

2004

Confronting Pornography: Some Conceptual Basics

Rebecca Whisnant

University of Dayton, rwhisnant1@udayton.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://ecommons.udayton.edu/phl_fac_pub

 Part of the [Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

eCommons Citation

Whisnant, Rebecca, "Confronting Pornography: Some Conceptual Basics" (2004). *Philosophy Faculty Publications*. 167.
http://ecommons.udayton.edu/phl_fac_pub/167

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Philosophy at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact frice1@udayton.edu, mschlangen1@udayton.edu.

Rebecca Whisnant

Confronting pornography: Some conceptual basics

Porn takes over

There can be no doubt, at this moment in history, that pornography is a truly massive industry saturating the human community. According to one set of numbers, the US porn industry's revenue went from \$7 million in 1972 to \$8 billion in 1996 . . . and then to \$12 billion in 2000.¹ Now I'm no economist, and I understand about inflation, but even so, it seems to me that a *thousand-fold* increase in a particular industry's revenue within 25 years is something that any thinking person has to come to grips with. Something is happening in this culture, and no person's understanding of sexuality or experience of relationships can be unaffected.

The technologies of pornography are ever more dynamic. Obviously, video porn was a huge step up from magazines and even from film. Not only was it cheap to rent and watch in privacy and anonymity, it was also easier and cheaper to make, thus opening up a huge amateur market. In the mid-1990s, *Playboy* ran a feature story on how to make your own amateur pornography, including tips and tricks on coaxing a reluctant female partner into participating.

Video is now old hat, of course; more recent developments include not only standard-issue web porn, but also elaborate and 'realistic' porn video games, websites where the consumer can cross-index porn stars with the kinds of sexual acts he wants to see them perform, and porn DVDs that enable the viewer to control the action and inject himself into it. One might expect that the advent of the web and internet porn would reduce the market for video porn rentals; instead, the relevant period of time saw rentals multiply nearly tenfold, from 75 million in 1985 to 721 million in 2000.²

Meanwhile, pornography has become so merged with big business that the two are hardly distinguishable. GM (via its subsidiary, DirecTV) now sells more porn films than Larry Flynt (Egan 2000). AT&T offers broadband cable

1 These numbers come from the companion website to a Court TV documentary entitled *Adults Only: The Secret History of the Other Hollywood*. See 'Porn Industry Facts' at <http://www.courttv.com/archive/onair/shows/mugshots/indepth/hollywood/index.html> (last accessed March 18, 2004).

2 See 'Porn Industry Facts,' cited in note 1.

subscribers a hardcore porn channel, and also owns a company that sells porn videos to nearly a million hotel rooms (Egan 2000). According to *Forbes* magazine, the contemporary legal pornography business is a \$56 billion global industry (Dines 2003). Those who fear a government crackdown on pornography can rest easy: too many Fortune 500 companies are making megabucks from it for the US government to dream of getting in the way.

These depressing developments give us at least a ballpark estimate of the size and impact of the industry. However, as many commentators have pointed out, it is difficult to get a clear picture of the industry's size. On the one hand, much of the material is illicit and not measured in official numbers, and a great deal of it is free. On the other hand, there is always the risk that the industry's own numbers are inflated. Thus, it is (as always) useful to supplement statistics with an appeal to experience and common sense.

During my 15 to 20 years as an adult, the visibility of pornography in everyday life has exploded. One cannot avoid it. It pops up on the computer screen unbidden and screams out ads for itself in one's personal email. Larry Flynt advertises his Hustler stores on highway billboards, after being lionized as a hero of free speech in a major Hollywood movie. Meanwhile, glancing over into the next car while sitting at a red light may get you a look at a porn movie playing on the backseat DVD player (AP 3/10/04).

Sniggering jokes about porn in mainstream sitcoms and other TV shows are as common as dirt. Girls of ten and twelve know how to mimic the poses and conventions of the industry, having watched shows like *Can You Be a Porn Star?* on cable TV. Pornography has become the ultimate cool—quodidian and yet thrillingly audacious. Constant pop cultural references teach us that men's pornography use is both inevitable and completely legitimate, and that the way to be a cool, modern, liberated woman is to not only tolerate it but join in.

