

porn studies



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Porn Studies:

Proliferating Pornographies

On/Scene: An Introduction

LINDA WILLIAMS

★ *Porn Studies* grew out of a graduate seminar on pornography in the Film Studies Program at the University of California, Berkeley. Many of its chapters were originally seminar papers, now much revised, for courses offered in 1998 and again in 2001. The volume augments the essays by these younger scholars, many of them still completing their doctorates, with several more established contributors to the field: Rich Cante, Constance Penley, Angelo Restivo, Eric Schaefer, Tom Waugh, and I. The porn studies of this volume diverge markedly from the kind of agonizing over sexual politics that characterized an earlier era of the study of pornography. Where once it seemed necessary to argue vehemently against pro-censorship, antipornography feminism for the value and importance of studying pornography (see, for example, the 1990s anthologies *Sex Exposed* and *Dirty Looks*), today porn studies addresses a veritable explosion of sexually explicit materials that cry out for better understanding. Feminist debates about whether pornography should exist at all have paled before the simple fact that still and moving-image pornographies have become fully recognizable fixtures of popular culture.

To me, the most eye-opening statistic is the following: Hollywood makes approximately 400 films a year, while the porn industry now makes from 10,000 to 11,000. Seven hundred million porn videos or DVDs are rented each year. Even allowing for the fact that fewer viewers see any single work

and that these videos repeat themselves even more shamelessly than Hollywood (e.g., *Co-ed Cocksuckers 21*, *Talk Dirty to Me 13*, *Dirty Little Sex Brats 14*), this is a mind-boggling figure. Pornography revenues—which can broadly be construed to include magazines, Internet Web sites, magazines, cable, in-room hotel movies, and sex toys—total between 10 and 14 billion dollars annually. This figure, as *New York Times* critic Frank Rich has noted, is not only bigger than movie revenues; it is bigger than professional football, basketball, and baseball put together. With figures like these, Rich argues, pornography is no longer a “sideshow” but “the main event” (2001, 51).¹

Who is watching all this pornography? Apparently all of us. As the editor of *Adult Video News* puts it: “Porn doesn’t have a demographic—it goes across all demographics.” The market is “as diverse as America” (Rich 2001, 52). Porn videos are remarkably diverse as well, ranging from the rarefied (s/m, bondage, amputees, geriatric, fat, ethnic, interracial, etc.) to the mainstream hetero product and the enduringly popular gay videos (whose appeal and numbers far exceed the category of a niche market and which are awash with inventive auteurs like Kristen Bjorn, Wash West, Matt Sterling, and others). Along the way there is the smaller niche of lesbian porn (Shar Rednour and Jackie Strano), the seat-of-the-pants, low-budget gonzo of John Stagliano and Ed Powers, and the woman-friendly “erotica” of Candida Royalle.

Mainstream or margin, pornography is emphatically part of American culture, and it is time for the criticism of it to recognize this fact. If feminist debates about the propriety or danger of pornography marked the 1980s and 1990s, along with larger societal debates about censorship in general, the new millennium, in the wake of a remarkably pornographic tale about a president and an intern (see Maria St. John’s essay in this volume), has become increasingly used to, if never fully comfortable with, “speaking sex.” This is not to say, as I have noted elsewhere, that sexually explicit talk and representation takes place without controversy or embarrassment.² We have certainly not attained the “end of obscenity” once optimistically predicted in the late sixties by Charles Rembar (1969). It is to say, however, that long before it surfaced as news from the oval office, speaking sex had ceased to be a private, bedroom-only matter. Today, the very practice of American politics requires a familiarity with the alleged explicit sex acts of Gary Hart, Clarence Thomas, Bill Clinton, Gary Condit, and a great many priests of the Catholic Church. We are compelled to speak sex, whether to protect ourselves or our children from AIDS or other sexually transmitted diseases, or simply as a result of watching *The Sopranos*, *Sex in the City*, or *Queer as Folk*. If *Deep*

Throat (dir. Gerard Damiano, 1972) and a range of other films discussed by Eric Schaefer in this volume, inaugurated a pornographic speaking sex in the early seventies, today, a wide variety of different media have become the venue for the public representation of sex acts. Recently it was possible to view, for example, rock star Tommy Lee and former *Playboy* model Pam Anderson having sex on their honeymoon as still images in *Penthouse* magazine, as streaming video on the Internet Entertainment Group’s Web site, and as a home video, *Pam and Tommy: Uncensored and Hardcore* (see Minnette Hillyer’s essay in this volume).

Discussions and representations of sex that were once deemed obscene, in the literal sense of being off (*ob*) the public scene, have today insistently appeared in the new public/private realms of Internet and home video. The term that I have coined to describe this paradoxical state of affairs is *on/scenity*: the gesture by which a culture brings on to its public arena the very organs, acts, bodies, and pleasures that have heretofore been designated *ob/scene* and kept literally off-scene. In Latin, the accepted meaning of the term *obscene* is quite literally “off-stage,” or that which should be kept “out of public view” (*OED*). *On/scene* is one way of signaling not just that pornographies are proliferating but that once off (*ob*) scene sexual scenarios have been brought onto the public sphere. *On/scenity* marks both the controversy and scandal of the increasingly public representations of diverse forms of sexuality *and* the fact that they have become increasingly available to the public at large.

To me, the most eloquent example of the paradox of *on/scenity* was staged in the spectacle of Jesse Helms, standing in the U.S. Senate in 1989, waving the “dirty” photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe, which had been funded by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), for all to see.³ Helms implored his fellow senators to “look at the pictures!”, yet at the same time requested that “all the pages, all the ladies, and maybe all the staff” leave the chamber so that the “senators can see what they are voting on” (de Grazia 1992, 637). This spectacle of bringing *on* the obscenity in order to keep it *off*—of Helms exhorting (male) senators to look, even as he tries to keep others (women and young pages) from looking—exemplifies one side of the paradox of *on/scenity*. It is the side those in favor of more diverse forms of speaking sex tend to relish because it demonstrates the extreme futility of censorship. Jesse Helms in 1989, like Kenneth Starr in 1998, became an unwitting pornographer, pandering the very material he would censor.

