

# Getting Fucked Can Get Fucked Up: The Problems in Porn

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In this essay, I will be discussing pornography, and the problems that exist within the medium. As a male in his late teens, it is probably not surprising that I have at least a passing interest in pornography, but by my own admission I feel as though my interest goes deeper than casual porn use. I identify as bisexual, and throughout my life I have consumed both gay and straight porn, and have often been struck by the differences in the both the general styles and industries. This became evident when I discovered a major studio gay porn film titled *Scared Stiff*. When researching the film, I discovered promotional photos of the actors. They were not only in sexy poses, as to be expected, but were also shown casually hanging out together and with the director; this is something that I have never seen in straight porn promotion. Thus, began my interest in investigating the differences in gay and straight porn operation and by extension, their effect on the users' consciousnesses.

From my research, I have seen that straight pornography typically has more of a sexual imbalance between genders, which are contain negative depictions of sex and sexuality in contrast to the sex often seen in gay porn. Gay depictions of sex are typically free of power imbalances and inherent objectification. From these differences, we can see the real problems that exist in pornography, accompanied by some proposed solutions to these problems. To prove this, I will be critiquing texts with two contrasting positions on pornography, one from feminist scholar Andrea Dworkin and the other from sex therapist Marty Klein. Numerous studies on pornographic content and the business of porn will also be discussed. In addition, I will be breaking down a straight and gay porn comparison written by Tom Waugh, to in the end apply Martha Nussbaum's definitions of objectification to pornography.

To understand how the medium of pornography effects people, it is important to understand how any media or art form can affect its consumers. Exactly what the effects of a form of media are can be quite hard to pin down and can differ wildly from person to person. For example, reading a piece of writing can accelerate one's understanding of a social issue, but if one refuses to make any effort to interpret its meaning, it may simply broaden one's vocabulary. However, if anyone is persistently confronted with a certain style or message presented through a medium, they will slowly lose their ability to identify that they are even being affected by that media. Marshall McLuhan describes this as numbness; as a media becomes ubiquitous in one's life, it becomes difficult to identify its effects. In McLuhan's words, "[w]e are as numb in our new electric world as the native involved in our literate and mechanical culture" (McLuhan 8). It eventually can become impossible to disassociate

ourselves with the media itself, it is intertwined in our consciousness.

This concept can be directly applied to pornography. If one frequently surrounds oneself with explicit sexual content, this is going to shape how one perceives the world, perhaps without their knowledge. This is not to say that this shaping is positive or negative, as that would depend on one's personal belief as to what kind of messages porn sends out (and the content itself). Although it may be assumed that there is an easy answer to that question, the complete lack of consensus in the world of academia and beyond shows clearly that the answer is anything but clear. To gain a sense of how varied those perspectives are, I will investigate two conflicting essays on pornography, "Pornography is a Civil Rights Issue for Women" by Andrea Dworkin and "Pornography: What Men See When They Watch" by Marty Klein. These are both extreme positions on either side of the argument, but the essays show the diversity of thought on the topic, and exactly how far (perhaps too far) some may go to defend or attack it.

Within feminist philosophy alone, there are many shifting perspectives as to whether pornography is an important part of a sex positive society or, as Andrea Dworkin puts it, "a civil rights issue for women" (62). That quote, and the following ideas are from a testimony Dworkin gave decrying pornography. She is notorious for having an extreme anti-pornography viewpoint, and this testimony is no exception. From the beginning of the testimony she expresses humiliation over living in a country where, "millions of pictures are made of [women] in postures of submission and sexual access so that our vaginas are exposed for penetration" (55). She describes various niche genres of pornography including that of "mentally and physically disabled women, women who are maimed" (55) and "concentration camp pornography" (56). She discusses, at length, the various degrading acts she believes women are forced to do by pimps and pornographers, and that films of real murder and real rapes are regularly passed around in the porn marketplace. She also claims that pornography is a direct cause of crime worldwide, "especially in rape and battery, in incest and child abuse, in murder [and even] suicides of teenage boys" (64). By the end of the testimony, she calls for civil rights legislation aimed at preventing production and distribution in efforts to protect women specifically.

