viewers don't simply decode messages, they 'rehearse the complex connections between forms of the imaginary, and [their] pictures of and plans for reality' (Barker and Brooks, 1998: 287).

So rather than assume gendered identifications, I want to suggest something different. Readers approach the porn story as a dramatization of the sexual moment and the possible pleasures of surrendering to sexual delight. Gender is less important to this process than the ability to give expression to libidinal intensities. In Hardy's account, the bodily and emotional experiences described in the stories are sidelined in favour of a focus on the ways in which the sexual encounter might be understood to replicate gender power relations. If, on the

other hand, we focus on the bodily sensations of exhibition, humiliation, shame and pain as 'vehicles ... for staging dramas of suspense, supplication, abandon and relief' (Williams, 1989: 195), it becomes clear that they are not just stories of domination by one gender over another, but ways of expressing the intensifications of bodily experiences and feelings.

Grosz observes that 'erotic pleasures are evanescent; they are forgotten almost as they occur', but porn stories attempt to recreate pleasure as a textual formation and in the body of the reader – to revivify 'the ache of desire' (1995: 195). How do they do this? Reading is frequently a solitary activity and reading porn can be a particularly private engagement with the text. All texts require that the viewer, reader, listener orients themselves to the proposals of that text (Volosinov, 1973). In a porn narrative we are invited to join in the proposal offered to follow a narrative of desire expressed in the sensations of the body and to engage with the quite wayward expressions of motivation, sexual energy and sensitivities of particular bodily regions contained within the story. Often, as in the stories I describe here, the narrative is offered as a first-person exploration and explanation of the interiority of the experience of sexual arousal. The story offers us ways of engaging with the body's responsiveness to stimulation through the exploration of the feelings of the narrator. The reader engages in an empathetic relation with the narration – this is how sex can feel, how it works on the body. It is a relation of co-animation.

In 'Supermarket Slut' the story begins with a quite lengthy description of the narrator's body, the ways she moves it and how that makes her feel. Amanda's narration is charged with physicality – from her description of her breasts through to her hyper-awareness of her impact on the 'pimply young men' at the check-out:

I lean my bare arm with the little blonde hairs on it that they'd love to kiss ... They have to get up, trying to hide the hard-on they've got in their little polyester supermarket uniform trousers.

The narration lays out the particular power game Amanda likes to play, amusing herself as she arouses and embarrasses the check-out

boys. Things change when Ron the manager gets involved and here it is Amanda's turn to feel shame: 'I don't strip off like a common tart,' I said, blushing, my face burning, 'in a supermarket warehouse - what d'you think I am?'

The references to shame and humiliation are a way of bringing bodily experiences to the fore and they dramatize the reversibility of physical sensations: just like the check-out boys, Amanda is embarrassed *and* aroused. The story's erotic power depends upon the reversals of power and of bodily affect - the physicality of the body in all its relations to the social - so that shame brings a sensitivity and intensity to the sexual scene. The masochist sensibility of the story explores the borders and boundaries between painful emotions - fear, risk and shame - and eroticism: the interior voice tells us, 'I was still a little tearful, but I was flushed with excitement.' This ambiguity of sexual feeling and the contradictions of tearfulness and excitement dramatizes the capitulation to feeling. Pain, understood at its broadest to include emotional as well as physical pain and encompassing discomfort through to hurt, 'serves as a mode of corporeal intensification' (Grosz, 1995: 199). In dramatizing masochistic incidents these stories draw on vocabularies of intensity and demonstrate the ways in which the body has the potential to *really* feel. This is a corporeal intensification which requires going beyond the limits of 'ordinary, nice, well-behaved sex'; submitting to feeling, letting go, letting oneself experience sexual desire. Drawing on Bersani, Phillips insists that:

Eroticism involves the sense of an interior self, a self that is always vulnerable to invasion from the outside - that defends itself yet longs for the invasion. Masochism lends itself to all erotic experience in this sense, since it involves the capacity to be shattered into joy or *jouissance* by an extreme pleasure that is also intense suffering (Phillips, 1998: 150).

To explore this further, I turn to another story, where anger and social discomfort are the principal affects that drive the erotic play.

'THE RING'

Some presents are more intimate than others ...

A nameless woman anticipates her lover's arrival at a bar. She tells us that it's a favourite haunt of her successful, professional boyfriend, but she finds it intolerable because of the smugness and posing of the designer-obsessed clientele:

Gleaming sports cars conspicuously glide into the car park, driven by people who have never had to look after their own possessions. They don't know what it is to cherish something ... They never get attached to a familiar item. It goes out of fashion and is discarded because *it fails to impress*.

