The Right to Sex

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the thing I came for:
the wreck and not the story of the wreck
the thing itself and not the myth

Adrienne Rich, ‘Diving into the Wreck’

Talking to My Students About Porn

...In April 1982, the Barnard Sex Conference (as it came to be known)[1] was held in New York. Its theme was 'women's sexual pleasure, choice and autonomy'. In the conference's concept paper, 'Towards a Politics of Sexuality', Carole Vance called for an acknowledgement of sex as 'simultaneously a domain of restric-tion, repression, and danger as well as a domain of exploration, pleasure, and agency'.[2] About 800 feminist scholars, students and activists[3] attended talks and workshops including 'Pornography and

the construction of a female subject', 'Politically correct, politically incorrect sexuality' and 'The forbidden: eroticism and taboo'. As one of the organisers wrote in *Diary of a Conference on Sexuality* – a punk zine of critical essays, witty reflections, reading suggestions and sexually explicit images to be handed out to participants – the conference was intended to be 'a coming out party for feminists who [had] been appalled by the intellectual dishonesty and dreariness of the anti-pornography movement'.[4] With a week to go before it began, anti-porn feminists began inundating Barnard's administrators and trustees with phone calls, complaining that the conference had been planned by 'sexual perverts'.[5] The president of Barnard, Ellen Futter, allowed the conference to go ahead, but not before interrogating the organisers and confiscating all 1,500 copies of the *Diary*, which she declared was a piece of pornography.[6]

At the conference itself, anti-porn feminists, wearing T-shirts emblazoned with 'For a Feminist Sexuality' on the front and 'Against S/M' on the back, handed out leaflets accusing the conference of supporting not just pornography and sadomasochism but also patriarchy and child abuse.[7] (The last charge wasn't entirely baseless. The same organiser who called the conference a 'coming out party' also wrote in the *Diary*: 'I understand the advanced position on porn, on s and m, but I can't understand the argument for pederasty!'[8]) When the *Diary* was finally reprinted, Andrea Dworkin sent out photocopies of it with a cover letter declaring it 'perniciously anti-woman and anti-feminist'. The feminist publication *off our backs*, 'the closest thing to a newspaper of record of the feminist movement', devoted much of its June 1982 issue to lambasting the conference, triggering an 'avalanche' of enraged replies.[9]

The Barnard organisers recalled 'a McCarthyite atmosphere of witch-hunting and purges'[10] in the wake of the conference, and the Barnard Women's Center lost its sponsor for the conference series. One British feminist, observing events from across the Atlantic, ruefully noted that Barnard and its fallout had 'deepened the already scarring divisions in the American movement'.[11]

The intensity of the ‘porn wars’ is more understandable when you bear in mind that porn came to serve, for feminists of an ear-lier generation, as a metonym for ‘problematic’ sex in general: for sex that took no account of women’s pleasure, for sadomasochistic sex, for prostitution, for rape fantasies, for sex without love, for sex across power differentials, for sex with men.

By the mid-1970s, amid a growing cultural backlash against feminism, feminists began to identify porn as the lynchpin of patriarchy. 'Pornography is the theory, and rape the practice,' Robin Morgan declared in 1974.[18] In 1976, the first feminist anti-porn group, Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media, was founded in the San Francisco Bay Area; its aim was to 'put an end to all portrayals of women being bound, raped, tortured, mutilated, abused, or degraded in any way for sexual or erotic stimulation'.[19] That same year, Andrea Dworkin, together with other radical femi-nists, organised a picket of a movie theatre in New York showing the film *Snuff*, which depicted supposedly real footage of a preg-nant woman being murdered and dismembered by a film crew in Argentina. (*Snuff*'s tagline was: 'The film that could only be made in South America . . . where Life is CHEAP!') The group went on to form Women Against Pornography (WAP), and began running biweekly 'tours' of Times Square sex shops, peep shows and top-less bars. A *New York Times* reporter who went on one of the tours, led by Susan Brownmiller, described the consciousness-raising slideshow that preceded it: 'A dozen women stared frozen-faced in the tiny storefront, as images of women being bound, beaten and abused flashed across the screen.'[20] (Some feminists later admitted to having been aroused by WAP's slideshows.) WAP's headquarters on Ninth Avenue had been given to the group, rent-free, by the mayor's Midtown Enforcement Project, which had closed down the 'soul food restaurant and gathering place for transvestites and pros-titutes' that had previously occupied the space. ..

