

Introduction to Critical Feminist Studies Final

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Pornography and Feminism: Friends or Enemies

Feminism and pornography¹ have a history together. With a general focus on gender, feminism inevitably runs into sexuality as well. The feminist movement in the 1970's was split by the "Sex Wars", a period of debate between feminists about sexuality, including pornography (University of Michigan). There is no single feminist umbrella that every person who calls himself or herself a feminist can fit under, and there is no single consensus about feminism and pornography. It remains controversial. This paper is grounded in my search to find out for myself if porn is an acceptable part of a feminist lifestyle. Feminist is only one facet of my identity (student, woman, etc.), and I don't feel like everything I do or say must be feminist. Still, I strive to make the majority of my choices and actions feminist.

I chose this topic because pornography was never thoroughly discussed in class. Given the prominence of gender in pornography, feminism is very applicable. Pornography has a strong focus on gender¹ and is very prevalent in mainstream

¹ With hardcore (shows explicit sexual acts and shows genitals, versus softcore, which is less graphic) pornography, there is a visual or written focus on the genitals. Even though gender is so much more than what lies between someone's legs, seeing genitals does bring direct attention to gender. It is very difficult to hide or change the gender of genitals.

consciousness (in part due to the availability on the internet²). There has been some general public acceptance of pornography by at least the celebrity-watching segment of the United States population. Sex tapes with the celebrities Paris Hilton and Kim Kardashian were released (intentionally or unintentionally on the part of the actors); instead of losing whatever credibility they had, these women only gained celebrity status (Mai and Murphy). The pornography industry is also sizeable, though not enormous, with \$2.6 billion to \$3.9 billion of sales estimated in 2001 (Ackman). With these considerations in mind, this is an important topic for a student of feminism to study.

For this paper, feminism means the belief that there should be equality between the genders, with a goal of blending and removing the divide between them. It also includes the belief that there should not be a gender binary in how we live. Under this definition, this paper is not about only women and pornography. Men and people who don't identify as women are affected by pornography as well.

By studying different feminist theories and beliefs about pornography and sexuality, I hope to find conclusions from the following questions:

1. Can pornography be feminist? Does the answer to the question depend on the content of the film book, etc, how it was made, where it comes from, or any other factor? In other words, is there a reason that all pornography, no matter what, is not feminist?
2. Does pornography reinforce gender or racial stereotypes?

² According to a 2006 government study, 1% of "sites indexed by Google and Microsoft contain sexually explicit content" and 6% of searches lead to sexual material (http://blog.wired.com/monkeybites/2006/11/feds_claim_inte.html)

3. Does watching, participating in, or purchasing pornography “harm society” overall?
4. Can the private always ethically become public? What are the social implications of this?
5. Does pornography create a standard of what sexual experiences should be?
6. What makes pornography different from a non-sexual book, photograph, or film? Why are different standards applied to it?
7. Should pornography be considered a natural extension of individual sexualities?

My beliefs about pornography before conducting research were best described as libertarian. If people consensually and safely do it in their own private lives without any involvement of children or animals, then people should be able to do it on film. This includes porn that appears violent, like some BDSM-style porn, as long as it is made by a reputable company or person, without anyone coerced into doing anything. However, even if it should be legal to make pornography, it doesn't mean feminists have to support it.

There should be a distinction between what should go into law, and what should be a moral (versus ethical) practice. It's crucial to protect people while also being careful to avoid unnecessary³ censorship. The problem with banning some types of pornography is that you have to draw the line somewhere, and someone gets to draw that line. I don't want it to be up to unqualified government officials to

³ I believe that people should not be able to publish works designed to incite violence or hatred, especially against a group of people

decide exactly what is allowed and what isn't. Essentially, if I conclude that pornography is a problem for feminists, then a legal solution wouldn't be optimal. After reading Catherine's Mackinnon's⁴ essay "Pornography, Civil Rights, and Speech", I feel as though I was missing some of the big picture. Does pornography have a larger impact on society?

