



Original Research Article

A Phenomenological Analysis of a Consumer's Lived Experience of Pornography and Homoeroticism

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Abstract

A is- what is not A. A is – what is not-not A. In not being is, all that is. The being is not aware that it is, is. So, how will it know that whatever it is all that, it is or it also what it is not? This paper aims to interpret the gaze of a consumer of pornography and arrive at the phenomena, the essence of it. Alternatively, to investigate whether there is any essence behind the gaze of consumption, and if there is, then how is it made into it? Why is it there? The methodology used is hermeneutic phenomenology about about about about the method of a minor ethnographic study of a video parlour airing pornography. I have interlinked the technique and the research and investigated both of them carefully. I have first formulated phenomenological questions, without any assumptions around the context of my research. Then I have identified and collected experiential material and lastly, reflected on the totality of the meanings in all its relations. The ethnographic research was conducted between January 2016 to May 2016. The conclusion will leave the reader with questions on assumptions and perceptions about the ship – meanings lived experiences and the visual gaze. It is purely a phenomenological account of everyday lived experience.

Keywords: perception, hermeneutics, phenomenology, visual gaze, homo-eroticism, ethnography

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Prologue

I. The moment I say 'I', I become aware of the questions that start formulating about the perception of my location as a person and certain assumptions related to it. That it is 'a set of infinite tasks' (Moran, D. 2000: 2) in identifying the essence of these inter-sectional locations that the I assumes or perceives itself in, is similar as pointed out by Husserl in his account of phenomenology and finding its connections. I started attending the social research methodology and visual culture classes at the University with no aim in sight. My gaze was structured to learn whatever I could. Numberless walks and hanging-out on tapri joints, sitting down on foot-paths and roads, wherever I could, alone and contemplative, I observed. I used to look at people performing roles, take in the sight and smell of areas I lingered into. I always wanted to go deeper into the underlying reasons for social relationships. To see how they were formed and where did they originate. To become the observer and also observed from a subject-object point of view (Krishnamurti, J. 1978). The point was, how? The stint at the Sociology Department is proving to be one of the ways through which I can find answers to these questions.

I was 17 when I first stumbled into a video parlour airing pornography videos. We were two friends, lured into an alleyway by an old man selling tickets. "do ghante ka blue filmam" he said. For 15 rupees, that

seemed a good deal to my friend. And so, I tagged along. To quench my thirst for something new, something that I could observe and for something that my mind could contemplate on. Walking through alleyways, we reached at the end of it only to be welcomed by another person who was standing at the entrance. We were ushered into the hall after climbing a steep flight of stairs. I wasn't prepared for the scene that lay ahead of me. A group of men huddled together in front of 5 Television screens showing porn. When I signed up for the visual culture course, the six-year-old memories came back to me.

I had always been intrigued by the Men that came there, those who consumed the films shown. The different layers that their actions were involved in, had to be analyzed. With the social research methodology course, I started asking questions about the method that I was employed to study the video parlour space. Wasn't it value-laden? Wasn't I bringing my assumptions to the research? My rationale

Edmund Husserl pioneered the beginning of phenomenology in the introduction of Logical Investigations (1900-1901) where he discussed the need of a wide-ranging theory of knowledge.

value-laden? Wasn't I bringing my assumptions to the research? My rationale behind choosing to do this study was to arrive at the totality of meanings about the meanings that the consumers of porn attach, to the

films and space and also very importantly, to each other. I wanted to investigate and elucidate the lived experience and reveal meanings through hermeneutics.

Introduction

This study is a minor ethnographic study of a video parlour located in Tilak Nagar, an eastern suburb of Mumbai. It is densely populated, with old buildings being bull-dozed for new upcoming 'towers' in its place. The site where this study is located is struggling to accept the re-development changes taking place. It lies adjacent to the Eastern Express highway with its local hotels, bars and restaurants running full-house. The video parlour is located within a maze of alleyways, and it takes around 5 minutes actually to reach the parlour centre. It is a densely populated chawl area, with a famous Ayyappa temple located nearby. The parlour is run by a group of men, often related to familial relations to each other. All of them identify themselves as Tamil-speaking persons. I conducted ten rounds of visits to the parlour at different times, mapping both day and night time-zones. I was interested in studying the meanings that the consumers give to their surroundings, to the people and to the films that they watch. The interviews were semi-structured mostly. There was a one-on-one interaction with the viewer, often while watching the pornography itself. I was non-directive with my questions and asked questions and

initiated discussions through conversations. I couldn't tape-record or click any pictures due to the risk factor involved. Mobile phones or cameras were requested to be switched off while inside the hall. I was particularly interested in raising to phenomenological questions by entering into a dialogue of sorts and thus revealing meanings through interpretation. Therefore, the hermeneutic phenomenological methodology was adopted while conducting the study.

