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A cruel edge: The painful truth about today's pornography -- and what men can do about it

by Robert Jensen

After an intense three hours, the workshop on pornography is winding down. The 40 women all work at a center that serves battered women and rape survivors. These are the women on the front lines, the ones who answer the 24-hour hotline and work one-on-one with victims. They counsel women who have just been raped, help women who have been beaten, and nurture children who have been abused. These women have heard and seen it all. No matter how brutal a story might be, they have experienced or heard one even more brutal; there is no way to one-up them on stories of male violence. But after three hours of information, analysis, and discussion of the commercial heterosexual pornography industry, many of these women are drained. Sadness hangs over the room.

Near the end of the session, one woman who had been quiet starts to speak. Throughout the workshop she had held herself tightly, her arms wrapped around herself. She talks for some time, and then apologizes for rambling. There is no need to apologize; she is articulating what many seem to be feeling. She talks about her own life, about what she has learned in the session and about how it has made her feel, about her anger and sadness.

Finally, she says: "This hurts. It just hurts so much."

Everyone is quiet as the words sink in. Slowly the conversation restarts, and the women talk more about how they feel, how they will use the information, what it will mean to their work and in their lives. The session ends, but her words hang in the air.

It hurts.

It hurts to know that no matter who you are as a woman you can be reduced to a thing to be penetrated, and that men will buy movies about that, and that in many of those movies your humiliation will be the central theme. It hurts to know that so much of the pornography that men are buying fuses sexual desire with cruelty.

It hurts women, and men like it, and it hurts just to know that.

Even these women, who have found ways to cope with the injuries from male violence in other places, struggle with that. It is one thing to deal with acts, even extremely violent acts. It is another to know the thoughts, ideas, and fantasies lie behind those acts.

People routinely assume that pornography is such a difficult and divisive issue because it's about sex. I think that's wrong. This culture struggles unsuccessfully with pornography because it is about men's cruelty to women, and the pleasure men sometimes take in that cruelty. And that is much more difficult for people -- men and women -- to face.

Mainstream pornography

Pornographic movies tell stories about sex. The question is, what kind of stories? For whom? From whose point of view?

There are different pornographic genres telling different stories, but I am concerned here with the story told in mainstream heterosexual pornography. What kind of story about sex does such pornography tell the all-American boy, and what does that mean for the girl next door?

Let's start with that phrase. By mainstream heterosexual pornography I mean the videos and DVDs that are widely available in the United States today, marketed as sexually explicit (what is commonly called "hardcore"), rented and purchased primarily by men, depicting sex primarily between men and women. The sexual activity is not simulated; these videos are a record of sex between the performers. What happens on the screen happened in the world.

This analysis is based primarily on three qualitative studies of pornographic videos I have conducted since 1996. I use the term "mainstream" to describe the tapes because I excluded what many would consider the non-representative fringe of the pornography market -- bondage and sadomasochistic tapes; any tape that advertised explicit violence, urination, or defecation; and child pornography (the only material clearly illegal everywhere in the United States). There is no shortage of such material in this country -- in shops, through the mail, on the internet, or underground (in the case of child pornography) -- but I passed over all of that. Instead, I visited stores that sold "adult product" (the industry's preferred term) and asked clerks and managers to help me select the most commonly rented and purchased tapes. I wanted to avoid the common accusation that feminist critics of pornography pick out the worst examples, the most violent material, to critique. In one of the stores I visited, the section from which I rented tapes is actually labeled "mainstream."

What I describe here is not an aberration. These tapes are broadly representative of the 11,303 new hardcore titles that were released in 2002, according to the *Adult Video News*, the industry's trade magazine. They are the mainstream of a pornography industry with an estimated \$10 billion in annual sales. They are what brothers and fathers and uncles are watching, what boyfriends and husbands are watching. And, in many cases, what boy children are watching.

Here is a sample from my 2003 research, starting with the so-called “couples market,” the tapes the industry says it makes to appeal not just to men but to women. These films, sometimes called “features,” typically have a minimal plot line and make attempts, no matter how badly executed, at character development. From there, I’ll move to “gonzo,” films that have no pretense of narrative and simply present sexual activity, sometimes shot “POV” (from the point of view of the man engaging in sex).