Take, as but one example, a subplot on a recent episode of the hugely popular sitcom *Friends*. Monica walks in on her husband Chandler masturbating to pay-per-view pornography in his hotel room—but due to his last-minute switch to the nature channel, she mistakenly assumes that he's into 'shark porn'. She's appalled but, like a good girl, she decides to play along and support his fetish—renting him nature videos about sharks, and offering to 'thrash around in the tub' for his sexual entertainment. When she realizes that he's just into regular porn—'just good old-fashioned girl-girl action', as he helpfully clarifies—she is thrilled and relieved. Meanwhile, he congratulates her as the 'best wife ever' for having been willing to play along with even a profoundly disturbing fetish. Lesson learned, roll credits.

'It looks like violence but it's not'

It's common for well-intentioned people to respond to feminist critiques of pornography by quickly intoning 'Well, of course I'm against the violent stuff'. While the attempt to distinguish the 'violent stuff' from the rest of it was always a dicey proposition, ongoing changes in the content and emphasis of pornography have rendered the violent/nonviolent distinction almost entirely obsolete. This distinction is far too coarse to take account of what we perceive in contemporary pornography.

Some things in pornography never change: the body fragmentation, photographically cutting up women's bodies into isolated and fetishized parts; the sexualizing of childhood and the infantilization of adult women; the contemptuous and mocking cartoons; the bondage; the rape myths; the vacant, taken-aback, and/or fearful expressions on the women's faces. The precision of pornographic conventions, and their lack of fundamental variation, gives the lie to any suggestion that we are simply talking about any old descriptions or images of 'sex'.

At the same time, the industry is dynamic, both creating and responding to the cynicism and ennui of its consumers by constantly upping the ante. Martin Amis's 2001 *Guardian* article 'A Rough Trade', despite its generally sneering tone, nonetheless delivers some important information on changes in the industry and its effects on the women who participate in it. As Amis makes clear, the direction of the industry is toward 'gonzo', or pure and plotless succession of sex acts, with an emphasis on more 'extreme' activities. There is enormous pressure on women to engage in anal sex, double penetration (having her vagina and anus penetrated simultaneously), and even 'double anal' (having more than one penis penetrate her anus at once). A woman doesn't 'have' to do these things until her status in the industry has started to decline (which happens very quickly); at the same time, engaging in these acts lowers her status still further. Amis quotes Jonathan Morgan, a 'performer turned director', who explains it as follows:

The girls could be graded like A, B, and C. The A is the chick on the boxcover . . . Here you have a borderline A/B doing a double anal. Directors will remember that. She'll get phone calls. For a double anal you'd usually expect a B or C. They have to do the dirty stuff or they won't get a phone call. You've had a kid, you've got some stretchmarks—you're up there doing double anal. Some girls are used in nine months or a year. An 18-year-old, sweet young thing, signs with an agency, makes five films in her first week. Five directors, five actors, five times five: she gets phone calls. A hundred movies in four months. She's not a fresh face anymore. Her price slips and she stops getting phone calls. Then it's, 'Okay, will you do anal? Will you do gangbangs?' Then they're used up . . . The market forces of this industry use them up.

Amis's remarkably candid interviewees also make clear that mainstream pornography increasingly merges sex with violence and degradation, from spitting and choking to 'assbusting' and 'gangbanging', as well as of course the ever-essential 'facial' (in which the man ejaculates in the woman's face). Porn director John Stagliano, in discussing Rocco Siffredi, one of his favored male stars, observes that:

Together we evolved toward rougher stuff. He started to spit on girls. A strong male-dominant thing, with women being pushed to their limit. It looks like violence but it's not. I mean, pleasure and pain are the same thing, right? Rocco is driven by the market. What makes it in today's market place is reality.

In other words, today's porn consumers are no longer satisfied with regular old ordinary male-dominant sexuality; there has to be an extra kick, an extra charge, and that comes from 'women being pushed to their limit'. And of course, note Stagliano's chilling recognition that this is, in fact, not mere fantasy but 'reality'.

Feminists who work against pornography know that, at a certain basic level, this material defies description—the depths of its hatred and erasure of women must be experienced to be believed. It is clear, however, that despite surface variations in the level of violence and contempt being openly expressed in different pornographic materials, the industry functions as a mutually reinforcing whole. As a whole, it is a form of hate propaganda, whose effects are especially powerful because it bypasses rational thought and goes straight for the jugular, as it were, conditioning the consumer to respond sexually to a fascistic sexual ideology.

