

Pornography and Men's Consciousness

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I'd rather talk about pornography than the First Amendment. The former has been an important influence in my life and the lives of most of the men I know.

Unfortunately, we rarely discuss that influence. Too often, when I've been involved in discussions about pornography with groups of men, usually in a college or high school setting, the talk quickly goes to a debate about free speech and the Constitution.

Sometimes that focus, while evading the more difficult personal issues, can be enlightening and productive. But most of the time such debates are dominated by knee-jerk invocations of the Bill of Rights and the need to combat "censorship." The subject is framed as one of "individual rights" versus "government control," and the entire exercise is then dominated by men (and less frequently, women) who compete with each other to see who has the most compelling grasp of constitutional principles.

And no one talks about pornography.

For many of us who grew up with magazines like *Playboy* and *Penthouse*, this comes as a relief. It's a lot easier to talk politics and legal issues than it is to discuss masturbation, fantasy, and the sexual objectification of the women we work with, sleep with, and love. That stuff is . . . private. For many of us, it's shrouded in shame. And let's face it, it's embarrassing.

Conversational avoidance is one of the ways that men, myself included, have managed to dodge the kind of introspection that feminists have been engaged in for decades. Only in the past decade or so have a number of men begun to apply some of the feminist ideas linked to the insight that the personal-is-political and started talking about our own experiences and attitudes in an honest and self-revelatory way.

When the subject is pornography, this sort of critical male self-disclosure can lead to new insights both about sexism and men's violence against women, and about the sexual and emotional problems of many men.

But before I get to some of these, I have to acknowledge that my focus here is the effects on men of heterosexual pornography aimed at straight men. The consumption of pornography by gay males has its own dynamics, as does the consumption by lesbians of lesbian porn. There are common issues of sexual objectification, the commodification of people's bodies, domination and submission, and so forth. But the overwhelming percentage of pornography consumed in our culture today is heterosexually oriented, and that is the sphere with which I'm best acquainted.

So what kinds of things can we learn when men talk about our use of pornography and not the First Amendment? I realized when I first read seriously and considered the ideas of anti-pornography feminists that it is naive and facile to equate pornography to media representations of "sex" and not deconstruct further its function within the system of gender relations. This insight seems obvious in retrospect, but I never thought about that when I was growing up in the 1970s. Even today, despite more than a quarter century of feminist anti-porn writing, teaching, and political activism, most young men I talk with think that the only people with a reason to oppose it are uptight and prudish religious fanatics and man-hating radical lesbians.

This ignorance is partially based in a defensive form of denial. It is unsettling to learn that what we experienced as so pleasurable, masturbating to images and videos of nude women, has harmful effects. If it really is harmful to women, and to our relationships with them, we'd rather not think about it.

How is our private pleasure harmful to women? One way to conceptualize this is to consider pornography as an industry. It is a huge industry, taking in an estimated \$10 billion in annual revenues. (According to the *Los Angeles Times*, nearly 10,000 new porn videos were released in 1999 alone.) And who are the workers in this industry? They are, contrary to our convenient stereotype of high class models, largely poor or working-class women, many of color, who are often treated with outright contempt and coercion by the men who control the business. Further, the vast majority of women who pose for magazines or act in porn movies have been sexually abused as children and may have been raped or abused as adolescents. So we need to be aware that by purchasing and using pornography, whatever our motives, we are perpetuating the exploitation of women and girls who have already been victimized by male domination and violence.

But apart from these exploited women, does pornography "cause" violence against women? Some people argue that, after all, most of the 90-odd percent of men who have consumed pornography at some point in their lives do not rape and sexually assault women. While technically accurate, this misses one of the central points that feminists make: pornographic representations of women affect the way that all men see and relate to women. Visual imagery is powerful. It's not harmless fun. There is a vast amount of information contained in a picture or a video.

Most white people I know accept the concept that blatantly demeaning and degrading media representations of African-Americans are unacceptable. We see them for what they are: racist. We understand that the problem is not simply the injury done to the individual actors. Rather, we recognize that all African-Americans suffer, because our feelings about the entire race are influenced by those images. Most Gentiles I know accept the same reasoning when it involves popular caricatures of Jews in Germany in the 1930s.

But when many men consider demeaning and degrading images of women, they quickly discard logic and the consensus breaks down. "That's not sexism," they'll say. "It's sex. Can't you understand that I like looking at nude women's bodies?" In the debate about pornography and men's violence against women, many men simply refuse to ascribe the exact same causal connection between objectification and violence that they make when the subject is race.

Furthermore, arguing that the pornography industry is not sexist requires a willful ignorance about the deep misogyny that pervades porn culture. It's not just the images. One representative e-mail solicitation I received through my regular account with a leading internet service provider aimed this message at young men: "Summer vacation is here and we have the college sluts to prove it! Their idea of a 'summer job' is spreading their legs and taking it live on camera. . . . It's so easy to get those hot little bikinis off the sluts. It's what they want."