“Sopornos IV” is a 2003 release from VCA Pictures, one of the “high-end” companies that produces for what the industry calls the “couples market.” The plot is a takeoff on the popular HBO series about mobsters. In #4, mob boss Bobby Soporno is obsessed with the thought that everyone in his life is always having sex, including his crew and his daughter. In the final sex scene his wife has sex with two of his men. After the standard progression through oral and vaginal sex, one of the men prepares to penetrate her anally. She tells him: “That fucking cock is so fucking huge. ... Spread [my] fucking ass. ... Spread it open.” He penetrates her. Then she says, in a slightly lower tone, “Don’t go any deeper,” and she seems to be in pain. At the end of the scene, she begs for their semen (“Two cocks jacking off in my face. I want it.”), opens her mouth, and the men ejaculate onto her at the same time.

“Two in the Seat #3” is a 2003 release from Red Light District that consists of six separate scenes in which two men have sex with one woman, culminating in double-penetration (d.p.), in which the woman is penetrated vaginally and anally at the same time. In one scene, 20-year-old Claire, her hair in pigtails, says she has been in the industry for three months. Asked by the off-camera interviewer what will happen in the scene, she replies, “I’m here to get pounded.” The two men who then enter the scene begin a steady stream of insults, calling her “a dirty, nasty girl,” “a little fucking cunt,” “a little slut.” After the standard progression of oral and vaginal sex, she asks one to “Please put your cock in my ass.” During the double-penetration on the floor, her vocalizations sound pained. She’s braced against the couch, moving very little. The men spank her, and her buttock is visibly red. One man asks, “Are you crying?” which leads to this exchange: Claire: “No, I’m enjoying it.”

Man: “Damn, I thought you were crying. It was turning me on when I thought you were crying.”

Claire: “Would you like me to?”

Man: “Yea, give me a fucking tear. Oh, there’s a fucking tear.”

As the first man prepares to ejaculate into her mouth, she says, “Feed me your cum” and then displays it in her mouth for the camera. “Swallowed,” she says. The second man tells her to “spit all over my dick, bitch.” After he ejaculates she wipes the semen off her face with her fingers and eats it. The interviewer asks how her asshole feels. “Feels great. A little raw, but that’s good,” she says.

“Gag Factor #10” is a 2002 release from J.M. Productions. The company’s web site notes the Gag Factor tapes’ awards as “best oral series” and answers the question, “What makes Gag Factor different than all other blowjob tapes out there?”

1. Every girl must swallow the load of cum!
2. Every girl gets throatfucked until she gags and almost pukes!

3. Gag Factor has more stroke value than all other blowjob tapes combined!

One of the 10 scenes in the film begins with a woman and man having a picnic in a park. He jokes about wanting to use the romantic moment to make love to her mouth, and then stands and thrusts into her mouth while she sits on the blanket. Two other men who walk by join in. Saying things such as “Pump that face, pump that fucking face,” “All the way down, choke, choke,” and “That’s real face fucking,” they hold her head and push harder. One man grabs her hair and pulls her head into his penis in what his friend calls “the jackhammer.” At this point she is grimacing and seems in pain. She then lies on the ground, and the men approach her from behind. “Eat that whole fucking dick. ... You little whore, you like getting hurt,” one says, as her face is covered with saliva. “Do you like getting your face fucked?” one asks. She can’t answer. “Open your mouth if you like it,” he says, and she opens her mouth. After they all ejaculate into her mouth, the semen flows out onto her body. After the final ejaculation, she reaches quickly for the wine glass, takes a large drink, and looks up at her boyfriend, and says, “God, I love you baby.” Her smile fades to a pained look of shame and despair.

What pornography says about men and women

These three descriptions cover much of the range of the mainstream video and DVD market, of which the gonzo style is the fastest growing segment. Analysis of these scenes could go in many different directions, but what I want to focus on here is the expressions of pain.

I am not suggesting that in every scene in mainstream pornography such expressions of pain are evident. And I acknowledge that I cannot know exactly what the women in these films were feeling, physically or emotionally. I do not presume to speak for them, or for women in pornography, or for women in general. But here is what Belladonna, one of the women who appeared in “Two in the Seat #3,” told a television interviewer about such scenes: “You have to really prepare physically and mentally for it. I mean, I go through a process from the night before. I stop eating at 5:00. I do, you know, like two enemas. The next morning I don’t eat anything. It’s so draining on your body.” Women’s experiences no doubt vary, but Belladonna’s experience hardly seems idiosyncratic.

However, it is not necessary to reach definitive conclusions about the degree of pain women experience in such scenes to make one important observation. In these scenes, all three women at some point clearly appeared to a viewer to be in pain. Their facial expressions and voices conveyed that what was being done to them was causing physical discomfort and/or fear and/or distress. Given the ease with which video can be edited, why did the producers not edit out those expressions? There are two possible answers. One, they may view these kinds of expressions of pain by the women as of no consequence to the viewers’ interest, and hence of no consequence to the goal of maximizing sales; women’s pain is neutral. The second possibility is that the producers have reason to believe that viewers like the expressions of pain; women’s pain helps sales.

