

“Pornography and Research”

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Definition

The Greek linguistic roots of the English word “pornography” essentially refer to the written reportage (“graphy”) of prostitutes (“porno”) on their work. If the scholarly investigation of pornography and related cultural phenomena is to have any value today, the absolutely crucial issues clustered here must be appropriately remembered.

Today’s English word and concept “pornography” seem essentially to have come into being in tandem with: 1. Modern print technologies for the dissemination of writing, and; 2. The modern industrial period more generally, which produced print as a harbinger of today’s so-called mass media. Given its historical connections to reportage on acts of prostitution in one

medium or another, pornography is, at root, a technological concept: it has to do with the potential publicization, in mass-mediated form, upon otherwise fundamentally private (or even secret) sexual encounters. Pornography is in this regard a modern form of gossip, and a technologized version of “kiss and tell.”

And it is deeply conceptually entangled with prostitution. Pornography demands being taken as a newer form of prostitution, or at least as a logical extension of it. The session between sex worker and client, maybe more than the sex act per se, is its paradigm case for intimacy—and for the social event in general. In an updated version of the old switcheroo first accomplished by the invention of the “world’s oldest profession,” money as well as other potential compensatory provisions replace at least some of the human goods and services that are taken to be exchanged in “regular” sexual transactions. With pornography, the act of recording this—along with potential dissemination of this documentation/reportage—enter the economy of sexual exchange as well. Secondary markets are simultaneously created, via which traces of these original events can also be sold to further classes of “witnesses” in order to maximize the profits potentially made by any single act of commercialized sex.

Contemporary Implications of Historical Aspects of Definition

In this regard, the vexing matter of what mass media have to do with our tenuous, but necessary, categories of “the public” and “the private” is absolutely central to pornography. All contemporary talk about privacy, the public record, and sexual activity in the Internet era is already there at the historical heart of the concept and the word.

Pornographic performers occupy social roles that are very close to those occupied by prostitutes due simply to that history, though their roles are also intriguingly distinct. Documents of their work, for example, do sometimes function partly as advertising or marketing materials for their in-person services. Mediated engagement with these materials by audiences become, in this sense, substitutes for actual engagement with such persons. Thought of in this way, media pornography ironically appears partly to be a prophylactic shield between commercialized sex and the public, since it provides a version of “prostitution” through the barrier of the media, a barrier always punctured only to a limited extent (as if by a keyhole). While it might be possible that a piece of media can be classifiable as pornography even if it did not involve the actual exchange of money for participation in its creation, such exchange is still historically built into the genre of pornography.

Indeed, amateurism may today have become, with the Internet, central to the ethos of much pornography. The Hollywood-modeled star systems of pornography in the film and home video eras have been replaced, to some degree, by the kind of run-of-the-mill anonymity that now characterizes its performers. But money and the possibility of it still adhere, just in different ways than they do with the more glitzy for-pay aspects of stardom—or the ways that profit was differentially generated in the days of, say, VHS video. If anonymity is another root connection back to early industrial modernity, as can be seen by thinking about “the city” and its new mass of faceless denizens as the ultimate products of that era (including the figure of the prostitute), the star systems of the film and video eras now actually seem like something of a detour in some larger overall continuities in pornography’s history.

Pornography involves rumination upon just what a sex act is, and what it entails. This, too, is deep in its historical nature, and the fact that works of pornography essentially thematize

the fuzzy difference between an act of commercialized sex and an act of “freely” given sex is only one example. By implication, pornography also entails rumination upon where markets begin and end in the modern world. If pornography is a lowly and debased genre, it is also an inherently analytical and philosophical one.

Today, it may be hard to imagine that a piece of writing can even be classifiable as pornographic. The medium of print has been mostly replaced as moving-image-media, especially with sound, have become the normative materials of the pornographic. The development of each of these newer media and communication technologies over time has been significantly driven by desires to more effectively produce as well as consume pornography. In general, the public demand for pornography is indisputably powerful. Before the Internet was even really capable of streaming video delivery, it was plausibly estimated that pornography’s annual revenues in the United States already exceeded those of live music events combined with live sporting events.

Limits of the Ways That Pornography is Commonly Approached and Discussed

Some years ago, an undergraduate Women’s Studies major approached me about taking my course on pornography. She informed me that she was already in the process of writing an Honors Thesis about pornography. However, when she subsequently learned that my syllabus required viewing a selection of works of media pornography from the early 1970s to the present—in private, via the Internet—she told me that she could not possibly take the class because she knew that the viewing of such materials would be personally damaging to her. I

later learned that this student had, in fact, successfully completed an honor's thesis about pornography.