I was able to interact with four persons who identified themselves with a heterosexual orientation, but 3 of them indulged in homo-erotic activities ranging from mutual masturbation to oral sex in the parlour itself. This study also identifies the ideas or meanings as-relatable to homo-eroticism by the viewers who either indulged in it or themselves wanted to watch bi-curious pornography. The act of dialogue (Gadamer, H. 2006) made the process more open-ended for the responding viewer. I was trying to touch the root, between the relation of what the viewer saw and what the viewer already knew (Berger, J. 1973) by using the metaphors of understanding (Gadamer, H. 2006). The viewer became aware that he was a part of the visible world (Berger, J. 1973) since soon after he saw, he became aware that he was also seen. Thus, did his social relations and actions change in that scenario? And how did he adjust and relate to it? This

was also a part of the process of this investigation. The persons coming to the parlour were mostly workers from nearby areas. Working in the small-unit manufacturing plants, restaurants, rickshaw-drivers and vegetable vendors.

As a rule, Men who were clad with 'elite' kind of clothes were not allowed to come. They were refused tickets at the table itself. I was denied a ticket too, but Sri (altered name), my informer saved me the trip back home. I had met Sri some six years earlier as a teenager when I used to frequent the place. He recognised me instantly when I went back for this study after a gap of 5 years. He agreed to divulge with information about the inner-happenings of the parlour on goodwill. He stated that he remembered me because I was not the 'pervert' kind. These parlours are spaces where homo-erotic actions are quite common. Since I do identify myself as gay, these were an added encouragement for me to visit the parlour in my teens. I never indulged in openly doing anything sexual inside the parlour, and maybe this is what led Sri to label me as a non-pervert. The video parlour owner is his uncle, and Sri has been working or looking after the hall-room since he turned 13. My friendship with Sri couldn't cut through the informality between us. I was still a stranger to his social interactions except that I was allowed to take a peek and to know about some happenings inside the parlour.

The parlour works like a small theatre. It starts business at 11am which goes on till one at night. People usually start coming in the afternoon around 2pm. There are 2-hour slots for each customer which can be bought after paying 30 rupees. If a viewer wants to watch more, he needs to go back to the small table kept at the entrance of the alley and buy the ticket. The ticket is printed and the amount paid is written by hand. There are two tables kept for the ticket distribution. One at the entrance of the main alleyway to the video parlour, and the other at the opening of the parlour itself. A small parlour is located in the area opposite to the main road which airs C-grade Tollywood and Bollywood movies apart from airing pornography. Inside a maze of alleyways, I took a flight of stairs to the first floor where the rooms were located — two rooms with small windows which were blocked. The roof was covered with tin-sheets. The first room was large enough to accommodate approximately 60 persons. The second room was more modest and could accommodate around 25 men. A little spot at the corner was reserved for the Laxmi and Ganpati idols. Nobody is allowed to sit near the space. The sacred is distinctly made visible and controlled from the rest of the occupied area, which is believed to

My respondents worked in these places and were of the view that most men also worked in similar working spaces.

made visible and controlled from the

rest of the occupied area, which is believed to be non-sacred. The rooms were looked up for couples in a residential area by a group of youngsters who are related to the owner. They work in nearby hotels and sleep in the bedrooms available late at night. Most of them come from the same village as the owner.

The gender roles performed between men were taken-for granted as cis-gendered performances. These spaces were only inhabited and accessible to the men. Women are not allowed at all though kothis are allowed in. It is not surprising since space is a patriarchal organisation where male-to-male sex is quite common at the back end of the room. The families that live in and around the parlour know what goes inside. The existence, as understood by the men in these spaces, more like the experience of being-in-the-world or Dasein (Heidegger, M. 1996), is already taken for granted by them. The unravelling of this 'taken-for granted-ness' came through the dialogues I had with them.

There is a small escape route in the second room to enable the viewers to escape in the situation of raids. Raids have been conducted a year back in a video parlour located in Kurla (P. (Ed.) Times of India. 2015). Not far from the Tilak Nagar parlour. Sri still remembers the repercussions of the raid on his parlour. They had to keep the parlor shut for a week and go into hiding. The legality of such spaces confront the masses that frequent these spaces but

sadly, fails in uncovering the social realities involved. These parlours are illegal spaces, standing in the line between the inter-sectionalized version of public morality, class and homo-erotic desires.