From reading her statements above, it may surprise Dworkin to learn some simple facts about pornography. First, women both willingly participate in its creation (Griffiths 528) and consume it in the very same way men do, even if their numbers are fewer. According to a report on the porn business and porn use, 18% of women 18-30 admitted to using pornography at least once a week (Covenant Eyes 17). Secondly, pornography without any female involvement exists. This is not to deny mass exploitation existing in the porn industry, but this is a problem that is not saturated throughout the whole of pornography. In addition, her claim that this exploitation consistently only effects women and that "the major motif of pornography . . . is that women are raped and violated and humiliated until [they] discover they like it" (55), is both an oversimplified and misinformed statement, as I will discuss more in depth further into the essay. To say that porn is the cause (or even a cause) of crime worldwide is to ignore that the vast majority of porn users are not violent rapists and murderers. Porn users represent a very large majority. A study on pornography usage estimated that every second over three thousand dollars is spent on porn and over 20 thousand internet users are viewing porn. 12% of the internet is dedicated to porn and 40 million adults in the United States alone report that they regularly view Internet pornography (Ropelato 2007). If what Dworkin claims about porn's effect on its users were true, then this mass of

consumers would be a horde of violent thugs wreaking havoc on society, and this is, of course, untrue.

Dworkin's position is not the consensus in studies of porn, as sex therapist Klein shows in his essay: "[The conventional] critique . . . assumes that porn consumers are involved in an esoteric activity on the fringe of society. On the contrary - pornography is America's conventional entertainment" (Klein 245). His view of pornography is one of positivity, stating that the amount of well-adjusted and satisfied porn customers is a clear counterpoint to Dworkin's sentiments. Furthermore, what is depicted in pornography is actually an incredibly positive thing for society. Klein believes the lack of realism in porn, "the instant vaginal orgasms, the lack of kissing, the sex in physically uncomfortable positions" are akin to the unrealistic portrayals of violence and action in a Hollywood superhero film (Klein 248). They not are meant to be taken literally, but instead represent other themes just like any depiction in media. These themes include ones that Klein sees to be positive: consent, validation of sexual fantasy, self-acceptance, and abundance. He claims that "[abundance] is the ultimate erotic fantasy of most viewers - not actress A or B, not position A or B, but a world of erotic surplus in which all choices are possible, the desire for these choice is validated, and the acceptability of desire and the wholesomeness of eroticism is validated over and over" (Klein 249).

While this viewpoint of copiousness being the primary fantasy of the porn consumer is definitely close to the truth, there is a major problem in Klein's mostly valid take: the abundance and validation in porn does not exist for everyone. Due to the primary audience of porn being men, the excess and access is geared primarily towards what pornographer's perceive to be male desire. This comes out in male domination over females, which is a part of most straight pornography. Dworkin summarizes this problem when she states: "pornography sexualizes inequality" (62). Despite Klein's optimistic view of the medium, the inequality of the sexes in porn is clear and problematic.

Pornographic scenes often end with the male orgasm, the cum shot, showing that the male orgasm is the end goal of all sex in this fantasy world (Bridges 1069). Showing the woman's pleasure is not the motive of most of these films; what is most important is for the man to ejaculate, most often on the woman herself (Bridges 1074-75). However, women *are* pleased: they moan and scream in a way that can become absurd, to the point that "any touch or position by one actor to another is met with near orgasmic pleasure" (Bridges 1067). This is clearly included to service the male's pleasure. Even a casual viewing of mainstream straight porn can easily show an under layer of male domination and aggression. Women are "slammed," "pounded," and "fucked." A study of aggression in mainstream pornography found that 88.1% of scenes in mainstream porn included some aggressive behaviour, most commonly spanking, gagging and slapping (Bridges 1075). Although it's rare for the actresses to not enjoy the men's aggression (Bridges 1080), (and of course many women can and do enjoy male domination in their sex lives), to imply that there is no power imbalance in pornography is ludicrous. Put bluntly, women are all too often the objects in straight porn, and men the sexual beings who wish to use them. This is a sexist, toxic ideology that is hard to escape from when viewing straight pornography of any kind.