This logic and mentality are not atypical. Not only can it be acceptable to today carry out advanced academic research at a major university on a cultural phenomenon without scrutinizing a selection of examples of that phenomenon, when the topic is pornography. It can also be acceptable to actively *avoid* direct contact with the topic of one's research—and to be upfront about this avoidance to boot—without evident fear of having that research immediately dismissed as fraudulent at most or, at least, as purely subjective fantasy rather than fact. I cannot cite another other field of study, or another research topic, for which this could be the overt predicament in the contemporary United States.

This situation emerges largely from of the influence of two major legacies of thought on the ways that pornography is commonly approached and discussed in U.S. today, both within higher educational institutions and beyond them. Both of these have had particular influence in Women's and Gender Studies, partly because they have tended until quite recently to co-operate, and compound each other most dramatically, in the history of that field. The first tradition is social scientific approaches to the media, typified by so-called "media effects research." This had its relatively uncontested heyday in the late 1960s and early 1970s, due partly to the perceived roles of television in American culture during that time. The second tradition is feminist critiques of pornography from roughly the same period. These are actually very varied, but are nonetheless often lumped together into the catch-all phrase "anti-pornography feminism."

Both approaches come from a world that is now gone, and encapsulate ways of looking at that world that now have limited and questionable value. Adopting such approaches wholesale today thus tends to ignore the history of pornography since, along with a number of changes in

the greater world of which that is a part. Furthermore, such a wholesale adoption tends to ignore the insights of film, media, and technology studies in the Anglophone world since the 1970s. These last areas of scholarship are based primarily in the Humanities. Adopting these older, deeply influential feminist antipornography lineages of thought without appropriately updating them also generally fails to account for expert knowledge from the field of Sexuality Studies since the 1990s. This includes, but is not limited to, insights from “Queer Theory”—a term that itself includes, but is not limited to, LGBTQ considerations—as well as the tradition of Freudian psychoanalysis (an approach that investigates the world through techniques that are diametrically opposed to the ways that social-scientific, empirical thought—Psychology included—tends to operate).

Social Scientific Approaches to the Media (“Media Effects”)

Periodically, an article appears in publications such as *The New York Times* asking what the omnipresence of pornography is doing to us: destroying adolescent’s abilities to have realistic relationships later in life; making our sex lives less satisfying; damaging women’s images of themselves; and so forth. These are important possibilities. But the issues are usually framed in extremely repetitive and constricted ways, due in large part to unreconstructed reliance on media effects traditions in particular. As framed, the issues also often appear to be as much about “the media” *tout court* as they are about pornography per se, and such discussions can thus tend to ignore the details of precisely what they purport to investigate.

The first assumption from media effects approaches that tends to make its way into these discussions of pornography is that the media have effects on our lives, and that these effects are

more or less measurable. (Other traditions of social-scientific media research also partake in this, if in different ways. This includes “uses and gratifications” approaches.) This links the issues with pornography mostly to a way of thinking that has arguably provided us notably little solid information about precisely how the media work because the media’s roles in our lives are so complicated, contradictory, multiplistic and obscure. In other words, the media are probably doing many things to us at once, and many are modulating or cancelling each other out.

Secondly, we live with a variety of different media and communication technologies, though we use them in tandem. We are not even talking about one thing when we discuss “the media.” That term already involves a plethora of very different objects, formats, and systems. This generalization often carries over into overgeneralizations about pornography, and runs rampant through discussions of it.

Third, “the media” operate in tandem with other social, cultural, national, and international institutions and practices. Any effects “the media” might have as an autonomous system must always be considered in relation to the operations of systems external to them in all such contexts. Given this, can we ever really know where the effects of media begin and end, as opposed to the workings of these other aspects of the world? Furthermore, it is not simply that the line between the insides and the outsides of “the media” is not a readily demarcatable one. It is also that this “line,” to whatever extent we assume it ever existed, seemingly continues to break down further in today’s world of mobile, social, and even prosthetic/medical devices. But these insights are rarely taken serious, carefully, and together when pornography is discussed.

The world has changed in many such ways since feature-length film pornography was invented and “porn” started to become so “popular” in the United States. We know and understand a lot more about some of the involved workings than we did in the 1970s, when it

also started to become a hot topic of cultural discussion. But certain habits of thinking and talking persist from that time. Social-scientific approaches to media, especially about their so-called “effects,” always need to be carefully contextualized. This may be especially true with pornography today. Supplemental forms of thought must complement those traditions if we want more substantive, valid, current, and appropriately nuanced answers about pornography—and if we want answers to maximally insightful questions in the first place.