I want to close this section by describing two pornographic images that, to me, capture the core of pornography's contempt for and endangerment of women. I am describing them from memory (thus without specific citation) because these are images that have stayed burned in my mind over a number of years since I actually saw them. Both are from pornographic magazines that students gave me some time in the 1990s when they knew I was doing feminist research and writing about pornography.

The first is from one of the thousands of relatively interchangeable porn magazines that line the shelves of adult bookstores across the country. I don't remember its title—nothing famous. In one of the numerous 'pictorials' was a photo of a woman's backside leaning over a chair in what looked like an ordinary living room. The photo shows only this one body part, more or less in close-up. The woman's anus is gaping and distended, misshapen, a black hole around an inch in diameter. It leaps off the page—something is horribly wrong. Anuses don't look like that. What has been done to her? How did it get like that? How does she feel about having this damaged, mutilated,

ravaged bit of her anatomy displayed for men to jerk off on, about, into? We don't know—her face is hidden, gone, not relevant, not part of the picture. Her pain and humiliation, the damage already done to her, is front and center. A bulls-eye—here's where to hit, here's where to push. It doesn't matter—she's already broken. Her physical integrity is gone, the boundary of her body completely demolished. I cannot forget this picture.

The other is a cartoon sequence from an issue of *Hustler*, titled 'Why We Hate Women'. Each panel depicts some contemptible or objectionable female habit, like asking men to do laundry, whining about ill treatment, that sort of thing—I don't recall exactly. The panel I remember is the last one in the sequence. Its caption is 'they always want to cuddle after you fuck them'. The drawing is of a woman sitting up in bed, her face startled and hurt, taken aback. She is covered in ejaculate, literally drenched and dripping, as if a bucket of it has been emptied over her head. I cannot forget her expression.

This is where we are. This is 'reality'. We live in, and live out, the sexual reality that this material both constructs and reflects. From here on, I want to offer some reflections and suggestions about how we can think about it.

Conceptual basics

So many confusions surround our talk about pornography that it can be useful to introduce some elementary distinctions and conceptual clarifications. (Some of these points I will just touch on, since they have been made repeatedly and well by other authors; others have received less attention and so bear a bit more discussion here.)

Prostitution and pornography

It's common in everyday parlance to distinguish sharply between pornography and prostitution. Beyond the obvious fact that we use two different terms to refer to the two practices, many men who would regard patronizing a prostitute as beneath them see nothing wrong, pathetic or shameful in their use of pornography. Finally, of course, the legal status of prostitution—in the US at least—is very different from that of pornography. It is illegal (except in parts of Nevada) to purchase sex from a prostitute 'in person', as well as to be the one selling it; whereas the production and distribution of most pornography is legal. This legal difference, again, reflects a widespread public perception that prostitution and pornography are two very different things—and that pornography is either perfectly acceptable or, at least, 'less bad' than prostitution.

It is way past time to challenge this distinction. Pornography is the documentation of prostitution. It is a technologized form of prostitution—prostitution at one remove.

To see the point, consider an example. Suppose that Fred is making money by selling Gertrude's sex act to Harvey and reaping part or all of the proceeds. In short, Fred is a pimp. It then occurs to him that with this new technological innovation called the camera (or video camera, or webcam, etc.), he could sell Gertrude's sex act not just once, to Harvey, but many thousands of times, to many thousands of different men. In this way, he can make a great deal more money from this one sex act than he is making now. So Fred is happy. Meanwhile, Harvey will almost certainly pay less for his magazine or DVD or web site access than he would have paid for the act 'in person', so Harvey is happy. Everybody wins . . . oh yes, except Gertrude. She will probably not make any more money this way; she might well make less, even though her sex acts are now being sold far and wide, at enormous profit to the pimp and with enormous potential damage to her own privacy and safety.