Ultimately the problem in straight pornography is not that women are coerced into participating in fetishistic acts. This does occur, but the clear majority of acts are done consensually, and in fact women in pornography report high enjoyment of sex, more than the average women (Griffiths 528). Moreover, their enjoyment is completely okay! The problem

is that even in porn that attempts to portray typical couples or balanced sexual acts, there is a subtext of power imbalance, skewed in favour of the man. It is the norm for men's sexual pleasure to be of the upmost importance, while women's pleasure merely falls to the wayside, or is shown only to pleasure men.

Were this aspect merely a portion of the general porn content, there would be little problem. Unfortunately, as discussed, this power imbalance is epitome of straight porn. One must be suspicious and even concerned of the sexual consciousness of the regular straight porn consumer: a person who is being told (perhaps daily) through this media that the male is the most important and valued portion of a sex act, no matter how innocuous, and that women are merely there to satisfy the males' needs. This ideology is more horrifying to me than any consensual scat porn that Dworkin condemns. It's no wonder that fewer women than men have any interest in porn: an industry which is constantly telling them (whether explicitly or implicitly) that although they are certainly valued and deserve an orgasm here or there, their sexual needs pale in comparison to the needs of the man, which they are made to service.

Ironically this leads us to the most male-dominated genre of porn that exists, gay pornography. Although many women are not interested in mainstream pornography which feature women, they of course are still sexual beings who enjoy getting off now and again. What could be their media of choice, aside from steamy romance novels? In fact, many women, both straight and queer, have an affinity for seeing gay men have sex on camera. One woman described gay porn as "different to any other porn I had seen, with real, intense chemistry and models that were obviously having a good time" (Welsh 2014). In addition, I have had many discussions with my female friends over the years who have said they prefer gay pornography to straight, and not just because of the sexy guys who are plentiful throughout the genre. This is only surprising until one spends some time learning about and consuming both gay *and* straight porn. They are entirely separate industries and entities. On the surface level, condom use is much more common in gay porn than straight (Grudzen 52), but there are other deeper differences.

As discussed, much of straight porn by only being made for one half of the genre's participants has an inherent power imbalance. This imbalance cannot exist in gay pornography, and because of this, the genre is produced in entirely different ways. In straight porn, the "spectator's position tends to be rigidly gender determined; ... [the] straight male spectator looks at female image-object" while in gay porn "the spectators position [is] in relation [and] the representations are open and in flux ... [the] spectators position [can] fluctuate or is simultaneously multiple, among different characteristics and types" (Waugh, 1985). In addition, in straight porn "women frequently are active partners (i.e. aggressive fellators) as well as passive insertees, but the range of roles is quite rigidly prescribed" (Waugh, 1985). To contrast gay men can experience sex "in a wide range of combinations and roles not determined by gender" (Waugh, 1985). It is no surprise from these descriptions why some women are more interested in gay porn rather than straight porn.

This contrast could be blamed on the gender differences that are inescapable in straight porn, but I must question that sentiment. Why is it possible for there to be no prescribed gender roles in actual, healthy sex lives and not in media depictions of them? There is a problem, one that exists in much of media portrayals of human relationships, but specifically exemplified in pornography. Although Marty Klein's view is optimistic, it is far from accurate and should be held up as an ideal of what we could accomplish with the media,

rather than what we currently have.