However, there is another side of this *on/scenity* paradox, one not so easily appreciated by civil libertarians. This occurs when those in favor of

free speech and speaking sex nevertheless themselves censor some of its more sensational elements. Consider a recent collection of essays on pornography, the very well-meaning, liberal volume, *Porn 101: Eroticism, Pornography, and the First Amendment*, a compendium of articles originally presented in 1998 at the pro-free speech World Conference on Pornography, whose title suggests, but whose presentation contradicts, the arrival of pornography as a legitimate academic subject. This conference, one of whose keynote speaker's was American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) president Nadine Strossen, enthusiastically defended pornography's right to exist and championed its study from a wide variety of legal, cultural, sociological, and sexological perspectives. Conference sessions overflowed with videos, slides, photos, and other visual exemplars of its topic, not to mention the amusing, genial spectacle of the porn stars in attendance rubbing elbows in the lobby of the Sheraton Universal Hotel with families setting out on tours of Universal Studios. However, in the proceedings of the conference published by Prometheus, the exuberant visuals disappeared. Except for a few antique lithographs, the volume is shockingly denuded of the very illustration that had made the conference so lively.

For example, the very first article, by Jennifer Yamashiro of the Kinsey Institute, describes a breakthrough 1957 legal ruling, eloquently dubbed *U.S. v. 31 Photographs*, that allowed the Kinsey Institute to build its collections of visual erotica and other sexually explicit materials. The article, however, fails to illustrate even one of the famously censored photographs, censoring them, in effect, all over again. Never mind that the article's very point is the importance of the acceptance of such images "on the scene" of the American academic study of sexuality—the very scene of the conference proceedings themselves—and never mind that the slides of these thirty-one photographs occupied the very center of the talk given at the conference.⁴ Here is a mirror reversal of the kind of on/scenity displayed by Helms and Starr: a whole conference invoking the visual artifacts of the history and sociology of pornography, which, either due to the timidity of publishers or to that of the book's editors, are not shown.

If *obscenity* is the term given to those sexually explicit acts that once seemed unspeakable, and were thus permanently kept off-scene, *on/scenity* is the more conflicted term with which we can mark the tension between the speakable and the unspeakable which animates so many of our contemporary discourses of sexuality. In Judith Butler's terms, it is both the regulation that inevitably states what it does not want stated (1997, 130) and the opposition to regulation that nevertheless censors what it wants to say. On/scenity

is thus an ongoing negotiation that produces increased awareness of those once-obscene matters that now peek out at us from under every bush.

Porn Studies differs from previous anthologies about pornography—including those that purport to legitimize its academic study—in its effort to take pornography seriously as an increasingly on/scene cultural form that impinges on the lives of a wide variety of Americans and that matters in the evaluation of who we are as a culture. It is serious about installing the critical and historical study of pornography in the academic curriculum. To further that end, authors have included images to illustrate their chapters, and a selected annotated bibliography of readings important to the study of pornography as a cultural form—not just as a legal or sociological issue—has been added, along with information on how to locate hard-core materials. In other words, this volume tries to help the teacher and student of pornography roll up their sleeves to begin work in this field rather than to pose the genre as the limit case of cultural analysis—the thing about which there is really nothing to say. Even Frank Rich, author of the *New York Times Magazine* article quoted above, which makes a major economic and social claim for the importance of pornography as a cultural "main event," dismisses its enactments of sexual performances. To Rich, the sex acts are Kabuki-like rituals that bring narrative to a halt, "like the musical numbers in a 30s Hollywood musical" (2001, 92). Rich's point seems to be that these rituals interrupt the more important narrative mission of film. To my mind, however, his analogy misses its point because there is so very much to say about the ritualistic "musical number" quality of the sexual representations of pornographic film and video. I have argued elsewhere that this comparison actually constitutes the inception of an important insight into how we might begin to understand the choreography of performing and laboring bodies in these works (Williams [1989] 1999).

This tendency to dismiss the textual working of popular pornographies is endemic, and not only to journalists like Frank Rich. Slavoj Žižek (1989), for example, argues that "in a 'normal,' non-pornographic film, a love scene is always built around a certain insurmountable limit; 'all cannot be shown'; at a certain point, the image blurs, the camera moves off, the scene is interrupted, we never see directly 'that' (the penetration of sexual organs, etc.);" (1989, 33). Thus a certain "limit of representability" defines the "'normal' love story or melodrama," while pornography by definition "goes too far" and thus misses what remained concealed in the "'normal,' nonpornographic love scene" (33). Žižek effectively dismisses the texts of pornography as abnormal representations doomed perpetually to "go too far." By showing "it,"

pornography becomes simply a “pretext for introducing acts of copulation,” “instead of the sublime Thing, we are stuck with a vulgar groaning and fornication” (33). But as many of the essays in this volume argue, there is a great deal to say about the quality and kind of the generic deployments, including the sublimity (see Franklin Melendez) of precisely these performed acts of copulation. How, in fact, do these performed acts construct the “it” that they purport to reveal? Is it perhaps the critic who has not gone far enough in analyzing this construction?