The structure, logic, and purpose of Fred's activity have not changed. He is still a pimp. He has simply become more savvy and enterprising than he was back in his days as an ordinary street pimp. The basic elements of Gertrude's experience, similarly, have not changed: she is still exchanging sex acts for money. The only member of our original trio now having a significantly different experience is Harvey, who now has his sexual experience 'with' (at, on) Gertrude at some technological remove. He may like it this way or he may not, but keep in mind that he is getting the goods at a much lower price, with greater anonymity, and with the added benefit of not having to see himself as a john. Plus, if all that isn't enough for him, he can still seek out 'in-person' experiences with prostitutes if he wishes. So really, from his point of view, what's not to like here?

There is one other difference: namely, that the man onscreen actually performing the sex act (or having it performed on him) is being paid rather than doing the paying. So essentially, a male prostitute has entered the scene and is now participating alongside the female prostitute. But what of it? The basic structure of pimp, prostitute, and customer remains intact. (Changing the gender of one or more participants, of course, also would not change the basic structure.) Again, the transaction has simply become immensely more profitable for the pimp, while becoming cheaper, legally safer, and more anonymous for the customer.

Pornography *is* prostitution.³ Our usual failure to see it this way is striking. Whose interests does that failure serve? Again, it benefits the pimps and johns, both of whom get to see their pornography-related activities as relatively

3 An exception to the analysis of pornography as prostitution will, of course, be the case of pornography that is merely written or drawn, rather than using the actions and images of actual living human beings.

respectable, rather than as mass-produced prostitution.

In this respect my analysis converges with those on the pro-pornography side who emphasize the connections and commonalities among different forms of 'sex work', from stripping to escort services to pornography to paid phone sex. Of course, their objective is to take this insight in the opposite direction: in their view, since pornography is both legal and widely regarded as innocuous, then so too should prostitution be. While I strongly disagree with that conclusion, perhaps we can all agree that it is time to start asking the question openly: if you think that there is a real dividing line between pornography and prostitution, such that the legal status quo makes sense, then how do you defend that position? What are the relevant differences between the two?

Even if we initially accept the distinction between pornography and prostitution, it soon starts to get blurry as we consider examples. If a man pays to access a website where he can instruct far-away women to perform particular acts for him via live webcam, is that pornography or prostitution?⁴ Come to that, what about good old-fashioned 'live sex shows' and private dances in strip clubs? Here again, the man is paying to watch, rather than to actually do something or have it done to him. Often enough, even men who hire prostituted women in private want to *watch* them do something (sometimes with each other). Which is that—pornography or prostitution? Shall we say that something is prostitution if the woman is in the same room with the buyer, and otherwise it's pornography? What kind of pointless distinction is that?

It is perhaps also worth pointing out that the pornography industry shows a nearly inexhaustible capacity to blur the distinction between pimps and johns, turning one into the other with dizzying speed and regularity. The burgeoning market of 'amateur' porn is the direct descendant of time-honored traditions such as *Hustler's* 'Beaver Hunt' feature, in which 'readers' are urged to send in 'beaver shots' of their wives and girlfriends, thus pimping the women in their lives. (It's impossible to know how many of these women were even aware of where these pictures were going—one risk that's less endemic to 'live, in person' prostitution than to pornography.) While the question of whether pornography causes rape is a perennial and important one, what definitely seems clear is that pornography 'causes'—that is, encourages and legitimates and inspires—pimping.

Not surprisingly, rape, pimping, and pornography sometimes converge in profoundly ugly ways. In *Our Guys*, Bernard Lefkowitz's fine book on the 1989 gang rape of a young retarded girl, he reports that the teenaged male

4 Donna Hughes's article in this volume makes clear how various new technologies continue to erode whatever rough-and-ready distinction may have once existed between prostitution and pornography.

perpetrators were in the habit of getting together in one of their basements to watch video pornography. After committing the gang rape, they planned to lure the victim down to the basement again so that this time they could videotape the assault.

Offense, harm, and coercion

Feminists have had some limited success in getting across that our problem with pornography concerns the harm it does, rather than the offense it causes. Offense, we have repeatedly stressed, is a way of feeling bad, which can usually be avoided or ended by avoiding the stimulus that triggers the bad feeling (hence the familiar refrain that ‘anyone who doesn’t like pornography doesn’t have to look at it’). Harm is different. It is an objective condition, not a way of feeling; to be harmed is to have one’s interests set back, to be made worse off, to have one’s circumstances made worse than they were or than they would be in the absence of the thing that’s doing the harm. Whether a person is harmed or not does not depend on how she feels. In fact, she can be harmed without even knowing about it—say, by having vicious lies about her spread behind her back, thus damaging her reputation and diminishing her opportunities. In contrast, no one can be offended without knowing about it, because offense is something that happens in one’s head.