> The message of these materials . . . is 'get her,' pointing at all women, to the perpetrators' benefit of ten billion dollars a year and counting. This message is addressed directly to the penis, delivered through an erection, and taken out on women in the real world. The content of this message is not unique to pornography. It is the function of pornography in effectuating it that is unique.[23]

To say that it is porn's function to *effectuate* its message is to see porn as a mechanism not just for depicting the world, but for making it. Porn, for MacKinnon and other anti-porn feminists, was a machine for the production and reproduction of an ideology which, by eroticising women's subordination, thereby made it real.

This analysis, uncompromising in its insistence on porn's world-making power, was, in the hands of black feminists of this period, historicised and racialised. They identified the template for main-stream pornography in the historical display of black women's bodies in the contexts of colonialism and slavery: Sarah Baartman, for example, the 'Hottentot Venus', whose near-naked body was exhib-ited across Europe as a specimen of African female hypersexuality; and the countless enslaved women who were stripped, prodded and sold at auction. Thus Alice Walker wrote that the 'ancient roots of mod-ern pornography are to be found in the almost always pornographic treatment of black women who, from the moment they entered slav-ery ... were subjected to rape as the "logical" convergence of sex and violence.'24

It was my students who first led me to think about this question.

Discussing the ‘porn question’ is more or less mandatory in an introductory class on feminist theory. But my heart wasn’t really in it. I imagined that the students would find the anti-porn position prudish and passé, just as I was trying hard to make them see the relevance of the history of feminism to the contemporary moment. I needn’t have worried. They were riveted. Could it be that pornography doesn’t merely depict the subordination of women, but actually makes it real, I asked? Yes, they said. Does porn silence women, making it harder for them to protest against unwanted sex, and harder for men to hear those protests? Yes, they said. Does porn bear responsibility for the objectification of women, for the marginalisation of women, for sexual violence against women? Yes, they said, yes to all of it.

It wasn’t just the women students talking; the men were saying yes as well, in some cases even more emphatically. One young woman pushed back, citing the example of feminist porn. ‘But we don’t watch that,’ the men said. What they watched was the hardcore stuff, the aggressive stuff – what is now, on the internet, the free stuff. My male students complained about the routines they were expected to perform in sex; one of them asked whether it was too utopian to imagine sex that was loving and mutual and not about domination and submission. My women students talked about the neglect of women’s pleasure in the pornographic script, and wondered whether it had something to do with the absence of pleasure in their own lives. ‘But if it weren’t for pornography,’ one woman said, ‘how would we ever learn to have sex?’

Porn meant so much to my students; they *cared* so much about it. Like the anti-porn feminists of forty years ago, they had a heightened sense of porn’s power, a strong conviction that porn did things

in the world. Talking with my graduate teaching assistant after that seminar (she was a handful of years younger than me), I realised what should have been obvious from the start. My students belonged to the first generation truly to be raised on internet pornography. Almost every man in that class would have had his first sexual experience the moment he first wanted it, or didn't want it, in front of a screen. And almost every woman in the class would have had her first sexual experience, if not in front of a screen, then with a boy whose first sexual experience had been. In that sense, her experience too would have been mediated by a screen: by what the screen instructed him to do. While almost all of us today live in a world where porn is ubiquitous, my students, born in the final years of the last century, were the first to have come of age sexually in that world.

My students would not have stolen or passed around magazines or videos, or gathered glimpses here and there. For them sex was there, fully formed, fully interpreted, fully categorised – *teen*, *gangbang*, *MILF*, *stepdaughter* – waiting on the screen. By the time my students got around to sex IRL – later, it should be noted, than teenagers of previous generations – there was, at least for the straight boys and girls, a script in place that dictated not only the physical moves and gestures and sounds to make and demand, but also the appropriate affect, the appropriate desires, the appropriate distribution of power. The psyches of my students are products of pornography. In them, the warnings of the anti-porn feminists seem to have been belatedly realised: sex for my students is what porn says it is.

It's a startling image: porn as a virtual training ground for male sexual aggression. Could it be true? Or is this image itself a kind of sexual fantasy, which reduces misogyny to a single origin, and its many, diverse agents to a single subject: the porn watcher?