Turning to the Indian legal framework, sec.67 of the Information Technology Act makes cyber pornography a crime. Under its ambit, it includes material like DVDs, mobile phones, video files, audio files etc. which may consist of any image considered to be 'obscene' under the act. The transmission can happen in any form. In our case study, it is through spaces where the owners hoard DVDs of porn clips and share or 'transmit' it to others.

It should be noted that viewing cyber pornography is legal. Also, downloading or storing pornography for personal viewing is not illegal too. However, the transmission of it is illegal and punishable. This law disadvantages and creates a rift between who gets to 'store' pornography and personally view it and who 'doesn't'. The persons coming to the video parlour in Tilak Nagar form the chunk of viewers

A man identifies himself as a kothi when he takes female gender role in same sex relationships, often with a desire to be the penetrated member in sexual intercourse. It is a commonly used term within the Queer circles in India. They differ from hijras in the sense that they don't live together as a community

who cannot afford a space or means to download pornography and view it. Contrasting this situation to the one in the USA, there are adult film arcades which show pornographic films and hire out spaces to people who are interested in indulging in sexual activity. Though our parlours cannot be aligned to theirs, the consumption of pornographic material happens at both the places, with similar sexual activities in tow. Sri could not believe that such spaces exist where it is 'normal' to masturbate or perform sexual activity while watching porn. He thought the people who do it in his video parlour are big hue (corrupt).

'Paise banane hain, baaki jo bhi piche chalta hai, chalne deta hu. Yahan par bigde hue log aate hain jo hilla ke (masturbation) chale jaate hain'. (I want to make money, other than that, I allow the things to happen at the back. Corrupt people come here who masturbate and leave).

These are his parting words as I leave the parlor while he hurriedly sets out on his duty to watch the entrance.

Phenomenological questions

The viewing of pornography in a video parlour can be taken as a social phenomenon for the customers and the people who live in and around the site. The question that is raised here is the shared perceptions of the viewers of pornography and the owner of the parlour. What is the structure of this perception? What

is the assumed part? The essences of sharing the same space and watching porn together will be analysed and confronted. The phenomenon that is most normatively perceived and experienced is questioned and deliberated to reveal the underlying essence that unifies the entire perception or the assumption of the viewers.

Consuming desire

The idea of approaching the visual (Berger, J. 1973) mediates itself through various power relations between the visual and the person perceiving it. I conducted informal dialogue sessions with the viewers watching, or applying Berger's term, gazing at the pornography films. The assumption here was that they were aware that they were becoming a part of something that was 'hidden'. Some of them did not know that it was illegal to be an audience there. All of them affirmed to desire, is the motivating force that led them to be there. Desire in visualising or perceiving sexual activities and desire to vent out sexual energies too. The group of viewers also could control what they wanted to see and what was given to them. There were 5 LCD T.V. screens in the first room while the second room had 4 Samsung T.V. screens. The viewers desire to watch a kind of pornography was almost always met with fulfilment. The most popular genre was European or American porn. White-bodied porn actors performing while the viewers consume the whiteness and the roughness of the act. The most favoured porn was heterosexual

porn. A slight deviation from the norm was allowed for lesbian pornography, but the same was not given to male-to-male pornography. Only one T.V. screen aired indigenously produced Indian pornography which was not very sought after by the viewers. Their consumption lingered into the 'otherness' that met their gaze. White-bodied performers epitomised the sexual adventures that they imagined themselves to enjoy. The brown-skinned or black-skinned pornography was not relevant to them, nor were they interested in consuming any other kind of racial performer's body. Also, the emphasis was more on the intercourse rather than the other parts to sexual activity. It brings us to the subjective points of departure and contact, as perceived by the viewer. The viewer cuts himself off from the location and the language of the images; thus transmitted becomes an illusion (Berger, J. 1973). It only transforms the memory of the white-bodied porn performer into something that should be desirable but also something that should be expected.

Ranbeer is a 25-year-old, daily wage earner. He earns his living through selling vegetable as and when he can get a dayjob. I met him on my trip to the smaller video parlour that is technically a competitor to the bigger video parlour I am studying. Upon finding him alone at 11am, I went and sat beside him. He was masturbating and deeply engrossed

in pornography. Upon seeing me, he thought I could give him a hand-job. It was too early for anyone to come in at this time.

He said, "*Koi is Waqt Nahi aata. 2 baje tak khaali rahegi jagah. Hillaoge kya?*" (Nobody comes here at this time. The place will be empty till 2pm. Will you masturbate?)

I said, "*Nahi. Sirf dekhunga.*" (No. I will just watch).

My gaze here was a mix of lust and interest.