Feminists have claimed that the mass production and consumption of pornography harms women in general—by contributing to violence and discrimination against women, and by conditioning its users to respond sexually to women as inferiorized, fetishized objects who crave humiliation and degradation. We have also claimed that the pornography industry harms many, if not all, of the women who participate in it. Coercion and abuse is rampant in this industry—from the literal enslavement often associated with international sex trafficking, to women and girls who get filmed without their knowledge (remember those ubiquitous and slyly salacious pop-up ads for the tiny, easily hidden ‘X2’ video cameras?), to women whose husbands or boy-friends tell them that the pictures or videos being made of their sex life are ‘just for us’, when in fact he’s uploading them to the internet (or does so later, after they break up).

In a sense, pornography critics have suffered from too much success in conveying this latter argument, in that now many people’s only response when confronted with feminist critiques of the industry is ‘but what about the women who *choose* . . .?’ That is, by emphasizing the extent of coercion into the industry, we may have inadvertently made this seem to be the only issue of concern. And in a media environment where we all see breathless press accounts of women lining up eagerly to get into *Playboy* and *Penthouse* shoots, the coercion argument alone simply won’t suffice.

I want to suggest that the issue of choice, consent, and coercion is at once both more and less central than we in the feminist anti-pornography movement have tended to make it. It is more central, in that coercion really is different from, and worse than, non-coercion; we need to avoid implying that there is no important difference between doing something voluntarily and being forced to do it. It is less central, in that we need to emphasize even more clearly that consent is not the *only* important issue. Let me now address these two points in turn.

Often, when confronted with critics who point out that ‘some women choose’ (and who myopically assume that this is a debate-settler), our response has been to question the very possibility of ‘choice’ or ‘consent’ under pervasive conditions of sexual (and sexualized) inequality, or sometimes even to imply that consensual prostitution is no better than prostitution that is outright forced. Such responses are neither necessary nor plausible. Choice and consent are not everything, but neither are they nothing. Typically, and other things equal, something consensual is *better* than that same thing non-consensual. That doesn’t mean that it’s good or even that it should be allowed, let alone encouraged—but it’s at least somewhat less bad.

Granted, there are plenty of circumstances in which it’s not clear whether consent is present or not. Consent is not a simple on/off switch, and it is important to be aware (and to make others aware) of the sexist social pressures, abuse histories, economic needs, and other factors that constrain and influence women’s and girls’ participation in the sex industry. If women’s participation exists on a kind of continuum, with one end being ‘fully free choice from a range of meaningful alternatives’, and the other end being ‘outright coercion and force’ (say, having a gun to one’s head), then probably most women in the industry are located somewhere in between these two extremes. Nonetheless, each of these endpoints is very different from the other one, and even from most of the midpoints. Choices made in the absence of better economic alternatives, or in the grip of pernicious ideologies, or even as a result of traumatic dissociation, are still choices, and are still significantly different from being forced.

Rather than always putting ‘choice’ and ‘consent’ in scare-quotes, we need to clarify what does and does not follow from the observation that something is a choice, or is consensual. That something is chosen or consensual is perfectly consistent with its being seriously oppressive, abusive, and harmful—to oneself and/or to a broader group of which one is a member (e.g. women).

What I am saying is that we need to think and talk somewhat differently about women who participate in the sex industry. Yes, many are coerced. Many are not coerced, but their choices to participate are made under far less than ideal conditions and result in significant harm to themselves. Finally,

there may be some women (a relative few, to be sure) who choose participation in the sex industry from a meaningful range of options and who experience that participation as at least tolerable, and at best empowering. Certainly there are women who report this to be true of them, and while we may often suspect that a level of denial is operative, we need not assume a priori that denial or dissociation explains every such case. Rather we can grant, at least for the sake of argument, that such cases exist. The next question is, what of it? In particular, it seems to me that a useful next question would be this: on whose backs are they having this tolerable-to-empowering experience? What are the costs to women in general, and to the overwhelming majority of prostituted women in particular, of allowing this opportunity to those few (by definition relatively privileged) women who might freely and sincerely choose it for themselves?⁵