Mackinnon describes pornography as "creating and maintaining sex as a basis for discrimination" (Mackinnon, "Pornography, Civil Rights, and Speech", 380). She focuses on pornography as the commercial eroticization of hierarchy, and calls it "a practice of power and powerlessness" (Mackinnon, "Pornography, Civil Rights, and Speech", 379). She points to pornography as the source of men's discrimination and violence against women. She also writes how it is a greatly contributes to women's reputation as the subordinate gender by showing male sexual dominance over women.

Pornography does or doesn't cause gender violence depending on who reports the study. According to Mackinnon, "recent experimental research on pornography shows [...] measurable harm to women through increasing men's attitudes and behaviors of discrimination in both violent and nonviolent forms" ("Pornography, Civil Rights, and Speech", 382). She writes that this is true even for nonviolent porn, deemed "sex-only materials" (Mackinnon, "Pornography, Civil Rights, and Speech", 382). On the opposite side Wendy McElroy, in her book *XXX: A Woman's Right to Pornography*, claims that there isn't a consensus among experts,

⁴ An activist who asserts that all pornography is violence against women

and that “radical” feminists including Mackinnon are not looking at all the evidence (100).

It would be difficult to actually show cause and effect of pornography consumption and sexual violence incidence. I don’t think that laboratory studies, where subjects are shown materials and then asked a series of questions, are accurate at predicting real-life behavior. There are many factors to control, including many types of pornography. It would be difficult to do a survey of the most-watched types of pornography as well, making it hard to apply a study to an actual population. To conduct such a study accurately, a researcher would have to look at sexual violence and pornography consumption data over a number of years. Both of these markers are difficult to measure, as many cases of sexual violence aren’t reported and so much (quantity and variety) pornography is available free on the internetⁱⁱ. With this uncertainty in mind, pornography cannot be completely banned on the basis of inciting violence. There is also the possibility that all depictions of violence—not just sexual depictions—incite violent (including sexual) acts.

In his essay “Pornography and the Alienation of Male Sexuality”, Harry Brod writes, “the campaign against pornography is [...] a consumer campaign for product safety” because of the theory that pornography causes violence (Brod, 405). As an attempt to account for the uncertainty about pornography causing violence, we can take the “consumer safety” precaution approach. Studios that produce film pornography should make an effort to present the actors as real people⁵, perhaps by

⁵ See page 11 for feminist porn websites that attempt this

interviewing the actors out of costume and makeup after filming, and including these interviews with the video. The nature of the internet (illegally uploaded film clips instead of full films) places limitations on this. Another possibility is including a statement like the FBI copyright infringement warning in the film, such as “This is a fictional story filmed with actors under controlled conditions”. This statement, however, could not apply to films that aren’t fictional.

Since pornography is (usually) the creation or depiction of a fantasy, it could be interpreted as a part of the creator’s and viewers’ individual sexualities. Is the existence of pornography inherent in some people’s sexualities? I’d like to think that everyone has a sexuality that exists without a need for technology or language, a sexuality that only truly depends on themselves and other people, but I’m not sure if that’s the case. If pornography is part of sexuality, then under Gayle Rubin’s⁶ philosophy, pornography should be allowed. In “Thinking Sex”, she writes for freedom of sexuality, including homosexuality and other forms of sexuality considered “deviant” by what she deems the “conservative right”. Pornography is at least a form of sexuality expression. It doesn’t appear out of nowhere, someone has to make (write, film, photograph, record, etc) it, and someone else has to purchase and watch it. There has to be financial backing to make the film before any customers buy it, someone willing to distribute to stores, and storeowners willing to sell the product. In other words, pornography requires the participation of a number of people.

⁶ A pro-sex feminist

To control pornography requires a definition of what is right, and what is wrong in sexual expression. This is where the private and the public collide. Individual choice is very important, as is keeping damaging influences away from society. Private sexual practices become public when turned into pornography. If something is acceptable between two or more consenting adults, does that make it automatically acceptable to put into a film, book, or other form of media?