In yet another example of a respected culture critic using pornography as a limit text, Roland Barthes cites a self-portrait by Robert Mapplethorpe as an instance of “blissful eroticism” that leads Barthes to “distinguish the ‘heavy’ desire of pornography from the ‘light’ (good) desire of eroticism” (1981, 59). Here, too, the critic works hard to distinguish the (bad) pornographic from the (good) erotic, as if there were never anything erotic in the pornographic (see my essay in this volume). This anthology does not seek to illustrate the distinction between a “good” eroticism and a “bad” pornography. It is no more interested in these distinctions than it is interested in the related debates about pornography within feminism, in which a “bad,” androcentric pornography is often opposed to a “good,” gynocentric eroticism. Indeed, there are some forms of pornography which either have no interest whatsoever in women’s bodies—for example, the vast arena of gay porn (see essays by Tom Waugh, Hoang Tan Nguyen, and Rich Cante and Angelo Restivo)—or which are so exclusively oriented toward these bodies that questions of objectification by male viewers do not apply—as in the much smaller arena of lesbian or dyke porn (see the essay by Heather Butler). As a cultural form that is “as diverse as America,” pornography deserves both a serious and extended analysis that reaches beyond polemics and sensationalism.

Part I, “Contemporary Pornographies,” investigates a wide range of contemporary examples showing how new forms of pornography have become part of the fabric of everyday life. As Maria St. John shows in the opening essay, “How to Do Things with the *Starr Report*: Pornography, Performance, and the President’s Penis,” the on/scenity of sex in the American public domain came clearly into focus during the highly publicized investigation into President Clinton’s “physically intimate” encounters with Monica Lewinsky. These scenes, and the spin that surrounded and replayed them, seriously challenged the distinctions, long-teetering in the American imagination, between high and low, public and private, clean and dirty. The intention of Kenneth Starr’s report was to cleanse the White House by exposing Clinton’s illicit actions and, by impeaching the president, to exorcise the porno-

graphic element. But the exorcism backfired; instead of ejecting Clinton, American popular culture, as St. John explains, popped the report itself into the VCR and played it as pornography. St. John argues that the *Report* is a polymorphous text that inscribes many different conflicting desires by taking up, then abandoning multiple pornographic conventions. In a related vein, Minette Hillyer looks at another instance of “celebrity porn”: the hard-core honeymoon of Pamela Anderson and Tommy Lee, which has become the most-watched home movie in recent memory. In both cases, the codes of pornography are discovered at work in forms not originally intended as pornography but ones that have arguably become it. Hillyer explores the question of the relations between home movie and pornography, identifying what she calls the “porning” of domestic footage. Another essay, “Office Sluts and Rebel Flowers,” by Deborah Shamoan, considers the intriguing phenomenon of Japanese hard-core ladies’ comics, which merge popular forms of romance with sexually explicit drawn images in which codes of vaginal wetness become the visual expression of female pleasure. Shamoan shows how these comics refute many common perceptions about women as consumers of porn. Finally, Zabet Patterson, in “Going On-line: Consuming Pornography in the Digital Era,” investigates the ways in which on-line cyberporn introduces new forms of interaction that are less about the encounter of bodies and more about the physical encounter with an eroticized technological apparatus.

One of the serious limitations of much of the earlier writing on pornography (certainly of much feminist scholarship fighting the “porn wars”) was the assumption that pornography expressed the power and the pleasure of heterosexual men. Part 2 of this volume, “Gay, Lesbian, and Homosocial Pornographies,” discusses many of the features of gay and lesbian pornography that differ from heterosexual forms presumed as dominant. Tom Waugh begins by questioning the supposed heterosexual pleasures of the classical American stag film. He asks about the significance of the male body in a film form that was officially only interested in the female anatomy. He discovers that the homosocial collective experience of “men getting hard watching images of men getting hard watching or fucking women” constituted a major part of the experience. A second essay, by Rich Cante and Angelo Restivo, “The Cultural-Aesthetic Specificities of All-male Moving-Image Pornography,” offers an overview of the aesthetics of contemporary gay pornography, arguing that the fantasies constructed by these works create a very different space than does heterosexual pornography. These authors offer an intriguing twist on the quasi-publicness of contemporary pornographies dis-

cussed above, suggesting that gay porn has an extra dimension of on/scenity by virtue of its passage through an “imagined public gaze” that establishes the position of the gay man within the social space he inhabits.

Where gay porn is prolific, lesbian porn made *for* lesbians has remained all but invisible until very recently. Both gay and lesbian porn have histories and aesthetics that differ markedly from heterosexual norms. In her essay, “What Do You Call a Lesbian with Long Fingers? The Development of Lesbian and Dyke Pornography,” Heather Butler explores the ways in which hard-core pornography has articulated the figure of the “authentic” lesbian since the 1960s. By asking in what ways lesbian pornography has transgressed heterosexual norms to (re)educate the porn spectator, Butler determines that the figure of the butch proves central to the articulation of “authentic” lesbian desire. A final essay by Jake Gerli, “The Gay Sex Clerk: Chuck Vincent’s Straight Pornography,” investigates the fascinating phenomenon of a gay man who directed straight porn in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Gerli suggests a variety of ways in which Vincent’s sexuality manifested a queer perspective on straight porn.

Part 3, “Pornography, Race, and Class,” is a short section that opens up a discussion of an area of porn studies barely broached until now: the role of racial stereotypes in a moving-image genre that fetishizes racial difference. Hoang Tan Nguyen asks about the role of the traditionally “undersexed” stereotype of the Asian man in gay pornography, and I ask about the traditionally “oversexed” stereotype of the African American in heterosexual porn. Nguyen’s “The Resurrection of Brandon Lee: The Making of a Gay Asian American Porn Star” looks at the case of Asian American porn star Brandon Lee in order to assess changes in the representation of Asian men within the visual economy of North American gay video porn. By probing the relations between Brandon Lee and martial arts star Bruce Lee, his essay explores the racial “packaging” of Brandon Lee from his early appearance in Asian-niche videos to his crossover into mainstream gay videos. My own essay on interracial lust investigates what happens when racialized bodies become the subject of pornography’s unique brand of confessing the “truths” of sex. If pornography is a genre that seeks to confess the discursive truths of sex, then what happens when racialized bodies are asked to reveal their particular “truths”? And what does it mean when the taboos enforcing the racial border are systematically violated and “black cock” penetrates “white pussy”? I argue that in American pornography and exploitation films the depiction of black-and-white interracial sex acts depends on the self-conscious cultivation of an anachronistic fear that enhances desire. Finally,

Constance Penley’s essay, “Crackers and Whackers: The White Trashing of Porn,” argues for a class-based understanding of the genre as a protest against class privilege and bourgeois social values. Pornography—her prime example is *John Wayne Bobbitt: Uncut*—often deploys a “low-class” form of humor associated with dirty jokes and forms of class-based critique.