A solution to this problem can be found by applying the style of gay porn to that of straight porn. Gay pornography can easily allow the participants to be on a level playing field, equally devoted to providing each other pleasure and satisfaction. It typically does not focus on objectifying and idealizing the traits of one of the men, and instead allows sex itself to be idealized. This is entirely at odds with typical straight pornography, which is very much devoted to showing the features of the women and what the viewer can get from (or do to) her. This is objectification, the root of the negativity in straight porn, but is something I believe the medium can do without entirely. This may seem like a strange statement, given that objectification seems the de facto goal of porn. However, if one considers the definition of objectification, as provided by Martha Nussbaum, it is clear that just as sex can exist without it, so can media's depiction of sex.

Nussbaum's definite investigation of objectification was provided in her book *Sex and Social Justice*. She proposes that objectification has seven rigid indicators, which are as follows:

1. *Instrumentality*. The objectifier treats the object as a tool of his or her own purposes.
2. *Denial of autonomy*. The objectifier treats the object as lacking in autonomy and self-determination.
3. *Inertness*. The objectifier treats the object as lacking in agency, and perhaps in activity.
4. *Fungibility*. The objectifier treats the object as interchangeable with other objects of the same (or other) type(s).
5. *Violability*. The objectifier treats the object as lacking in boundary integrity, as something that it is permissible to break up, smash, break into.
6. *Ownership*. The objectifier treats the object that is owned by another, can be bought, or sold.
7. *Denial of subjectivity*. The objectifier treats the object as something whose experience and feelings need not be taken into account. (Nussbaum 218)

Nussbaum discusses that to objectify someone, one only has to do one of the above, and they are not inclusive to each other: one can treat someone as a tool to his or her own purposes without treating them as an object that can be broken. She also states that objectification is not necessarily a negative thing; a parent must treat their small children as inert and deny them subjectivity to protect them from potential danger (221-222).

However, the way people, mainly women, are objectified in porn is what leads to the negative domination-centered sex that exists in it. Most often what is seen in straight porn is a combination of instrumentality, denial of autonomy, fungibility, and frequently violability. Women are treated solely as a tool for men's desire, unable to make their own decisions about what they want and need in sex. They are regularly traded around in a scene, with no value placed on them beyond what their vaginas can do in that moment. They are also dominated aggressively and treated roughly, which again, is not wrong on its own in the context of consensual sexual experience, but as it is the way sex is mainly depicted in porn, it becomes problematic. By constantly depicting women being objectified in this way, either through what is occurring in the films or how they are produced, straight porn perpetrates sexual negativity in the belief that male sexuality and desire is the most important (and sometimes only) factor in sex.

From seeing exactly what leads to negativity and inequality in porn, it can be

understood that just as objectification is not needed for sex in life, it is not mutually inclusive with porn either. If we can envision and experience a lack of objectification in our sex lives, why can't depictions of sex in media be the very same way? The truth is, it already can! Aside from the gay pornography that I've discussed, straight feminist pornography, like the kind produced by websites like Bright Desire and others, intends to produce porn that focuses on sexual positivity, fluid gender roles, pleasure and satisfaction for all participants and validation. Although the porn can still depict more fetishistic sexual content that Dworkin may despise, it does so with an aim for equality and mutual pleasure, and through this, stop the true exploitation that exists in the genre. Even if the actors could be objectified by the viewer, this is not intended by the porn itself, which shows a massive shift from the negative ideologies that can be found in much of mainstream porn.

There is a practical, simple approach to helping us confront the negative ideologies of porn in daily life. When we consume porn, whether it is mainstream, amateur, gay, straight, or whatever else we happen to be into that day, we need to analyze what is behind the attempts to turn us on. This is the very same approach we should be taking we any media. Unless one is working inside the porn industry to change it, being analytical and self-reflective is the one thing we can do to fight against becoming numb to the ideologies that are presented to us. If we enjoy watching porn that has a bent towards objectification, male domination and sexism, the only responsible thing to do is to question why that is appealing and whether that is effecting how we see the world in a potentially damaging way. In addition, we shouldn't give gay or feminist porn a free ride; it is important to critically think about what is going on beneath the surface that could be negatively influencing us in any medium. Doing this is the only true way to confront the problems that porn, and media in general, presents us with.

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