Once a work transfers hands from the creator to an anonymous, disconnected viewer, the personal is usually lost, creating the possibility that the observer will misinterpret something. However, this is true for any expressive work (paintings, movies, photographs, novels, poems, etc.). Pornography gets the special focus because it is obtained, watched, and read differently than other types of entertainment media. It is often purchased and/or used in private. A person cannot simply walk into a regular movie cinema and ask the cashier for a ticket to *Debbie Does Dallas*⁷. In most social circles it isn't something blatantly purchased or watched. Rubin writes that the United States "culture always treats sex with suspicion" (Rubin, 158). Pornography is an "adult" genre, and certainly not family friendly; it's not something children are supposed to grow up with. Legally, ownership, purchase, and viewing of pornography is restricted to those over the age of 18 (or 21 in some states) in the United States, even where the age of consent is lower.

Despite the definite risk of misinterpretation, I think the private should still be able to be public. If something is done in multiple private households, then it is

⁷ A "porn icon" according to McElroy (55)

valid for general public exposure. This still leaves open the possibility of something being permitted under the private to public right, but still not being acceptably feminist. Popularity doesn't make something feminist

More than in a non-pornographic film or story, pornographers and viewers do objectify the people in it. As actors, they literally become sex objects, as the giver and receiver, the penetrator and the penetrated⁸. As Susan Griffin, author of *Pornography and Silence: Culture's Revenge Against Nature*, writes, an actor in a pornographic film "must be pictured from the side, and particular parts of her⁹ body, those intended for use...must be carefully examined" (Griffin 36). She compares the treatment of actors in pornographic films to the treatment of furniture, with the actor playing "the part of an object," and says that turning a person into a thing "is no accidental by-product of the pornographic mind" (Griffin 36 and 49).

I agree with Griffin: objectification is purposeful on the part of the pornographer. This isn't an end-all of pornography though. I believe that objectification is integral to sexual experience. Feminism includes acknowledgement of and pride in the body. Sex is so physical that a focus on the body is inevitable, especially when it is captured on film or written about in a text. Objectification becomes unacceptable under feminism when it is used to compare people or when it is the only force present. Pornography is more than objectification. There are personalities, characters, and (sometimes) a plot.

⁸ This is not a reference exclusively to heterosexual sex

⁹ Griffin's analysis is of a female actor, but it applies equally to non-female actors

Since it usually depicts a fantasy and depends on proper lighting, makeup, editing, etc., pornography has the ability to alter a person's expectations of sexual experience. Mackinnon argues, "pornography conditions male orgasm to female subordination" (Mackinnon, "Pornography, Civil Rights, and Speech", 384). This assertion, however, leaves out women who watch pornography (are they, too, conditioned to only orgasm to female subordination?) and pornography that depicts male subordination to a dominating female figure. She acknowledges that women can consume or participate in pornography like men do, but claims that they are only acting in a role created by men. Griffin also writes that pornography is "a tradition already defined and shaped by men" (Griffin 52). Mackinnon does mention male subordination and female domination, but describes the dominating woman as the masculine figure. Griffin writes that the sadist and the masochist are "simply representations of one mind" and are both "shaped as 'male' in this society" (Griffin 52). From Mackinnon's perspective, pornography allows men to "have sex with their image of a woman" and defines female sexuality as "love of violation" (Mackinnon, "Sexuality, 168). She says women claim to "chose" sexual objectification because they are surrounded by it (Mackinnon, "Sexuality, 171).

I don't think that watching or reading something can completely change a person's sexual response, even though this sexual response is not purely innate. Sexuality and sex aren't completely biological or genetic; Mackinnon and Griffin argue that sexuality is a social construction. Mackinnon considers sexuality a "social construct of male power" (Mackinnon, "Sexuality", 159). She compares sexuality to race and gender, describing how sexual acts themselves don't exist in a bubble from

society. Even when practiced in private according to her, there is no “just sex”, meaning sex is always influenced by society (Mackinnon, “Sexuality”, 168). She elaborates, describing “sexuality itself” as “the dynamic of the inequality of the sexes” (Mackinnon, “Sexuality”, 161).