Part 4, “Soft Core, Hard Core, and the Pornographic Sublime,” considers the variety of historically produced technologies that have engendered recognizable forms of pornography in both soft- and hard-core forms. In an era of hard-core on/scenity, the static pinup can seem comparatively tame. Yet as Despina Kakoudaki argues, considered from the perspective of the work it performed in American culture during World War II, the pinup can be seen as a sublime form of patriotic representation as used in magazine photography, film, popular song, and animated cartoon. As such, it offers an important case study for the more far-flung technological and military uses of pornography, reminding us, as Lynn Hunt (1993) has done in another context, that pornography not only functions to arouse its viewers. Eric Schaefer, on the other hand, examines a much later historical development: the influence of 16 mm film technology on a 35 mm, non-hard-core but “adult” film marketplace beginning in the late 1960s, which resulted, eventually, in the transition to hard-core, aboveground, narrative features. Schaefer demonstrates that these feature-length hard-core narratives must now be considered as a brief entr’acte between the plotless underground stag film and the similarly plotless sex acts of much contemporary porn in the video age. Yet unlike previous historians of porn, Schaefer explains, in rich historical detail, just how the transition from nonexplicit sexploitation to explicit hard-core images took place through the intervention of 16 mm formats. In “Video Pornography, Visual Pleasure, and the Return of the Sublime,” Franklin Melendez also investigates the relations between technology and sexuality, in this case the newer phenomenon of video. He argues that hard-core pornography as viewed on the VCR in the postmodern era intertwines the allure of the sexually explicit image with the technology that makes it visible. Examining the construction of sexual numbers in one gay and one straight example of contemporary video porn, Melendez explores the relations between the convulsing body and the convulsing machine. In all the above cases, the “excessive” pleasures of the pornographic image are inextricable from the negotiation of a relation to technology, each in their own way offering a form of the sublime.

A final section, “Pornography and/as Avant-Garde,” considers the relations between these two seemingly antithetical yet also related forms. Where

pornography is formulaic, commercial, and repetitious, the avant-garde is anticommercial, innovative, and often deeply personal. Yet both pornography and the avant-garde have historically been the one place in moving-image culture where a frank interest in sex, and specific sex acts, is not taboo. Ara Osterweil's study of Andy Warhol's *Blow Job*—a minimalist motion portrait of a young man's face as he supposedly receives fellatio off-screen—argues that this film provides an especially useful way of understanding the confluence of the avant-garde and pornography in the sixties. In "Unbracketing Motion Study: Scott Stark's *NOEMA*," Michael Sicinski examines another minimalist avant-garde work, in this case a film that transforms porn videos into a kind of experimental motion study concentrating on all the in-between moments in which couples awkwardly shift positions, scratch itches, and push hair out of their eyes. Stark's selection of decidedly "unsexy" moments forcefully returns the viewer of *NOEMA* to a flat fact the pornographic films themselves tend to elide. We are not simply watching "sex"; we are watching the human labor that contributes to the construction of pleasure.

Part Two: The Porn Classroom

One of the marks of pornography's on/scenity is its recent appearance in the academic curriculum. Because the question of pornography's place in the university has been a source of some controversy,⁵ and because I hope that this volume can become a useful tool for those who elect to teach and learn about pornography, I would like to begin by explaining my own personal and professional reasons for bringing it on/scene in the classroom. This short essay makes no attempt at suggesting how one should go about teaching pornography—although I hope that the annotated bibliography and list of sources for purchasing videos and DVDs might prove useful to those organizing their own courses. Rather, I here provide an account of the reason why pornography came to appear as an urgent topic in need of teaching to me, and how I first went about teaching it.

In 1989, I published *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible,"* a book that examined the genre of heterosexual film pornography from a feminist, Foucaultian perspective. Although I had experimented with teaching some pornographic film in the past in the context of a literature class, and though it was already clear to me that moving-image pornography was the most enduringly popular of all the film (and now video, DVD, and Internet) genres, it was not immediately apparent to me that it be-

longed in the classroom. It was especially not apparent that I should teach it to young and impressionable undergraduates. Could one ask students to analyze, historicize, and theorize moving images whose very aim was to put them into the throes of sexual arousal? When I teach other film genres (melodrama or horror), analysis of our responses of pity or fear form part of what we examine. Although I knew that it was possible to transcend the initial embarrassment of talking about sexual representations, I was not convinced that even the most highly motivated undergraduates could handle watching and analyzing moving-image or other forms of visual pornography.

Until 1993, the above had seemed compelling enough reasons *not* to teach pornography. However, in that year, Catherine MacKinnon wrote an article for *Ms.* that entirely changed my mind. She argued that the Serbian rapes of Muslim and Croatian women in Bosnia constituted an unprecedented policy of extermination caused by pornography: "The world has never seen sex used this consciously, this cynically, this elaborately, this openly, this systematically, with this degree of technological and psychological sophistication, as a means of destroying a whole people. . . . With this war, pornography emerges as a tool of genocide" (27). Reports by Muslim women that some of the rapes had been videotaped, transformed ordinary rape, MacKinnon believed, into a historically unprecedented atrocity. The real culprit in these rapes was, for MacKinnon, not the Serbian rapists, but the supposed saturation of Yugoslavia with pornography. Such an argument encourages us to shift attention from the real crime of politically motivated rape to the supposedly more heinous crime of filming it. Instead of concentrating on how Muslim and Croatian women became the targets of sexual crimes, MacKinnon preferred to blame pornography as their cause. We come away from her article with the impression that it is pornography that we must fight, not rape.