"*Yeh ganda kaam hai. gandi aadat pad chuki hai. yahan pe achhi jagah milti hai. Subah aata hu kyunki log nahi rehte.*" (This is bad work. It's a bad habit. I get a good place here. I come in the mornings because nobody is around)

Ranbeer acknowledges that privacy was something he lacked and the parlor fulfilled the space crunch that denied him the act of masturbation. Uncovering the gaze is important. A daily wage-earner mediates spaces to come to a particular location and perform certain activities while becoming a consumer to things that he assumes to be 'bad'. Another viewer assumed the same 'bad' element in the mutual masturbation activity being performed while a group of men were busy watching porn on 4 T.V. screens simultaneously.

Azeem is 45 and bald. He works at the nearby manufacturing unit and

comes to the video parlor at night. He says, "*raat ko waqt achha hota hai. Maza bhi aata hai.*" (The time is nice at night. There is enjoyment too)

"*Gori ladkiya achhi lagti hain. Aajkal nayi filmein nahi laga raha hai. Wahi purana roz dekhna padta hai.*" (I like white girls. These days the owner does not put new films. Have to make do with the old ones)

Azeem comes here every day after work. His favorite time is after 10pm. He does get mutually masturbated at times but terms it 'bad' and a taboo and tries hiding it. Our perception here is moving in a circle of detail and the whole (Gadamer, H. 2006). The hermeneutic understanding moves from Azeem's opinion of pornography films as desirable, which show white-bodied actors and his homo-erotic activity as bad. The interpretative knowledge achieved here is that he trades the desirability of gazing at an image with the homo-erotic activity that he indulges in but again, gazes at it in a socially normative way, which is of repulsion.

Chintan at 18 took the phenomena to a different level. He wants to identify himself as gay someday but is scared to come out. He primarily comes here to indulge in homo-erotic activities ranging from foreplay to oral sex. He says, 'I come here to have fun. There are so many easily available men here'. 'I am not attracted so much to the porn, as much as I am to the men here'.

'I don't like the way they dress up or carry themselves. But my fantasies come true here'.

He states his location as 'upper middle class'. He owns an android mobile phone and comes here not for the porn but sex. The legal provisions concerning pornography rip off and starkly reminds us of the distance between the people who have access to porn and those who don't. Chintan has access but chooses to come here because of his inter-sectional identity of a gay male does not give him many choices to look for and have sex in the hetero-normatively structured society. The lived experience of Chintan is unique to him and yet is a key to understand and interpret the whole through its part.

Babul, 30-year-old daily wage earning worker remains unperturbed at the thought of what goes on at the back of the video parlour room. He sits in the front rows. Says, "*aage ki seats achhi hoti hain. Koi pareshaan Nahi Karta yahan. Jisko haath lagwana hota hai, who piche baithta hai*". (The front seats are good. Nobody troubles me here. Whoever wants to be touched, goes and sits at the back).

On further prodding, he asserts that he does not like being touched. Says, "*aage baithne se film bhi sahi dikhti hai*". (I can watch the films clearly if I sit ahead). On the topic of his favourite films, he says "*Hindi mai maza nahi aata. Goro mai aata hai.*" (There is no fun in Hindi. There is fun in watching the whites).

Sartre identifies that there is no essence in the object but rather in the meaning of the essence of an object (Sartre, J. 1956: 45). The principle of meanings that it holds takes the object-essence making it into the part of the totality of the whole (Sartre, J. 1956). For Babul, the meaning he derives in choosing to sit at the front, about the activities that happen at the back is the essence of the object. He perceives white-bodies as the meaning to the essence of the pornographic film that it is acting in or embodies itself with.

Illumination

The meanings of what my respondents expressed can be gauged by their lived experiences. The experiences of all them led us to a shared essence of the acceptance of and tolerance to the homo-erotic activities taking place inside the video parlour. Also, the essence of being a male and thus availing the space to watch pornography is also not lost to the viewer. The perception of pornographic material as appeared and surveyed by the male gaze also introduces us to the consuming culture of pornography (Berger, J. 1973). The language of the image creates assumptions and perceptions of and for the desire, which is repeatable, and the viewer keeps coming back for more. The visual imagery of pornography embodying white-bodied porn performers feeds on the real perception and makes the viewer into an expectant gazer in his day-to-day interactions.

What struck me was the coming together of desire and accessibility to a certain kind of 'desirable' homo-erotic sexual experience coupled with the consuming gaze for pornographic material.

The questions keep rolling, and further investigation can commence on the beingness of the consumer itself. Can the consumer of pornography in a collective space, is only a consumer or does it become into something else?

A is - what is not A. The viewer is whatever is not the viewer.

A is – what is not-not A. The viewer is – whatever is not-not the viewer.

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