Men who are not troubled by this type of blatant anti-woman aggression, including those who consume some of the really outrageous pornography available today, probably know at some level that they are "getting off" on a celebration of their power over women (i.e., *sexism*).

But for some men, including the majority who have not been exposed to overtly violent pornography, the reasoning process is more complicated. I know. I went through it myself. Initially I found it difficult to understand how pornography that is not explicitly violent can be harmful. The standard arguments were sufficient to soothe my conscience: I'm not going to rape anyone; these women are consenting adults.

When I began listening to some of my women friends' feelings about pornography I was forced to reassess my thoughts. These were intelligent, urbane women, far from prudish, for whom pornography was saddening and degrading. Because I respected them, I had no choice but to take this seriously.

Some of my friends' discomfort with pornography was linked to their level of consciousness about the subjugation of women. But it was more than that. Women with a feminist political consciousness, like all women, carry with them the personal scars and baggage of living in a male-dominated world. Some of the most painful of these involve issues of body image and sexuality. Women inevitably internalize the culture's misogyny, which then contributes to all sorts of problems in their relationships with men.

One woman I was close to was deeply disturbed by the sexual exploitation of women in the media. This included media far more mainstream than hard- or soft-core pornography. Whenever we'd see a particularly "sexploitative" beer commercial or MTV music video, she'd feel personally violated, then morose. As a man I could empathize to some degree, but I rarely had the same visceral response. This inevitably affected the way we

related to each other, including the way we related sexually: how safe she'd allow herself to feel, how vulnerable.

But it's not fair to say that pornography worked only on her psyche. It touched mine as well. The reduction of women to body parts for men's consumption can significantly damage women's self-respect. But repeated exposure to pornography also can reduce men's ability to form intimate relationships with women. Such exposure conditions us to relate sexually not to unique, complex women, but to interchangeable bodies who are "fuckable" to the degree that we like looking at their breasts, vaginas, and buttocks. I'm sure that few men who use pornography ever pause to consider how their long-term consumption of it contributes to the impoverishment of their relationships with real women.

For many men, the short-term pleasure provided by pornography overshadows any harm it might cause. As the saying goes, if it feels nice, don't think twice. How bad can it be if it gets you off?

If a consumer of child pornography made that argument, we would have a ready rebuttal: we don't care if you get off to it, it's wrong (and you have serious problems). There are more important matters here to consider beyond your immediate sexual gratification. And though the arguments can get tricky when considering the case of consenting adults, the moral, if not the legal, principle holds: your right to get off sexually has to be balanced against women's rights to live free and dignified lives.

How does pornography perpetuate the subordination of women? The level of male violence against women in this society is out of control. Despite decades of feminist activism, boys and men are still sexually abusing, battering, raping, and murdering girls and women at an alarming rate. While this violence has no single cause, the dehumanization and objectification of women in the media is surely one of the contributing factors. Consider the pervasiveness of sexual harassment that women suffer from men in school, the workplace, on the street. Men aren't born biologically programmed to sexually harass women. We learn it. We learn it through continuous exposure to a media culture that is profoundly influenced by the ideological and stylistic conventions of pornography. It is impossible to discuss the way American boys have been socialized into manhood over the past three decades without talking about the effects of pornography.

I know that many of my thoughts and feelings about women, men, and sexuality were shaped by some of the dominant themes of the genre. For example, one of the more popular themes is that while they might like "sensitive" guys for friends, most women are sexually attracted to rough, aggressive men.

This didn't cause me to become a jerk, but it did cause undo self-doubt and insecurity. For other young men, this same media message is taken as a license to be sexually callous if not abusive toward women. This isn't to say, simplistically, that men see women in movies and magazines enjoying rape and sexual harassment, and are thereby encouraged to go out and assault them. That happens, but the long term effects of media messages are even more troubling. The blatant sexism and misogyny of the pornography industry has pervaded all other forms of media, inevitably permeating our consciousness.

But we're not passive agents. We can't reverse the entire process overnight, but we can choose to stop supporting the degradation of women and the dehumanization of our own sexuality by refusing to purchase or rent porn magazines and videos, or subscribe to porn sites on the World Wide Web. There's no getting around it: the personal is political.

At the same time, personal change on the part of a handful of sensitized men is insufficient. We need also to express publicly our unhappiness and outrage at the way the pornography industry fuels sexism and violence against the girls and women we claim to love. This can help stimulate discussions among men about our sexual and gender iden-

tities, utilizing some of the growing body of pro-feminist men's research and literature. Just like women, men go through a process of consciousness-raising as the first step toward politicization.

This isn't going to be easy. The question of motivation is especially problematic. People wonder: what do men have to gain by making these changes? What's in it for them?

It's really pretty simple. If we want to be able to look the women we care about in the eye and say that we respect them and support their struggle for dignity and equality, then we really have no other choice.