The notion that pornography raises the misogynous crime of rape to a new level of technically unprecedented genocide is also the premise of MacKinnon's 1993 book *Only Words*. As in the case of Bosnia, it is the mechanically or electronically reproduced images, not the acts themselves, that are taken to be the most reprehensible. Pornography is conflated with genocidal rape, degradation, and abuse. It is never for an instant taken to be a genre for the production of sexual viewing pleasure. For MacKinnon, pornography is sexual abuse, pure and simple.

Now these are the kinds of arguments that can only work if one has little knowledge about moving-image pornography, its history, its conventions,

and its various uses among very different kinds of viewers. For example, a look at the history of the representation of rape in hard-core, moving-image pornography, teaches that where rape was once represented from a masculinist “lie back and enjoy it” perspective in the old illegal stag films and in the early features, it has increasingly become taboo as women have become a component of the audience (Williams [1989] 1999, 164–65). Indeed, most forms of violence are now strictly taboo, to the extent that the usual fictional fistfights and gunfights of feature films are rarely seen in pornography.

I had endured the argument of *Only Words* without being moved to teach pornography, but the argument about rape in Bosnia was the last straw. This was not a theoretical argument about the evils of porn, it was an argument that encouraged taking action against pornography as if it were the same thing as taking action against rape. As such, it seemed to me to be thoroughly inimical to the goal of feminism. Though I could take satisfaction in Erika Munk’s subsequent, well-informed response to MacKinnon’s specious arguments, I knew that what had not been adequately countered was a facile fantasy about the root evil of pornography, one that can only persist in ignorance of the genre’s history and its close analysis. As a feminist scholar of moving-image pornography, I realized that I had an obligation to do more than write about, or engage in polemics about, pornography. As one of the relatively few scholars in the United States with some expertise in this area, I needed to do what other scholars have done: integrate my scholarship into my teaching. I did not do this lightly, for I was acutely aware of the aforementioned problem of the status of texts that seek to sexually arouse viewers. I resolved nevertheless to teach a course that would approach the history, theory, and analysis of the genre of moving-image pornographies as a way of understanding the various constructions of sexuality and the history of the representations of sexual pleasure. The goal was never to defend pornography against the sex-negative, sex-scapegoating MacKinnons and Andrea Dworkins of this world, but to promote a more substantive, critical and textually aware critique of the most popular moving-image genre on earth.

I cannot say that that first upper-division undergraduate class, offered in the spring of 1994 at UC Irvine, in the heart of conservative Orange County, California, was all that successful. Nor can I say that my experience was at all typical. Nevertheless, it is the story of that class that I would like to tell, since its partial failures seem to me instructive and to offer some examples of the difficulties of bringing this material on/scene. I defined the class from the beginning as an experiment to determine whether the textual study of moving-image pornography had a place in the university curricu-

lum—a question the class would take up at the end of the ten-week quarter. Aware that they were part of an experiment, students were on especially good behavior.

The course was designed to survey the history of American moving-image pornography from early, underground stag films for all-male audiences to the quasi-legitimate couples films of the seventies to the proliferating varieties of gay male, lesbian, bisexual, straight, sadomasochistic, fetishist pornographies available now that low-budget video shooting and home VCR viewing predominate. Casually curious students were warned away by an unusually heavy workload, the inclusion of feminist concerns about power, as well as the genre’s concerns about pleasure, and the cross-listing of the course between film studies and women’s studies. Thus after an unusually high initial enrollment of over sixty students for a class with no teaching assistants, the course settled down to a comfortable thirty film studies, women’s studies, and a few other students.

I began with the premise that since moving-image pornographies existed, we would not take up the question of whether they should exist before we had considered their form and content. Though I was considerably emboldened by the success of my UC Santa Barbara colleague Constance Penley’s strategy of teaching pornography as simply another film genre, my own plan was to return to the feminist arguments against pornography once we had actually learned something about the genre. Thus we read MacKinnon’s *Only Words* toward the end of the course and attempted to debate the anti-censorship, antipornography positions at that time. We saw a group of hard-core stag films the very first day, and we continued to see at least one work of hard-core feature-length pornography each week, and sometimes twice a week. I always showed the films first, then introduced readings about them. We eventually read all of *Hard Core*, many essays from the anthology *Dirty Looks* (Gibson and Gibson, 1993), parts of Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* (1978), and about twelve photocopied articles. Students wrote book reports on a wide bibliography of works related to pornography, took a midterm, made formal group presentations to the class, and wrote a variety of final projects, including some pornographic screenplays, which grew out of their own dissatisfaction with the quality of the scripts in most contemporary porn. One group also made a video of the class as part of our ongoing self-scrutiny. We had three guest speakers: Constance Penley, who spoke on slash fanzines, a man from the Los Angeles chapter of People against Pornography, and Kelly Dennis, a Ph.D. student completing a dissertation on pornographic painting and photography.

Because they had to do group presentations, students began working together to understand difficult material and quickly overcame any embarrassment discussing sex acts in class. These discussions were some of our best. The first five weeks of the class, in which we read *Hard Core* and screened a collection of stag films, *Deep Throat*, *Behind the Green Door* (Mitchell Bros., 1972), *The Opening of Misty Beethoven* (Radley Metzger, 1975), *In the Realm of the Senses* (Nagisa Oshima, 1976), and a selection of films by Candida Royalle, including what was then her new feature, *Revelations* (1993), were lively and, to my mind, very successful. The second half of the course was less so. The main reason, I think, was the difficulty of teaching the “controversy” of pornography when I and the rest of the students were already so emphatically on the side of anticensorship. Throughout the class, students had been more than willing to criticize pornography, but they were understandably unwilling to challenge its right to exist since the very course they had signed up for was exercising the kind of tolerance of and even frank interest in sexual representation that the MacKinnon position wanted to revoke. So the debates about pornography turned out not to hold great interest for students—which is not to say that we did not have our own debates of what constituted offensive material!

