HBO’S CATHOUSE: PROBLEMatising REPRESENTATIONS OF SEX WORKERS AND SEXUAL WOMEN

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HBO’s reality television series Cathouse shows life at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch, a legal brothel outside Carson City, Nevada. The form, content, and medium of the show construct an image of prostitutes as legal “sex workers” who have chosen their work, are comfortable with their sexuality, provide a service for their customers, and are economically rewarded for their choice. Characterisation as “sex workers” flies in the face of typical media portrayals of prostitutes neither needing to be saved nor punished (Hallgrimsdottir, Phillips & Benoit 2006; Mclaughlin 1991). As a result, it problematises representations of prostitutes specifically and of sexual women generally.

Cathouse can be characterised as reality television (RTV) docuporn. It is RTV as it takes place in the actual work setting, the brothel, of the sex workers, and it films the women in seemingly unscripted interactions with each other, customers, and their bosses. Even so, the show is edited to construct a story of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch as a typical American business with the sex workers as the protagonists of the story. Docuporn is defined by Arthurs as “documentaries whose purpose is entertainment through erotic display and talk [that] have been joined by others that are designed with more ‘proper’ purposes” (2004b, p. 98), such as educating the public about stigmatised work. So, television provides the medium through which this “real” sex is the content of the show and the means of drawing in viewers. At the same time, focus on the business of sex allows Cathouse to both provide erotic entertainment and to provide documentation of how a legal brothel operates.

Admittedly, Cathouse utilises erotic entertainment to draw in viewers. This representation would seemingly invite the cinematic “gaze” (Mulvey 1992), casting the women who work at the Bunny Ranch into the passive object role. However, this is only one aspect of RTV docuporn. The documentary aspect of Cathouse brings together the form and content of the show to construct a narrative of prostitutes as sex workers, making what they do a job rather than merely a stigmatised social practice. As such, the show includes daily practices of the business, from how customers pick working girls and how “parties” (paid-for interactions between sex workers and customers) are negotiated, to how the business is regulated to protect the women from abuse.

Additionally, as RTV, Cathouse uses the logic of double remediation to legitimise the authenticity of this story of legal prostitution as a job. As Bolter and Grusin (2000, p. 34) describe the logic of
double remediation, the process multiplies the signs of mediation, and in this way tries to reproduce the rich sensorium of human experience. In every manifestation, hypermediacy makes us aware of the medium or media and (in sometimes subtle and sometimes obvious ways) reminds us of our desire for immediacy. Where hypermediacy makes us aware of the medium of television and, in this case, the genre of RTV, erasure attempts to hide these same signs that what we are watching has been edited and produced.

There are many points throughout the Cathouse pilot, for example, when it uses hypermediacy. For example, when the sex workers and her customer(s) enter a bedroom, they are filmed by hidden cameras. The audience is informed of this fact when, upon entry into the room, four corner frames appear at the four corners of the television screen. Above the bottom right frame, a red light appears next to the words, “Hidden Camera.” This strategy legitimates for the audience that the party negotiations filmed are “real,” or authentic. To further this characterisation, out-takes of participants’ reactions when they were told they were being filmed were included during the ending credits.

These out-takes show customers’ immediate shock and discomfort, as well as Madame Suzette’s (the general manager) assurances that what was filmed would not be used for the show unless the customers signed a release. At the same time it highlights the medium, Cathouse also erases the medium of television.

Hand-held cameras are used during interactions in the parlour of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch to show the verite’ of the situation, and the participants are seemingly filmed in situ to demonstrate that who they are and what they do is “authentic.” Ultimately, the fact that this narrative, told in this form, is shown on television further problematises these women’s bodies being subject to the cinematic “gaze” (Mulvey 1992), as television emphasises the “glance.” That is, its location in our living rooms, bedrooms, and homes, means that television becomes part of our everyday lives. Watching it does not necessarily command our full attention (Kim 2001). We watch TV while eating dinner, doing laundry, and even entertaining guests. Such multitasking makes the viewing experience “fragmentary, dispersed, and varied in nature” (Flitterman-Lewis 1992, p. 172). Yet, television “has woven itself into our social and familial lives” (Bolter & Grusin 2000, p. 194), in part due to the location in which it is viewed. So, rather than merely being on display for the gaze of the viewer, sex workers’ portrayal as sexual, hard working, business oriented, in charge, and independent can be integrated into our social understanding of them. Typical media depictions of prostitutes are locked in a reform/punishment binary based on the dichotomy between “good girls” and “bad girls.” Reviews of media narratives of prostitutes reveal that these women are consistently characterised as either dangerous fallen women from whom the general public needs to be protected, or, alternatively, as victims in need of protection from evildoers (usually men) who seduce innocent girls into this life of deviance (Hallgrimsdottir, Phillips & Benoit 2006; Mclaughlin 1991). These media representations are both based on and reproduce the assumptions that “good girls” are not sexual except within the socially sanctioned role of wife (and then sexual in private only for the purposes of reproduction). “Bad girls”’ sexuality is dirty and socially unacceptable so that they need to be controlled or punished.
In “Documenting the Sex Industry,” Arthurs (2004) recognises the punishment/redemption dichotomy in some media depictions. She also argues that prostitutes defining themselves as “sex workers” in contemporary society has led to increased acceptance and legitimisation of women formerly considered transgressive or victims. For this reason recent media forms, including docuporn, soft core, auteur films, and reality television accounts, include both these dominant narratives and incorporate the business side of the work. In these business narratives, the women are shown as economically empowered through their work.