“Anti-Pornography Feminism”

In attempting to intervene in the sexist ways that society is structured, feminist antipornographic activism—entangled from the early 1970s with other kinds of feminist activism about “the media”—promoted certain visions of what pornography is, how it works, the effects it allegedly has on people, and the nature of its connections to larger social operations. Not all of these now appear plausible, and some of them also characterize a world now lost to history. Furthermore, this was indeed an activist tradition. Its claims were always, in part, self-consciously strategic, rhetorical, and political claims.

Highly questionable characterizations of what is going on in much of the pornography in the mediasphere were sometimes involved, often without even pointing to named examples of specific pornographic works. This included assertions about just how much pornography involved overt acts of violence toward women—or at least the differential degradation and/or objectification of women—as well as the idea that pornography continually makes women seem perpetually sexually available to men. (This was an idea that was related to sexual consent and to the possibility of authentic forms of it.) This was also in connection with visions of pornography

representing, propagating, and/or creating violent or derogatory behavior, feelings and attitudes amongst men and being addictive too, on the model of drugs. Of course, such characterizations depend upon just what gets classified as violent or degrading, or as objectification and addiction. One problem here is that, without recourse to just which works were being discussed this way, it remains hard to look into this much of the time. Likewise, to establish reliable numeral norms and prevalences of such aspects in the overall archive of pornography is impossible anyway. No one ever really has access to the totality of such a media archive, both because it is too large—and otherwise inaccessible—at any given time and because it is bound to then get lost to history too.

The basic notion that pornography even essentially presents us with “gender issues” is also questionable. Today, it appears instead that pornography might essentially have to do with what we can call “sexuality.” We now have a clearer sense that gender and sexuality are quasi-autonomous, partly as a result of further attention to homosexuality in the intervening years. In fact, Laura Kipnis has plausibly demonstrated that, if pornography fundamentally operates through any one axis of social division, that axis would probably be socioeconomic class. Portraying pornography mostly as having to do with relations between, and power imbalances amongst, women and men—and even as necessitating legal intervention to rectify its differential harms to women—is no longer tenable the way that it once may have been, on the bases of such assumptions.

Once you move beyond the catchall “plug in drug” model of addictive media often espoused by antipornography feminism in those years, the evidence that there are many differing kinds of pornographic works starts to become more visible. So does the likelihood that pornography is doing fundamentally different things for different people and groups of people, as

well as doing fundamentally different things for the same people at different times. For example, the explosion of all-male pornography since the video era of the 1980s—and its special places in gay culture—has involved men using pornography as a “safer sex” survival strategy during the riskiest years of HIV and AIDS. This was used partly as an alternative to some of the sexual forms invented and popularized by 1970s gay liberation, including forms of anonymous sex. Can there be an ethically viable legal argument for banning pornography all-out in the face of such information? Likewise, gay men did not have the chance to even see themselves represented in mainstream media most of the time, compared with heterosexuals. Pornography became a privileged format, because it was available to them, for their working through of their relations to their own self-images, in times that were even more stacked against them than today. Likewise, the increased social acceptance of all non-heterosexual people, identities and behaviors since the 1980s—as well as non-cisgendered people, identities and behaviors—probably has something to do with their sheer increased presence in the public sphere thanks to pornography. If pornography does its wrongs, it is also useful to people in ways that—though now much more visible—still go regularly unacknowledged in discussions about it because of the lingering biases of those discussions, including heterosexist biases.

Likewise, the idea that pornography is a poor substitute for real human intimacy, and is thus denigrating to the sanctity of sex—and to all that we truly need from sex as humans (which is connected to our human, and humanizing, vulnerability)—might be true in some ways. And women might unequally bear some of the burdens. But people might simultaneously be turning to pornography to get away from the mandates of good or better sex in the first place, which are continually sold to us by the media itself and which might also unequally burden women in a cluster of ways. Besides being complicit with “the media” and media culture where such

(gender) issues go, pornography also clearly participates in trenchant critiques of all of our dominant media and their built-in values. This, too, is now much clearer, though it is still regularly elided from discussions of pornography that remain excessively rooted in certain aspects of older traditions of thought such as this one.