The course syllabus had contained a fairly conventional, boldface warning that I had intended to warn away the squeamish: “Many of the films, videos, and images we will see in this class are bound to be offensive to some viewers. Please do not take this class unless you are willing to look closely at a wide variety of explicit, hard-core pornographic sexual representations and to discuss and write about them with the same kind of attention you would give to any other popular cultural form.” I had considered other ways of dealing with this problem. It is common in some women’s studies classes presenting images, though not teaching the genre, of pornography to ask students to sign a consent form saying that they are warned that they may be viewing some possibly horrendous materials, but then to provide for the possibility for students to excuse themselves from screenings or images that offend them too much. This tactic seems to me counterproductive. It assumes that the topic of hard-core pornography is beyond the pale, *ob/scene* not *on/scene*. The consent approach tends to make the course all about finding that moment of most extreme offense, when the offensive text does what it is all along expected to do.

I did not want to set myself up for such reactions since our main object was to study the genre closely. However, I did try, in my boldfaced first sentence, to steer away those students able to judge that they might take

offense. I knew, of course, that my warning itself constituted an invitation to be on the lookout for what is most offensive and to register it with dramatic means. What I did not anticipate was that it would be the men in the class who would eventually register offense most dramatically. For the most part, however, and certainly in the first half of the class, students tended to use journals effectively as a way of expressing both offense and occasional pleasure in often quite lengthy daily entries. This way of letting off steam seemed to work well for the first half of the class.

The stag films that occupied us first, although often quite misogynist, seemed, because of their distance in time, merely quaint. Students marveled at black-and-white, silent-movie sex. They did not seem to bother too much about the sexual politics of this sex. They were more amazed, I think, at the fact that people back then *had* sex, especially non-missionary position sex. Even pornography from the seventies still had a patina of age—those sideburns, that hair! Although *Deep Throat* and *Behind the Green Door* certainly proved offensive to many of the women in the class, they watched with interest and simply vented their objections to the disregard of female pleasure and autonomy in articulate discussions of plot, motive, and the *mise-en-scène* of sexual positions. They voiced anger at the archaic representation of “ravishment” in *Behind the Green Door*, the ubiquity of “money shots” throughout the feature-length form of the genre, and the frequent lack of convincing female orgasm. But as we moved into the eighties and nineties, and pornography went from relatively high-budget film to low-budget video, and as students began to see reflected in these videos corporeal styles closer to their own, distance became harder to achieve.

As it turned out, however, it was the women in the class who were much better able to handle offense and to keep a critical distance on the material, even as it got closer to home. Many of these women, although heterosexuals, found the woman-oriented porn of Candida Royalle too tame, while they enjoyed the butch/femme roles of *Suburban Dykes* and the fluidities of bisexual porn. Female-to-female sex outside the context of “the male gaze” seemed exhilarating to them, even if it did not appeal to their own propensities. On the other hand, while the men in the class had nodded in agreement with the women’s criticism of heterosexual pornography geared to men, they did not express any deeply felt offense themselves. They also nodded in agreement at the greater empowerment of women in lesbian pornography. But as might have been predicted, they were not themselves similarly exhilarated by gay male porn. The sense of offense from these (presumably straight) undergraduate males almost became palpable as we screened William Higgins’s

The Young and the Hung (1985) and, later, *Bi and Beyond: The Ultimate Sexual Union* (1986) and a few men made dramatic, door-slamming exits. In the discussion that followed the screening, tensions were exacerbated by the fact that some of the women students took this opportunity to take revenge on the males who had finally been made to squirm by the use of male bodies as sexual objects of desire. For example, here is a journal entry by the woman student who wreaked the most revenge:

I believe what I liked so much about this movie was the thought that after all these screenings, finally “our guys” would feel a little uncomfortable. This time, *male* bodies were used as masturbation aids. . . . Did it turn them on? If it did, did they spend the rest of the weekend worrying about their “proper heterosexuality”? If yes, would they EVER admit it in class?? What does that say about the way society still constructs “lesbianism” as foreplay and homosexuality as a major taboo? *Finally, what is the role of homoeroticism in a patriarchal, homophobic culture; i.e., . . . is not any kind of extreme male sexism and phallogentrism merely disguised homo-sexuality?* I think my head is gonna explode.

This same student then precipitated the most traumatic of our class discussions by pointedly asking the men in the class how they felt in response to the gay porn. Up until this moment, no one had asked this question. Though there had been ample discussion of the political implications of various sexual acts and positions, no one had been willing to say publicly either “this turns me on” or “this disgusts me” without giving either a safe political or aesthetic reason for such a reaction (nor did I ever ask anyone to say what turned them on, though the issue was lurking in the background throughout the class). Though the question was obvious and important, it thus represented something of a breach of class etiquette, made no less serious by the fact that it was uttered, and was understood to be uttered, in a spirit of revenge. Since almost all the pornography we had seen up to that point had concentrated, at least ostensibly and despite the obsession with money shots, on women being fucked, and on women voicing pleasure at being fucked, the woman who asked the question was saying, by implication, “If you don’t like the spectacle of a man being fucked, now you know how we women feel.” But she was also saying, somewhat more tauntingly, what if you *do* like seeing a man being fucked? All but one of the men denied feeling anything but a healthy, virile disgust either at the aesthetic crudeness of the film or at what today are judged unsafe sex practices. The exception

was a young biology major, new to the kind of media study conducted in this class, who admitted, with disarming honesty, that the film made him uncomfortable because he was afraid that if he liked it, it would mean he was gay.