Sexuality has both social (meaning from society) and innate influences. Sexuality isn't entirely social because then people would not have any difficult-to-fulfill fetishes. Considering the discrimination queer individuals face, there must be some internal drive for sexuality. This internal drive is one reason that pornography should be allowed in a feminist lifestyle. People should be able to make books, photographs, and films for themselves or others who will erotically enjoy them. Sexuality was not simply created by men; women's sexualities are not just creations of the patriarchy. Otherwise, why would there be lesbianism? Feminists should be selective, however, in the pornography they support because there is the potential that it was created in a coercive environment.

Not all pornography is created equal, and for pornographic video or photography, the conditions under which the pornography is produced crucial to my feminist and ethical acceptability. Actors should be able to form a union¹⁰ like the Screen Actors Guild, a union for general film actors, and receive royalties from videos (McElroy 163). This would make it more likely that fair wages are given and acceptable working conditions (like mandating breaks for actors) are provided. A union could also provide a seal of approval for pornographic material, ensuring it was produced under fair conditions and without coercion of the actors. The

¹⁰ Currently there is not a union of pornography actors (McElroy 14)

pornography business, if McElroy's depiction needs to change its attitude towards the actors. From her interviews with men in the industry, she writes that female actors are "always referred to as 'the girls'" and that their bodies are routinely commented on by co-workers (McElroy 148).

Not all pornography is feminist. However, there is an opportunity to make it and people are already doing so. What would feminist pornography look like? It would show the actors as real people or real characters. People have a right to sexual expression, and feminism can accommodate those who include pornography in their expression. Good For Her, a feminist sex shop in Toronto gives out the "Feminist Porn Awards"¹¹. To win an award, a film must include women as viewers and allow the actor's desires to be expressed in the film (Blue). There are also feminist pornography studios and websites (such as Good Dyke Porn¹², No Fauxxx¹³, and Femme Productions¹⁴) Pornography can even enhance feminism by making material that challenges the gender binary. For those already engaging in sexual activity, pornography also has the potential to enrich society by promoting safer sex. This is where I agree with Mackinnon, who supports what she deems erotica: "explicit materials premised on equality" (Mackinnon, "Pornography, Civil Rights, and Speech", 380).

¹¹ http://www.goodforher.com/Feminist_Porn_Awards.html

¹² A lesbian- made pornography site <http://www.goodykeporn.com/> (found through the feminist blog Feministe)

¹³ A pornography website with a focus on acceptance of gender non-conformity and different body types <http://www.nofauxxx.com/> (found through Feministe)

¹⁴ A company focusing on making pornography designed to appeal to women (McElroy 171)

The pornography industry needs improvement, but I believe that a feminist (under my definition of feminism) can watch porn and still be in accordance with feminist values. This requires consideration of how the pornography is made, and the content. I don't think that there is place for explicitly racist pornography, and I don't support any pornography with minors (unlike what Rubin seems to imply in *Thinking Sex*). Like McElroy, I support "a woman's body, a woman's right" and do not want to actively stop anyone (of any gender) from acting in pornography if that person is of legal age and understands what he or she is getting involved in (McElroy 123). Pornography is a topic that feminists must consider further in the future, as the films, books, photographs, and industry all continue to evolve.

ⁱ In this paper, "pornography" refers to material (film, photography, writing, etc.) created for erotic enjoyment. I do not make a distinction between pornography and erotica for this paper. I am writing about erotic material, made for sexual purposes, and am not debating what should be considered artful or tasteful enough to be considered erotica.

ⁱⁱ According to Net Rankings (via Forbes.com), 22.9 million unique people went to pornographic websites in April 2001. For reference, the same source says 41.1 million people visited news websites.