Many of those who enter and remain in the industry *voluntarily* are also grievously harmed by their participation in it. Coercion is only one kind of harm; there are others, and we need to explain what they are and why they are worthy of our serious attention.⁶ As in other forms of prostitution, the rates of addiction (to both illegal street drugs and prescription drugs) are very high as women numb themselves to the continual objectifying intimate use of their bodies. Rates of sexually transmitted diseases are astronomical as well, with minimal health and safety protections for people working in the industry (Huffstutter 2003). Women in the industry report devastating effects on their capacity for intimate relationships: one 21-year-old interviewed by Martin Amis says, 'I don't have relationships any more. They make life unstable. The only sex I have is the sex on screen.' Again, recall that most women in this industry are very young. Women in their early twenties are likely to be washed-up, considered too old for 'Just 18' or 'Teen Sluts'. However they got where they are, the fact remains that (as Gail Dines puts it) 'No woman was put on this earth to be hurt or humiliated in order to facilitate male masturbation' (Dines 2003, p. 314).

Furthermore, we need to make clear—loudly and consistently—that pornography's broader social harms of gender subordination, commodified sexuality, and eroticized dominance *do not depend* on whether the persons

5 This point is especially important to make in response to those who point out that some women gain significant power in the industry by becoming producers themselves, rather than 'actresses'. Such women have become pimps, and need to be held accountable for the effects of their choices on other women—especially those they are pimping.

6 For example, go back to the picture I described earlier of the woman's damaged anus. Ultimately, what is the importance of knowing whether she 'consented' to take part in the industry, or even to the specific acts which led to that kind of bodily harm? In some sense we can hope that she wasn't forced, but whether she was forced or not, her body and no doubt her spirit are damaged beyond recognition.

depicted are participating voluntarily. That is, when we are asked, ‘What about the women who choose?’, we need to be less quick to respond, ‘But do they *really* choose?’, and more ready to explain why their choice (or lack thereof) is only one of many morally and politically relevant features of the situation. We also need to emphasize, continually, that the pornography industry—like prostitution more generally—does not ultimately exist because of women’s choices. Rather it exists because men, as a class, demand that there be a sub-class of women (and children, and men, and transgender people—but mostly women) who are available for their unconditional sexual service.

It’s bad to deceive, coerce, or force women (or men) into pornography. It’s also bad to harm, objectify, and use up women (or men) who are not being deceived or coerced. And it’s bad to use women (or anyone) in an industry that harms *other* women and that contributes to keeping women as a class subordinate to men—even if the particular woman being used is as free and fulfilled in her pornography career as anyone could possibly desire to be. No matter how implausible we may find the latter scenario, we still need to be clear that our analysis and critique of the industry do not depend on denying it.

‘What can we do?’

To confront pornography and listen to the women hurt in it and by it, and still to cast pornography as merely a free speech issue, or as merely a matter of who feels offended by what, requires a stunning exercise of deliberate blindness, an extraordinary numbing of one’s basic capacities of sympathy, moral identification, and outrage. It indicates that privilege is being defended with all the perceptual and conceptual resources at one’s disposal—the privilege of being a man, yes, but also the relative comfort of being a woman who believes it cannot and will not happen to her.

Those of us who do understand the harms of pornography often wonder what we can do to fight against this powerful and ubiquitous industry. Beyond the usual (and important) responses about joining with others to resist the industry politically, I’d like to close with some additional suggestions about fending off pornography in our own lives.

Men: don’t use pornography. Throw it away and start dreaming your own dreams about sex, women, men, and joy. Don’t let this vicious industry lead you around by your dick. Don’t kid yourself by saying, ‘Well, I don’t look at the really bad stuff. The woman doesn’t look abused. Look, there she is having an orgasm.’ Take yourself, and her, more seriously than that.

Also, don’t let your friends use pornography without challenging them. You don’t have to deliver a long feminist declamation—just let them know that you don’t like pornography and don’t want to be a part of seeing it or having it around. Let them call you pussy-whipped—you know better, and if

you let them intimidate you by calling you names, then who is it that's really got you whipped? . . . As men, you have a lot of power to challenge pornography, because things you say (especially about gender-related issues) are taken to be more important and more likely to be true simply because you say them. This is sad and unfair, but you can use it in the service of justice. Let what you say matter. Allow yourself to make a difference.