What is the proper “pedagogy of pornography” at a moment like this? This was a class that had shown quite a bit of respect and honesty up until this point. Yet here was a strong expression of homophobia. Was it my job to “correct” the homophobia of the fearful males, to take the side of the more tolerant women in pouncing on their reactions? I knew that if I simply corrected the male homophobia and continued with our screening of gay and bisexual pornographies as scheduled, we would no longer be able to talk honestly as a class. The offended heterosexual males would simply clam up. Perhaps ironically, I had taken it as a good sign that the male students had felt free to express their homophobia in the midst of so much politically correct position taking. I was actually pleased that at least one male had expressed what seemed to me the root cause of homophobia, not irrational fear of homosexuality, but fear of becoming homosexual. Should I press on with more films and threaten these males more? In the end, I decided to cancel further examination of gay and bisexual pornography.

Looking back on it today, I feel this was a mistake. In effect, I fostered an atmosphere in which a fear of homosexuality could be expressed in order to curtail what seemed to me a worse evil: the sort of pseudosophisticated condemnations of unsafe sex practices or critiques of silly plots that the majority of the straight men voiced, but really only to cover up deeper anxieties. The danger was that feminist political correctness would make it impossible for homophobic males to say what they honestly felt. Here is an example of the kind of reasoning that arose in the face of the women’s criticism of overt homophobia:

Today we covered a tough topic, gay male sex. A lot of people left when the film started. I said earlier I’d sit through it all to learn but this was hard. I did stay and found it very offensive. But not in the way you would think. I found it offensive in the same way I find straight porn offensive. It is how the men talk. “Fuck me up the ass,” “harder” all that crap. Even when guys talk to women in films like that it bothers me. The act of anal sex doesn’t shock me cause we’ve seen it with women. It was just the way they talked to each other I disliked. I figure if it doesn’t turn you on it may work for someone else. The basic plot was ridiculous and so that’s [sic] not a good start. . . . A big offense was also the fact that there were

no condoms in sight. That's bad, especially in these times. You've got to send the right message.

Now, this was a fairly savvy male film studies major who knew it would be uncool to say he was offended by male anal penetration. What he says instead is that he takes offense by a ridiculous plot (hardly the strong feature of any porn) and that he does not like the "dirty talk" (also true of much heterosexual porn) or the lack of condoms (in 1986, condoms were not yet *de rigueur* in gay porn). Notice also how this student rather enigmatically approaches the question of turn-on: "I figure if it doesn't turn you on it may work for someone else." I think this could be translated as saying that he is not turned on, but if someone else is, that may mean that this person is gay. Any vulnerability to or any pleasure taken in these images clearly frightens this student. There is nowhere to go in a class discussion with such a defensive attitude. Although this student is full of a sense of the *offense* of this work, he is not willing to attribute it to a sexuality he personally finds threatening. The feminist ethic of the classroom had made this too unpopular. Only the less sophisticated biology major was willing to confront his own vulnerability.

In response to this kind of stonewalling from most of the males, the female student who had precipitated the crisis wrote:

Today's in-class discussion was *exactly* what I had expected. . . . Don't I sound incredibly smug? [In the margin I noted that another student's journal had accused her of being smug when she asked the question in class, and though I was glad she precipitated our discussion by asking how the men felt in response to the film, that I wished she could ask it non-smugly so as to make them less defensive]. . . I *do* respect the honesty of some of our male fellow students. But here were also some remarks that frightened me: "Anal penetration isn't meant to be," "I found the gay porn offensive . . . but of *course*, I've also found the other screenings offensive!" etc. I am frightened because these remarks are not made by crusading fundamentalists, but by young, bright college students in the 90s. . . . For them *it is okay* to talk about the "abnormal character" of anal penetration. It is *okay* to point out the glorification of promiscuity only in gay porn. It is *okay* to "feel more offended" by this alternative than by any other. And finally, it is okay to say, "Of course I wasn't turned on, because *I'm not like this*," without ever stopping to question one's motivations to say so. . . . I'm afraid if we ever want to make progress on this matter, we will have to have many, many more discussions like the one we had

today. Sometimes, these discussions could be very ugly. We could end up at each others' throats. But it might be worth it.

Because I was worried that at this point in the class, students *were* about to end up at each other's throats, I became, like the publisher of the World Conference on Pornography, the censor of the visual material of the class. This actually only amounted to the cancellation of one screening, but the class experienced it as my retreat from the presentation of controversial material. I doubt that this was the right thing to do, but I was concerned that members of the class be able to keep talking to one another. I did, however, try to point out in discussion some of the fragilities of sexual identity and that what was at stake for a heterosexual man was not the same as what was at stake for heterosexual women in watching hard core. I appealed to psychoanalytic theory to explain what in heterosexual female gender identification is not threatened by seeing women in sexual connection and what in heterosexual male gender identification is threatened by seeing men in sexual connection. However, I made a decision not to press the comfort level of the class any further, thereby incurring the (fortunately temporary) wrath of the brave student who had precipitated our best, and our most disturbing, discussions.

We had a long discussion instead of another film. We continued to talk about pornography. We discussed and read about erotica. We had a debate and several guest lectures. Some students went on to see more pornography outside of class as they wrote their final papers, but we did not see any more pornography. I may have been guilty of pampering the sensibilities of "our guys," but my goal in offering the class had been to expose students to diversities of pornography and the dynamics of the genre so as to make them aware that the appeal to the censorship of pornography is an appeal to the censorship of diverse sexualities. I think everyone in the class saw that.