As she waits, she meditates on her relationship with Jason – is she just a possession to be displayed? She looks at her Gucci watch, a present from him, and contemplates how she will dump him. He arrives, 'cocksure' and 'positively sizzling'. If only 'he wasn't so disarmingly horny'. No verbal greeting is exchanged but his hand goes up her skirt, discovers she's wearing knickers and insists she takes them off. Going to the toilet to do as he asks, she is angry but asks herself, 'Why am I so excited?' In the toilet she touches the small clit ring he gave her, and finds that the piercing is healed and that touching it gives her a shock of pleasure. Excitement mounting, she returns to Jason; he puts his hand up her dress to attach something to the clit ring. As she walks to the bar the something – a weight – pulls on the ring and sends 'pure pleasure down to my toes'. Other men show their sexual interest in her but she's irritated that she's 'suffering' sexual excitement while Jason is so unconcerned. Kissing him, she is pleased to find he has an erection:

I can feel his hot breath against my shoulder and he really is getting quite worked up. He stands and takes my hand and I'm thinking. 'Hooray! I win, I win. Now give me my prize. Take me to that trendy apartment of yours, tie me to the four-poster and fuck my lights out.'

Instead of going home, they go into a club where she dances and, because of the clit ring and its weight, she experiences the most intense orgasm:

I can feel a great big shuddering heat starting to build up inside me. My legs are going and I'm falling, falling, falling, and suddenly Jason's there, catching me. He draws me to him and hooks an arm under my knee so that my dripping crotch is pressed against the huge bulge in his trousers. His tongue is in my mouth as the techno music drives me higher and higher. And I'm coming and coming and my eyes are stinging and - and ... I'm sucking his tongue and grinding my body into his. The first song mixes into the next, and its rhythm is faster, harder, meaner. The song is a blasting Prodigy track, my favourite one. I can hear Keith screaming - only somehow it's me. I shout as a final shudder heaves through me and I claw at Jason's jacket and rip the buttons from his shirt.

She sits down, has a cigarette and he walks away saying 'Give us a ring.' Irritated again, her final thought is '*Bastard!* I'll give him a ring all right. And I know exactly where he's going to wear it ...'

Both stories eroticize bodily affects that are not uncomplicatedly about pleasure. In 'The Ring' the narrator is burning with anger and resentment at her boyfriend, Jason, and her surroundings, but even as she feels anger, it constantly tips into recognition of her own bodily presence (how others are reacting to her) and feeling ('Why am I so excited?'). Several times the narrating voice says she is desperate for sex and yet she doesn't tell Jason: she lets him direct the action. In an analysis seeking to identify power relations, the focus would fall on Jason's orchestration of her orgasm, but that would be to sideline the description of sensations that animate her body (and that of the reader) - the flushed face, the weak knees, the tremendous orgasm. Power, here vested in Jason, is a device to ensure that she lets herself go entirely - no questions asked, no demurring, the narrator can surrender to an intense sexual experience all the more powerful because of her earlier sense of suffering.

Both stories hinge on the notion of a contract - in 'Supermarket Slut' this is expressly stated, in 'The Ring' it is implied - but in both the contract is an important 'psychological boundar[y] for good sex' (Langdridge and Butt, 2004: 40). Both women break the terms of the contract they've agreed to and both submit to the form of punishment dictated by their men. Yet, this is not submission as anti-porn

theorizing would have it: the contract is a necessary fiction for the *illusion of powerlessness*. Arguments for the pleasures of sadomasochism stress the consensual nature of the practice (Califia, 1997; Taylor and Ussher, 2001; Beckman, 2001) and reject the pathologizing impulses of psychoanalytic and psychiatric accounts. In so doing, they reject the idea that sadomasochism is based on patriarchal power structures; social structures of power are institutionalized and rigid whereas the sexual practice of sadomasochism remains a 'fluid' relation - 'an acting out of power structures by a strategic game that is able to give sexual pleasure or bodily pleasure' (Gallagher and Wilson, 1984: 30). The practices of humiliation, bondage and excess are techniques for accessing and understanding the potentials of corporeal sensation. This refocusing refuses an emphasis on power as the defining characteristic of sadomasochism and insists on prioritizing the sexual affects of its practices. The women in the stories don't just submit; there is a level of self-reflexivity implicit in the questions they pose themselves because therein lies the possibility of exploring something new. Both women are motivated by a need to feel *something*: in 'The Ring' the woman complains about the complacency of those who have every material want satisfied, and Amanda, in 'Supermarket Slut', continuously pushes her luck at the supermarket. The 'inadvertent' breaking of the terms of the contract leads to the exploration of humiliation, of feeling exposed and vulnerable in the stories. But through this comes pleasure. The excitement of being caught out, of being made to take a punishment and the detailing of the sensate qualities of these feelings offer the exploration of a disturbing sexual pleasure.