Women: don't lie to yourself and say that this issue has nothing to do with you or your friends. Have the courage to recognize the truth of your vulnerability to violence and degradation. This is not 'victim feminism'. Having the courage to look at the truth and pass it on to others does not make you weak; it makes you strong.

And here's another challenge: demand that your intimate relationships be free from the polluting influence of pornography. This is a hard one, especially for straight women. It narrows the field of men for you to relate to a whole lot. It introduces the possibility, indeed the near-certainty, of conflict into the intimate relationships that you do have. It raises the specter of loss, of rejection, of being called every misogynist name in the book by men outraged at the affront to their masculine birthright. And every woman has to decide for herself what her own tolerance level will be, what compromises she will make with this industry that chews other women up and spits them out, to what extent she will put up with having the most intimate spaces of her relationship invaded by the pornography in her own lover's head. But I can't help fantasizing about a *Lysistrata*-like resistance⁷ of heterosexual women saying, *en masse*, 'We will not date, marry, or have sex with men who use pornography. It's us or the dirty pictures—you pick.'

Regardless of the form(s) one's resistance takes, it is not easy to stand up against this powerful and pervasive industry—particularly since the industry and its supporters have polluted public discourse in ways that make it almost impossible to think clearly about it. The more we can keep the relevant concepts and issues clear in our own heads—including some of those I've discussed here—the less easily we can be manipulated and shut down.

As in all radical movements, it can also help to keep imagining what the justice we seek to create would look and feel like. Pornography as we know it, and the sexuality that it teaches us, is no more natural or inevitable than super-size fries and 60-inch TV screens. What would it be like to be free in our minds and in our relationships—free to create our own versions of sex, our own ideas about what it means to be a man or to be a woman? 'When equality is an idea

7 In *Lysistrata*, a comedic play by the Greek dramatist Aristophanes (c. 447–385 BCE), women from different states unite to end the Peloponnesian war by withholding sex from their husbands until the men agree to lay down their weapons.

whose time has come,' writes John Stoltenberg, 'we will perhaps know sex with justice, we will perhaps know passion with compassion, we will perhaps know ardor and affection with honor' (Stoltenberg 1990, p. 135). Could this time be tomorrow, or next week, or next year? What can each of us do *today* to bring it closer?

References

- Amis, Martin. (2001). 'A rough trade'. *The Guardian*, March 17, 2001. Available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/weekend/story/0,3605,458078,00.html> (last accessed March 18, 2004).
- Associated Press, 'Call It Drive-By Porn'. March 10, 2004. Available at http://cbsnewyork.com/water/watercooler_story_070144339.html (last accessed March 18, 2004).
- Court TV. *Adults Only: The Secret History of the Other Hollywood*. (TV documentary).
- Court TV. 'Porn Industry Facts'. Available at <http://www.courtstv.com/archive/onair/shows/mugshots/indepth/hollywood/index.html> (last accessed March 18, 2004).
- Dines, Gail. (2003). From Fantasy to Reality: Unmasking the Pornography Industry. In Robin Morgan (ed.) *Sisterhood is Forever: The Women's Anthology for a New Millennium*. New York: Washington Square Press.
- Egan, Timothy. (2000). 'Wall Street Meets Pornography'. *New York Times*, October 23, 2000. Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/10/23/technology/23PORN.html?ex=1079845200&en=1f5417e5ec2e83db&ei=5070> (last accessed March 18, 2004).
- Huffstutter, P.J. (2003). 'See No Evil'. *Los Angeles Times*, January 12, 2003. Available at <http://www.latimes.com/features/printedition/magazine/la-tm-pornjan12.story> (last accessed March 18, 2004).
- Lefkowitz, Bernard. (1998). *Our Guys*. New York: Random House.
- Rich, Frank. (2001). 'Naked Capitalists: There's No Business Like Porn Business'. *New York Times Magazine*, May 20, 2001.
- Stoltenberg, John. (1990). *Refusing to Be a Man: Essays on Sex and Justice*. New York: Meridian.