In the end, all students decided, in an anonymous evaluation, that pornography *could* be part of the university curriculum, though certainly not required. Some said it could be because they learned a lot about feminism, some because they learned about a popular film genre, some because it was intense and controversial and therefore engaging, some because it shed light on antiporn dogma, one person even said it changed his/her life and made him/her realize that pornography was not one "big Pavlovian turn-on." But by far the most frequent reason given had nothing to do with the film genre or the controversies of pornography—and everything to do with finding in those difficult and fraught class discussions of pornography an unexpectedly

fruitful forum for the discussion of sex and sexualities: "It brings out all the issues that are addressed rather indirectly in other classes. It also offers the opportunity to be (at times painfully) honest—the journal was a real 'emotional outlet.'"

In a final class discussion, several students also suggested that what the class needed was simply more discussion of sexuality. As a final paper, one student designed a course that would mix science and pornography to achieve a kind of sexology. The one thing these students were not very interested in pursuing was thus what had motivated me to teach the class in the first place: the feminist debates and controversies surrounding pornography. To them, pornography was much more interesting as a springboard for discussion and demystification of the sex acts and sexualities we always seem to talk around in other contexts. This constituted my most important lesson from this class. My way into the teaching of pornography through the feminist controversies did not prove helpful in organizing an effective course, but it was my way in. Students tolerated this, but they were less interested in feminist position taking than they were in finding ways for talking about sex. What a course like this can give them are certain discursive ways of speaking sex: Freudian, Foucaultian, and feminist. Feminist perspectives—whether antipornography or anticensorship—did not impede this discussion if they were brought in at certain points, but they tended not to be useful when they determined the entire agenda of the class. In a second attempt at teaching this undergraduate-level class, I found that when I made less of a fuss about potential offense taken at the material—whether that offense be feminist outrage or male homophobia—none was demonstrated. The lesson here is that it can prove all-too-easy for a teacher to set up students to act out offense, but that dramatic demonstrations of offense are not useful to further discussion. I also learned that it was better to show contemporary pornography and diverse kinds of pornography early in a course lest students think they will only be regarding the more safely distanced "antique" and heterosexual varieties. Undergraduate students, even at Irvine, became more tolerant and more interested in diverse forms of pornography in my second version of the class. They became more adept at speaking sex while being respectful to one another. It could be that this was the inevitable result of the very process of on/scenity that I have been describing above; it could be that I was no longer signaling my own difficulty with the material; or it could just be that times had changed.

I have given up on framing the teaching of pornography primarily through feminist debates. At UC Berkeley I now teach occasional graduate

and advanced undergraduate courses on pornography and other sex genres. It is comparatively easy to teach this material at such a notably liberal institution, where students often urge me to find more challenging—less normative and heteronormative—material, but it is still a challenge. I now believe that it was not wise of me to let students accept the challenge of creating better pornographies than those that already existed, as I did when I permitted a few students to write screenplays. Although I encourage students in every other sort of course to try their hands at "doing" the mode or genre we are studying, it is a mistake in the current climate for a teacher of pornography to do the same. It leaves one vulnerable to the charge of encouraging students to become pornographers; it may lead very young students into a world for which they are not prepared; and it can only bring oneself, and one's institution, bad publicity. It is already hard enough to justify the importance of this field of study to colleagues, administrators, and the general public; why complicate this difficulty with even the appearance of involving students in the profession? It is also worth noting that male teachers need to exercise special discretion in teaching this material because of long-standing presumptions, feminist and otherwise, that pornography is *for* men and only *about* women. I do not think this should deter male teachers, but it does mean that they need to take different sorts of precautions that are probably best acknowledged up front. A tone of frank sexual interest accepting the fact that sexuality and sexual representation have become compelling to all, but tempered by an awareness that we are still learning a proper pedagogy of pornography, seems the best course.

There are undoubtedly many other, and better, ways to frame the issues and debates of hard-core pornography than the route I have described here. This anthology, much of which has been written by a later generation of my students, suggests some of them. I dedicate this book to the experiment of that first undergraduate class.

Notes

- 1 He writes: "At \$10 billion, porn is no longer a sideshow to the mainstream like, say, the \$600 million Broadway theater industry—it is the mainstream" (Rich 2001, 51).
- 2 "Speaking sex," as I have argued in *Hard Core* ([1989] 1999), is the particularly modern compulsion to confess the secrets of sex described by Michel Foucault in his *History of Sexuality*. Pornography, I have argued, is one such discourse of sexuality. It is emphatically not a form of speech that liberates or counters repres-

sion. Speaking sex, and the related idea of on/scenity explained in the next several paragraphs, are reworkings of ideas from this book, especially pages 282–84 of the 1999 edition.

- 3 I discuss this episode in the 1999 edition of *Hard Core* (Williams, 285–86).
- 4 The same fate befell another talk by David Sonnenschein, whose very subject was the censorship of a number of extremely innocent photographs of a nude adult male next to a boy of about five years. The boy points inquiringly at the man's penis, looking at it with curiosity. In a subsequent picture, he looks at his own penis, then in another, back at the man's. The photos were shown in an art exhibit, then withdrawn when complaints about child pornography were registered. Subsequently, Sonnenschein was not able to print these photos in his book. He was censored again when the photos about which he was speaking, and which are referred to in his contribution to the world conference book as figures 1, 2, and so on, are simply missing. Once again, Sonnenschein's whole point was the complete innocence of the photos and the child's natural, comparative curiosity. See Sonnenschein 1999. In the case of my own contribution to the conference, I withdrew it from the volume when I learned that my talk would not be published with its illustrations.
- 5 See, for example, the discussion of the controversies surrounding the teaching of pornography in articles by Lord 1997 and Atlas 1999. See as well the controversies generated by Chicago School of the Art Institute professor Kelly Dennis (Letherman 1999) and Wesleyan professor Hope Weissman. David Austin (1999) has also written usefully about the use of pornography in the university classroom. More recently, and not very thoughtfully, see Abel 2001.

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