As Califia writes, 'One of the things fiction can do for us is take us for brief journeys, even if they're just imaginary journeys, inside each other's bodies' (1997: 89). *Forum's* stories are interesting because they explicitly draw on particular issues of submission and dominance that have proved problematic for theorists of porn and sexual desire. These are narratives that are problematic to our wider culture (see, for example, 'Operation Spanner' in 1990 in which 15 men admitted to consensual acts of sadomasochism and were given lengthy sentences for unlawful bodily harm⁸), and to feminism in its exploration of female desire. Within anti-porn theorizing submission is a pathologized and essentialized form of behaviour. This kind

of theorizing refuses the possibility of a pain/pleasure dyad, arguing instead that any such insistence on a relation between discomfort/pain and pleasure is to ignore and disregard women's suffering in forced sex (Dworkin, 1981).

The problem, of course, lies in the importation of an external form of worrying about effects and of searching for meaning and interpretations. What I am suggesting is that this has no relevance to understanding how and why readers gain enjoyment and masturbatory excitement from their fiction. In *Forum's* stories the pleasures described are of being overwhelmed by feeling and sometimes this is discomfoting. How do involved and interested readers respond to these themes? How do they engage with the narrative progression and expression of bodily affect? The sexual excitement and masturbation that may be a part of reading porn fiction are processes of bringing the 'self' into the story, but existing audience research (Ang, 1985; Barker and Brooks, 1998; Barker, 2005) tells us they will be of a different order to those presumed by theories of textual identification. Future examinations of the ongoing processes and forms of sexualization will need to address a wide range of sexual practices, values and identities. They will also need to engage with the embodied experiences of reading and viewing sexual media. To do that we will need to understand the ways in which sexual representations articulate the ache of desire and be prepared to let go of some of our fondest assumptions about gender, power and pleasure.

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NOTES

1. The magazine features very little pictorial material, with images used primarily to accompany articles, stories and letters. The sexu-

alization of mainstream culture has had a deleterious effect on the traditional top shelf. For three decades the top shelf was the UK's main source of sexually explicit short stories, but storytelling is in decline, a victim of the downturn in circulation and distribution of softcore magazines. The 1990s saw a major drop in purchases of softcore magazines such as *Men Only* and *Penthouse*, when men defected to the more respectable but saucy titles, *FHM* and *Loaded*. Porn publishers responded with segmentation and specialization – responses that have effectively done away with magazine short stories. Where titles like *Men Only* and *Penthouse* would once have featured at least one story each month, they are now included only infrequently. Publishers have cut back on written content because it is expensive and have focused on pictorial representations, a move which has rendered them particularly susceptible to competition posed by the Internet. For further discussion see Maddison, 2004 and Smith, 2005.

2. Editor of *Forum* since 1990 and a published author of erotic fiction.
3. This is similar to Roland Barthes' (1981: 45) idea of the punctum – the point in the photograph which takes us into the photo – the moment at which it 'annihilate[s] itself as medium to be no longer a sign but the thing itself'.
4. For example, in 'The Case in Question' (vol. 34, no. 12) by Frank Charnock, the third-person narration serves to ironize the unlikely scenario that two people mistakenly taking home the other's luggage should, on meeting, find themselves mutually eager for sex.
5. WH Smith and Menzies are the main channels of magazine distribution in the UK. For further discussion of their regulatory effects on content see Skordarki, 1991 and Smith, 2005.
6. I chose these two because on first reading I found 'Supermarket Slut' uncomfortable, but maybe that's the point! 'The Ring' was interesting because 'the action' has no mutually satisfying penetration.
7. Hardy's work is exemplary in offering bibliographic details of the stories analysed. A fuller critique of his arguments is developed in Smith, 2007.
8. See <http://www.spannertrust.org/documents/spannerhistory.asp>.