As RTV docuporn, Cathouse problematises the sexual representation and the good girl/bad girl binary in at least two ways. First, Cathouse focuses on more than just the sexualised bodies of the women who work at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. The show constructs a narrative of working women who are active agents in that they have chosen this line of employment, are in control of the action at work, benefit from it economically, and provide a needed service to their customers. The show also suggests that the stereotypical sexual relationship between men and women, where men are the active agents and women are the passive object, is also problematic. Cathouse shows men paying for sex, but the working girls directing the action. When a customer asks for a two-girl party, the sex worker he is with explains that she does not do that type of party. However, she also offers to introduce him to another woman who does do that type of party. When porn star Sunset Thomas negotiates prices, she demands $2000 for a one-hour party with two men. When they say they cannot afford it, she allows them a half an hour “masturbation party” for a mere $500. In Cathouse, the sex workers are both sexual objects who invite the audience’s “gaze” and active agents who demonstrate comfort with their sexuality, provide a service for their customers, and who are economically successful.

Second, Cathouse serves as a counter-discourse to typical reform/punishment media depictions of prostitutes by representing them as “sex workers,” that is, working women who are sexual, independent, and empowered by what they do. Some may argue that this does not represent the lives of prostitutes generally. Certainly, the focus on the sex workers as the protagonists of this story glosses over the hierarchal relationship these women experience with their male boss. However, I would contend that the show does represent what legalised prostitution could be: fun and empowering. Cathouse tells us that to work at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch, the women must have medical tests once a week to make sure that they are healthy and provide safe service to their customers.

The show also includes sequences during which the sex workers combine work and play. Working girls are shown chatting up customers at the bar, bringing payments to the office, laughing and dancing with one another (even when no customers are visible), and discussing their work schedules with the general manager. These sequences are interlaced with direct-to-camera explanations from the sex workers explaining both the logistics of their work and the benefits they receive from doing it. In this way, Cathouse serves to problematise the good girl/bad girl binary. The sexual “bad” girls are not punished but rewarded. At the same time, the information we are given about the business aspects of their work make it more difficult to
separate these stigmatised working girls from working women in other types of jobs who are just trying to make a living, except that the sex workers appear to be having more fun at their job.

Taken together, this narrative and its position as a response to typical depictions of prostitution suggest several questions that should be pondered in research about sex workers in the media, and, I would contend, about the representation of sexual women in general. Contemporary society has been theorised as increasingly “pornified” (Paasonen, Nikunen & Saarenmaa 2008). Unfortunately, this analysis carries the ideological baggage of the good girl/bad girl binary by dismissing the agency of women who are represented and assuming that sexualised women are on display only for the enjoyment of men. Cathouse shows women who know what their customers want/need and who have chosen to do this work because they know that their customers (men and women) will pay them good money to provide such services. These women are shown as comfortable and open with their sexuality and their choice to commodify it.

Perhaps instead of starting from a place where we assume the good girl/bad girl binary, we should instead question the binary itself. Why can’t good girls be sexual? Why are sexual women considered dirty? Why can’t we represent sexual women without such portrayals being considered merely for the pleasure of men? Why don’t we conduct more research into the production conditions of sexual representation to see if women are forced, unhappy, and oppressed, rather than assuming they are? Can representation of sexual women ever be anything but women’s bodies on display?

At the root of all these queries and the good girl/bad girl binary is this question: are women sexual beings? Until society is more comfortable with the relationships between women and sexuality (not to mention women and money and power), it will be impossible to theorise the representation of sexual women as anything but objects. As Fejes notes in his work on the political economy of lesbian and gay identity, “Updating Foucault, it would seem that today the consumer-based media, and not the state, the church, or the scientific professions, are the far more effective creators and regulators of identities and desires” (2003, p. 220). More specifically, the explosion of reality television programming in the last fifteen years makes it a specific site in which constructions of sex and sexuality can tell us a lot about the creation and regulation of identities and desires. Perhaps it is time to question the assumptions that go into our analysis of representation in these forms. Cathouse is one example of where the show itself uses its form (RTV docuporn), medium (television), and narrative (prostitution as a legitimate business) to construct a counter-discourse of prostitution that allows us to question the good girl/bad girl dichotomy which is assumed in much analysis of the representation of sexual women.

NOTE

1. Having worked as a researcher at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch, I conducted interviews and observations during November and December of 2007. I can attest to the fact that what is shown
in *Cathouse* presents a fairly realistic view of life at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch. There are differences between what is represented and the lived experiences of the women at the Ranch. However, these are not differences that justify characterising the women of the Moonlite Bunny Ranch simplistically as either in need of salvation or punishment.

REFERENCES