In a scathing review of *Only Words*, the political philosopher Ronald Dworkin (no relation to Andrea), claimed that porn viewing simply wasn't pervasive enough to have the widespread negative effects that MacKinnon and other anti-porn feminists claimed for it. If anything in mass culture was an obstacle to sexual equality, Dworkin wrote, it was soap operas and advertising. That may have been true in 1993, but it's less plausible now. In 2018, the five biggest porn sites – PornHub, XVideos, BongaCams, xMaster and xnxx – got a total of more than six billion visits per month. PornHub alone claimed that it had 28.5 billion visits in 2017.[28]

A 2010 meta-analysis concluded that there is a 'significant overall relationship between pornography consumption and attitudes supporting violence against women'.[29] The association was 'significantly stronger' in the case of pornography classed as 'violent', but was still statistically significant in the case of 'non-violent' pornography.[30] (MacKinnon and others would want to know: where we do we draw the line between 'violent' and 'non-violent' porn? Is it violent if he smacks her? If he calls her a bitch? If he ejaculates on her face? If he tells her that she likes it, that she wants it? If her 'No' finally becomes a 'Yes'?) Studies have found that men who watch porn frequently are less likely to support affirmative action for women[31] and to empathise with rape victims;[32] they are also more likely to report an intent to rape,[33] and more likely to commit sexual assault.[34] Meanwhile, in one study of sorority members, the women who watched porn were less likely to intervene when they saw other women being sexually assaulted.[35]

A 2012 University of Sydney study of 800 regular porn users found that 43 per cent of them started watching porn between the ages of eleven and thirteen.[36] In a study from 2007 of students aged thirteen to fourteen in Alberta, Canada, 90 per cent of boys reported accessing sexually explicit media; 35 per cent said they had viewed porn 'too many times to count'.[37]

The invocation of young people in political discourse often serves reactionary ends. Calls to protect their innocence are based on a fantasy of childhood that does not and never did exist – a childhood untouched by the world of adults and adult desires. The appeal to childhood innocence also tends to draw an implausibly sharp distinction between the way things were and the way things are now, skating over the continuities: between the Rolling Stones and Miley Cyrus, between top-shelf magazines and PornHub, between making out in the back row and the dick pic. What's more, it is arguably the rest of us, and not today's teenagers and young adults, who are under-equipped to deal with the technological renovation of our social world.

What is to be done?

In 1972, for the first time, a pornographic film was given a broad release in mainstream movie theatres. *Deep Throat*, now a cult classic, featured the actress Linda Boreman, stage name Linda Lovelace, in search of an orgasm – something, thanks to an unusually positioned clitoris, she was only able to achieve by performing fellatio. At the time, the film was taken to be a celebration of female sexuality; after its release, Boreman published a pornographic memoir describing the emancipatory experience of making it. The film remains one of the highest-grossing pornographic films of all time; it was released around the world, and screened several times a day in theatres across the US. The *New York Times* reviewer quoted a porn director (a 'seriously bearded young man with an interest in Cinema') who said of porn actresses that 'They do it because they enjoy it and because it's an easy way to make money – I think in that order. They're also exhibitionists. The camera turns them on.'[48]

Eight years later, in 1980, Boreman wrote another memoir, *Ordeal*, in which she revealed that she had been forced into pornography and prostitution, and raped by her husband and manager, Chuck Traynor. Boreman made these charges public at a press conference for the book, alongside Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin. Afterwards, Dworkin and MacKinnon discussed the possibility of using the law to combat pornography. Rather than invoking traditional arguments against porn – that it was obscene, indecent and violated community standards – they decided to argue that pornography was a form of sex discrimination, depriving women of their civil rights by undermining their status as equal citizens.

City Council but ultimately vetoed by the mayor, who cited free speech concerns. A version of the Dworkin-MacKinnon ordinance was passed in Indianapolis in 1984, but was later struck down as unconstitutional by the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals, a decision affirmed by the US Supreme Court. Judge Easterbrook wrote the opinion for the Seventh Circuit Court. 'We accept the premises of this legislation,' he said. 'Depictions of subordination tend to perpetuate subordination. The subordinate status of women in turn leads to affront and lower pay at work, insult and injury at home, battery and rape on the streets.' But this 'simply demonstrates the power of pornography *as speech*'.[49]