Given that the vast majority of those who will rent or buy these tapes are men, from that we can derive this question: Why do some men find the infliction of pain on women during sexual activity either (1) not an obstacle to their ability to achieve sexual pleasure or (2) a factor that can enhance their sexual pleasure? Phrased differently: Why are some men so callous and cruel sexually?

By that, I don't mean to ask why are men capable of being cruel in some general sense. All humans have the capacity to be cruel toward other humans and other living things, and we all have done cruel things in our lives, myself included. Contemporary mainstream heterosexual pornography raises the question: Why do some men find cruelty to women either sexually neutral or sexually pleasurable?

Feminist research into, and women's reflection upon, experiences of sexual violence long ago established that rape involves the sexualization of power, the fusing in men's imaginations of sexual pleasure with domination and control. The common phrase "rape is about power, not sex" misleads; rape is about the fusion of sex and domination, about the eroticization of control. And in this culture, rape is normal. That is, in a culture where the dominant definition of sex is the taking of pleasure from women by men, rape is an expression of the sexual norms of the culture, not violations of those norms. Sex is a sphere in which men are trained to see themselves as naturally dominant and women naturally passive. Rape is both nominally illegal and completely normal at the same time.

So, there's nothing surprising in the observation that some pornography includes explicit images of women in pain. But a healthy society would want to deal with that, wouldn't it? And from my research, both through these content analysis projects and my reading of material from the industry, it seems clear that mainstream heterosexual pornography is getting more, not less, cruel. A healthy society would take such things seriously, wouldn't it?

Infinite are the ways we can be cruel

There are only so many ways human beings can, in mechanical terms, have sex. There are a limited number of body parts and openings, a limited number of ways to create the friction that produces the stimulation and sensations, a limited number of positions from which the friction can be produced. Sexual variation, in this sense, is finite because of these physical limits.

Sex, of course, also has an emotional component, and emotions are infinitely variable. There are only so many ways people can rub bodies together, but endless are the ways different people can feel about rubbing bodies together in different times, places, and contexts. When most non-pornographic films, such as a typical Hollywood romance, deal with sex they draw on the emotions most commonly connected with sex, love and affection. But pornography doesn't, because films that exist to provide sexual stimulation for men in this culture wouldn't work if the sex were presented in the context of loving

and affectionate relationships. Men typically consume pornography specifically to avoid love and affection.

That means pornography has a problem. When all emotion is drained from sex it becomes repetitive and uninteresting, even to men who are watching primarily to facilitate masturbation. So, pornography needs an edge. Pornography has to draw on some emotion, hence the cruelty.

When the legal restrictions on pornography slowly receded through the 1970s and '80s, and the presentation of sex on the screen was by itself no longer quite so illicit, anal sex became a standard feature. Anal sex was seen as something most women don't want; it had an edge to it. When anal sex became routine in pornography, the gonzo genre started pushing the boundaries into things like double-penetrations and gag-inducing oral sex – again, acts that men believe women generally will not want. The more pornography becomes normalized and mainstreamed, the more pornography has to search for that edge. And that edge most commonly is cruelty, which emotionally is the easiest place to go for men, given that the dynamic of male domination and female submission is already in place in patriarchy.

This analysis is not news to the industry. As Jerome Tanner put it during a pornography directors' roundtable discussion featured in *Adult Video News*, "People just want it harder, harder, and harder, because like Ron said, what are you gonna do next?" Another director, Jules Jordan, was blunt about his task: "[O]ne of the things about today's porn and the extreme market, the gonzo market, so many fans want to see so much more extreme stuff that I'm always trying to figure out ways to do something different. But it seems everybody wants to see a girl doing a d.p. now or a gangbang. For certain girls, that's great, and I like to see that for certain people, but a lot of fans are becoming a lot more demanding about wanting to see the more extreme stuff. It's definitely brought porn somewhere, but I don't know where it's headed from there."

Director Mitchell Spinelli, interviewed while filming the first video ("Give Me Gape") for a series for his new Acid Rain company, seemed clear where it was heading:

"People want more. They want to know how many dicks you can shove up an ass," he says with a shrug. "It's like Fear Factor meets Jackass. Make it more hard, make it more nasty, make it more relentless. The guys make the difference. You need a good guy, who's been around and can give a good scene, fuckin' 'em hard. I did my homework. These guys are intense."