The Alternative Lessons of Humanities-Based Media Studies and Sexuality Studies

There are two major book-length works that rethink these two reigning thought lineages and poke at their intersections with each other. Both have helped to formulate influential alternative ways of thinking. The first is Linda Williams's *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and "the Frenzy of the Visible"*, from 1989. The second is Laura Kipnis's aforementioned *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America*, from 1996. Along with subsequent works by these authors—none of which promise easy answers that can be readily mobilized for partisan political purposes (one reason such scholarship is sometimes ignored)—they have had an especially notable impact on discussions of pornography since its further subsequent explosion into our lives with the video capable Internet.

Williams looks at the development since cinema's beginnings of the feature-length pornographic film as a genre, asking what we can see there about the cultural and social aspirations of pornography. Rather than being unconcerned with women's sexual pleasure, or simply objectifying women, she finds the genre to be characterized by complex brands of ambivalence toward all things feminine. Like the history of disciplines such as gynecology and psychoanalysis, pornography makes women visible and investigates "what they are" for reasons ostensibly including "public health," procreation, and the pleasure of looking. These may have

as much, if not more, to do with their benefits to men as to women themselves. But women still have their pleasures in all of the involved transpirations, and there is still power and agency for them in these pleasures and these transpirations even if they might be especially difficult to pin down.

Williams's book demonstrates that the "messages" of pornographic texts always demand being received and interpreted, and can indeed be received and interpreted very differently due to these inherent ambivalences. Just because real, in-your-face sex is involved does not mean that the meanings of these works, or whatever else going on in them and in their transactions with spectators, are self-evident, uncomplicated, or ultimately of one single variety or function. While there might be a kind of rote facticity involved in pornography—such films are works of non-fictional actuality—pornography is also intimately related to fantasy, since these are creative works of imagination and fictional imaginings/conjurings of worlds.

In fact, due partly to her debt to Freudian psychoanalysis—not to mention Marxism—and its influence upon film theory, Williams's book explores fantasy as much as it does pornography, given the crucial operative entanglements. Compared to the American colloquial usage of the word "fantasy," this usage approaches fantasy as not fully conscious, not at all opposed to reality, and as actually being at the core of all "reality." It is always "between" us and reality, mediating that relationship. If, according to the old logical reversal, non-fiction is about the facts whereas fiction is about the truth, Williams's approach helps us to remember that, with pornography, we are always dealing with both. And in some ways fantasy is actually on the side of truth. Pornography's "effects" do not simply issue forth from inside the media, in this regard. They come from us, and ultimately from our needs for, and difficulties with, "the truth" itself as

well as the truth's myriad connections to that motivating and crippling set of even more abstract machinations that psychoanalysis calls *desire*.

Kipnis's book builds on this. She approaches pornography as popular culture and as visual culture, including art. This is to say that she approaches it partly aesthetically, implicitly assuming that if pornography is not art, it functions like art and, in particular, like Modern art—which is very invested in critique and subversion. By implication, pornography even involves such old ideas as beauty, and may in fact be “addictive” mostly in the ways that art and beauty are addictive. Spectators may be using it, just as humans have always used art, to meditate upon and worship beauty as well as death, difference, social hierarchy, etc. To see what pornography is and what it does, we may therefore need to look beyond the figures (i.e., the bodies having sex) to the grounds of the images (such as the environments in which they are placed)—just as we do in the face of Mona Lisa.

For Kipnis, there is nothing inherently controversial about pornography. Our debates about it express longing, fears and anxieties about all sorts of other dimensions of the world. Kipnis's book takes an even more fundamentally interdisciplinary approach than Williams's in order to get at the variety of matters that might actually be at stake in discussions of, and debates about, pornography. The cracks between different disciplines of thought—Women's Studies, Art, Journalism, Media Studies, History, Sociology, and so forth—are essential to contradictions about pornography itself, and to all that we think we know about it, because of this variety of things that is *really* at stake with “pornography” and because each discipline has such a fundamentally different, and differently value laden, ways of constructing pornography as an object of knowledge.

This is to say that discussions of pornography, including research on it by experts—even more than is the case with other forms of either popular or unpopular culture—are always expressions for Kipnis as much of differing fantasies about the world (which cannot be reduced to “truth” or falsity in any simple manner), and of clashes amongst these fantasies, as they are of any set of facts about that world. These fantasies might revolve around gender relations, what the media is doing to us, what sex can and cannot provide, or anything else.

This last insight continues to pose especially invaluable challenges for academic research, and for public discourse in general, as they attempt—and avoid attempting—to seriously reckon with all that pornography mirrors back to us, in all of its fabricated contrivances, about everything that we and the world actually are.

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