We live in a culture in which rape and battery continue at epidemic levels. And in this culture, men are masturbating to orgasm in front of television and computer screens that present them sex with increasing levels of callousness and cruelty toward women. And no one seems to be terribly concerned about this. Right-wing opponents of pornography offer a moralistic critique that cannot help us find solutions, because typically they endorse male dominance, albeit not these manifestations of it. Some segments of the feminist movement, particularly the high-theory crowd in academic life, want us to

believe that the growing acceptance of pornography is a sign of expanding sexual equality and freedom. Meanwhile, feminist critics of pornography have been marginalized in political and intellectual arenas. And all the while, the pornographers are trudging off to the bank with bags of money.

I think this helps explain why even the toughest women -- women who at rape crisis centers routinely deal with sexual violence -- find the reality of pornography so difficult to cope with. No matter how hard it may be to face the reality of a rape culture, at least the culture still brands rape as a crime. Pornography, however, is not only widely accepted but sold to us as liberation.

The struggle for men of conscience is to define ourselves and our sexuality differently, outside (to the degree possible) the domination/submission dynamic. It is not an easy task; like everyone, we are products of our culture and have to struggle against it. But as a man, I have considerable control over the conditions in which I live and the situations I am in. Women do not have that control. Women are vulnerable in a different way. Women are not just at risk of sexual violence but also have to deal with how men, who disproportionately hold positions of power in this society, view them. Women do not, and cannot, control that in the short term.

When a female student has a meeting about a research project with a male college professor who the night before was watching "Gag Factor #10," who is she to him? What is she to him?

When a woman walks into a bank to apply for a loan from a male loan officer who the night before was watching "Two in the Seat #3," what is he thinking?

When a woman goes in front of a male judge who the night before was watching "Sopornos #4," does she want to throw herself on the mercy of the court?

But some will argue: How can you assume that just because men watch such things they will act in a callous and cruel manner, sexually or otherwise? It is true that the connection between mass-media exposure and human behavior is complex and not well understood. Social scientists, like most experts, argue both sides. I think the evidence clearly shows that in some cases pornography influences men's sexual behavior. But whatever one's view on that, this fact is not in question: Lots of men -- including professors, bankers, and judges -- pay money to watch those images and masturbate to orgasm watching those images. And they aren't simply images of sex. Often they are images of men being sexually cruel toward women.

If you are a woman, ask this: Do you want to seek out such a man as a partner?

If you are a man, ask this: When seeking a woman as a partner, would you advertise that you enjoy these images?

Why not?

This all would be easier if we could pretend that these images are consumed by some small subset of deviant men -- if we could answer the question "what kind of men like those things" by pointing to emotionally disturbed men, or pathological men who have some problem that could explain this. Then we could identify and isolate those bad men, maybe repair them. But the answer to the question is: Men like me. Men like all of us. Men who can't get a date and men who have all the dates they could want. Men who live alone and men who are married. Men who grew up in liberal homes in which pornography was never a big deal and men who grew up in strict religious homes in which no talk of sex was allowed. White and black and brown and any-other-color-you-can-imagine men. Rich men and poor men. And all the king's men.

I am not suggesting all men use pornography, or that all men who use pornography want material in which women are hurt and humiliated, or that all men who use pornography are bound to then want to hurt and humiliate women. I am simply saying that much of the pornography in the United States records scenes of women being hurt and humiliated; that men masturbate to orgasm to those images; and that those men are not deviants but are acting on the cultural norms that are widely taught. And I am suggesting that these facts should matter to us; they should scare us.

There is no way to say this that isn't harsh

I am sorry for what I am about to write, because it is harsh, and it may not be fair for a man to write this. But this is the truth, and I am more afraid of what will happen if we don't face the truth than of being harsh or unfair.

Men spend \$10 billion on pornography a year. 11,000 new pornographic films are made every year. And in those films, women are not people.

In pornography, women are three holes and two hands.

Women in pornography have no hopes and no dreams and no value apart from the friction those holes and hands can produce on a man's penis. If anyone doubts that, let me describe one more video from my research, one more video from the mainstream section of a store that carries adult product, where men rent and buy films to help them masturbate.

"A Cum Sucking Whore Named Kimberly" is a 2003 release from Anabolic Video Productions. The tape is a compilation of five scenes featuring Kimberly, taken from five other films produced by this company. The first scene is from "World Sex Tour #25," in which two men explain that this will be Kimberly's first anal scene and first d.p. Kimberly is French Canadian and speaks little or no English. At the end of the scene, when the men ejaculate into her mouth, she starts to gag, and the two men tell her (through a translator off screen) that she has to swallow the semen, which she does. Through the translator, they tell Kimberly to say, "Thank you for fucking me in

Montreal.” Kimberly says, “Thank you for fucking me in Montreal.” The scene ends with the two men talking later about the experience. “We blew out her asshole,” one says. This is how the film presents Kimberly’s introduction to what she will be in pornography, what men want her to be.

The remaining scenes follow Kimberly through her “career” in pornography, finishing with “Gang Bang Girl #32.” In this scene a frustrated football coach berates his players after practice, asking them whether they are “football players or fags.” He says they will lose the game the next day, which he wouldn’t mind if his players were men -- he just hates to lose with fags. He turns to the assistant coach and says, “prove to me they’re not fags” before walking away. The proof will be in the 13 players having sex with Kimberly, one of the cheerleaders in the stands. She comes down to the field and engages in sex in a variety of different positions. As the men wait for their turn, they stand around her, masturbating to keep their erections, joking and laughing. At one point she is in a double-penetration with a third man’s penis is in her mouth while she masturbates two other penises.

She is three holes and two hands.

One by one the men ejaculate, most of them into Kimberly’s mouth. One man ejaculates into a protective cup and then pours it into her mouth. The last man ejaculates inside her vagina, and then she stands and catches his semen in her hand. She moves forward to face the camera and starts to lick it off her hand. At first she can’t quite bring herself to do it, but then she does, making a pained face and gagging slightly. The scene ends with the men dumping the water from a large jug on her.

Anabolic Video made that gang-bang film and sold it once. It was successful enough to excerpt and sell again. Men rented and purchased these tapes, and masturbated to orgasm while watching Kimberly in those positions. And they keep buying and renting. As I write this, “Gang Bang Girl” is on videotape number 34 and World Sex Tour is on number 27. There are 10 tapes in the “Cum Sucking Whore Named ...” series.

In a society in which so many men are watching so much pornography that is rooted in the pain and humiliation of women, it is not difficult to understand why so many can’t bear to confront it: Pornography forces men to face up to how we have learned to be sexual. And pornography forces women to face up to how men see them.

The only resistance is collective, and the pornographers want to squash it

When I critique pornography, I often am told to lighten up; sex is just sex, people say, and I should stop trying to politicize pornography. But pornography obviously is political. Telling men stories about sex in which women are three holes and two hands, not people, is political. It offers men a politics of sex and gender. And that politics is patriarchal and reactionary.

As with any political issue, successful strategies of resistance to injustice and oppression must be collective. There cannot be personal solutions to political problems. If we avoid engaging political problems in public and hope to make the best of things in private, we fail. Pornographers know that, which is why they want to make sure no collective remedies for women (through legislation or the courts) are considered, let alone enacted. But they also would prefer that none of these issues even be discussed in public. In recent years, their strategies for cutting off that discussion have been remarkably successful. When we criticize pornography, we typically are told we are either sexually dysfunctional prudes who are scared of sex, or people who hate freedom, or both. That works to keep many people quiet. The pornographers desperately want to keep people from asking the simple question: What kind of society would turn the injury and degradation of some into sexual pleasure for others? What kind of people does that make us -- the men who learn to find pleasure this way, and the women who learn to accept it?

The pornographers want to label any collective discussion of the meaning of intimacy and sexuality as repression. They want to derail any talk about a sexual ethic. They, of course, have a sexual ethic: Anything goes. On the surface that seems to be freedom: Consenting adults should be free to choose. I agree they should. But in a society in which power is not equally distributed, "anything goes" translates into "anything goes for men, and some women and children will suffer for it." Any society that claims to take freedom seriously must engage in a discussion about power, and take steps to equalize power. That means taking steps to end men's domination of women.

There are many controversial questions in the pornography debate: What is the nature of the relationship between sexually explicit media and behavior? Under what conditions can the consent of people involved in acts that may be detrimental to their own well-being be questioned? What harms of speech acts can trump free-speech concerns?

But there should be nothing controversial about this: To criticize pornography is not repressive. To speak about what one knows and feels and dreams is, in fact, liberating. We are not free if we aren't free to talk about our desire for an egalitarian intimacy and sexuality that would reject pain and humiliation.

That is not prudishness or censorship. It is an attempt to claim the best parts of our common humanity -- love, caring, empathy, solidarity. To do that is not to limit anyone. It is to say that people matter more than the profits of pornographers and the pleasure of pornography consumers. It is to say, simply, that women count as much as men.