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# Hard Core

THE NEW WORLD OF PORN IS REVEALING ETERNAL TRUTHS ABOUT MEN AND WOMEN.

By *Natasha Vargas-Cooper*



IMAGE CREDIT: SØLVE SUNDSBØ/ART+COMMERCE

As recently as 15 years ago, if somebody wanted vivid depictions of, say, two men simultaneously performing anal penetration on the same woman, securing such a delicacy would require substantial effort because the pornographic repertoire was still limited by the costs and imprecision of distribution. Leaving aside matters of taste and propriety, just how big an audience of horny derelicts or hurried businessmen would wriggle into a Pussycat Theater, with its sticky floors, and, in the company of others, watch a double-anal double feature? Most likely, the producers were more comfortable knowing they could aggregate a much larger audience with an hour of good old-fashioned blow jobs and randy nurses. Even as porn migrated from film reels to videocassettes, there lingered some thorny logistical problems to overcome. The clunky videotape still had to be smuggled into the family residence, had to be viewed in a secured environment from which nosy children and spouses were barred, and then had to be stored in a crawl space, safe, or dedicated dungeon—or reluctantly tossed in the trash.

The difficulty of acquiring this material may have hinted at a great, and therefore pent-up, demand. Then, technology produced the Second Coming: the Internet. And then the Rapture itself: broadband. Pornography is now, indisputably, omnipresent: in 2007, a quarter of all Internet searches were related to pornography. Nielsen ratings showed that in January 2010, more than a quarter of Internet users in the United States, almost 60 million people, visited a pornographic Web site. That number represents nearly a fifth of all the men, women, and children in this country—and it doesn't even take into account the incomprehensible amount of porn distributed through peer-to-peer downloading networks, shared hard drives, Internet chat rooms, and message boards.

So, perhaps it's no surprise that, for those who crave the more drastic masturbatory aid, the Internet offers easy access to a Grand Guignol of the outright bizarre (Midget Porn, Clown Porn, Girl-Fight Gang-Bang Porn). What is surprising is what now constitutes widely available, routine stuff in the major porn portals: episodes of men—or groups of men—having sex with women who are seven months pregnant; the ho-hum of husbands filming their scrawny white wives having sex with paunchy black men in budget motels; simulations of father-daughter (or mother-daughter) incest; and of course, a fixture on any well-trafficked site: double anal.

When a 13-year-old girl can sit in math class, hide her Hello Kitty smart phone behind her textbook, and pull up such an extreme video in less time than it would take her to text a vote for her favorite *American Idol* contestant, we've certainly reached some kind of new societal landmark. It's important, however, to distinguish between what has changed and what hasn't.

Porn's new pervasiveness and influence on the culture at large haven't necessarily introduced anything new into our sexual repertoire: humans, after all, have been having sex—weird, debased, and otherwise—for quite a while. But pervasive hard-core porn has allowed many people to flirt openly with practices that may have always been desired, but had been deeply buried under social restraint. Take anal sex: in a 1992 study that surveyed sexual behaviors, published by the University of Chicago, 20 percent of women ages 25 to 29 reported having anal sex. In a study published in October 2010 by the Center for Sexual Health Promotion at Indiana University, the instances of anal sex reported by women in the same age cohort had more than doubled, to 46 percent. The practice has even made its way into the younger female demographic: the Indiana study shows 20 percent of 18- and 19-year-olds have had anal sex at least once.

One of the Indiana study's co-authors, Debby Herbenick, believes that Internet porn now “plays a role in how many Americans perceive and become educated about sex.” How this influence actually works is speculative—no one can ever really know what other people do in their bedrooms or why. Some experts postulate a sort of monkey-see, monkey-do explanation, whereby both men and women are conforming to behaviors they witness on their browser media players. But in many ways this explanation doesn't account for the subtle relationship between now-ubiquitous pornography and sexuality. To take anal sex again, porn doesn't plant that idea in men's minds; instead, porn puts the power of a mass medium behind ancient male desires. Anal sex as a run-of-the-mill practice, de rigueur pubic waxing for girls—and their mothers—and first-date doggy-style encounters (this is but a small sampling of rapidly shifting sexual mores) have been popularized *and* legitimized by porn. Which means that men now have a far easier time broaching subjects once considered off-putting—for instance, suburban dads can offhandedly suggest anal sex to their bethonged, waxed wives.

MEN, SO THE CONVENTIONAL wisdom goes, tend to desire more than women are willing to give them sexually. The granting of sex is the most powerful weapon women possess in their struggle with men. Yet in each new sexual negotiation a woman has with a man, she not only spends down that capital, she begins at a disadvantage, because the potential losses are always greater for her. A failed or even successful single encounter can be life-altering. Whatever “social construct” you might impose upon the whole matter, nature imposes much more rigorous consequences on women than on men.

Over the years, different strategies have been offered so that women could avoid the more subjugating consequences of sex. Though methods of reversing the biological power dynamics between sexes date back to ancient Sparta, the premise had always been confined to the fringes of society until the sexual revolution of the 1960s, a period in which many feminists considered marriage the primary mechanism for women’s sexual conscription. The liberation on offer was sexual freedom for women—and their partners—through open marriages and sex communes. It’s worth noting that these polyamorous arrangements usually had at the center a male patriarch who reaped the perks of women’s newfound freedom. This experiment was short-lived, as sexual jealousy seemed an impossible force to rationalize, and children conceived on the grounds of a canyon commune needed more stability than a group of wayward adults could provide.

But the reactionary political correctness of the 1990s put forth a proposition even more disastrous to women than free love: sexual equality. With the rise of PC culture, the notion of men and women as sexual equals has found a home in the mainstream. Two generations of women, my own included, soared into the game with the justifiable expectations of not only earning the same wage as a guy, but also inhabiting the sexual arena the way a man does.

Armed with a “Take Back the Night” pamphlet, we were led to believe that, as long as we avoided the hordes of date rapists, sex was an egalitarian endeavor. The key to sexual harmony, so the thinking went, was social conditioning. Men who sexually took advantage of women were considered the storm troopers of patriarchy, but women could teach men to adopt a different ideology, through explicit communication of boundaries —“you can touch there” or “please don’t do that.” Thus was the dark drama of sex replaced with a verbal contract. Once the drunken frat boys and brutes were weeded out, if we gravitated toward a kind of enlightened guy, an emotionally rewarding sex life was ours for the taking. Sex wasn’t a bestial pursuit, but something elevating.

This is an intellectual swindle that leads women to misjudge male sexuality, which they do at their own emotional and physical peril. Male desire is not a malleable entity that can be constructed through politics, language, or media. Sexuality is not neutral. A warring dynamic based on power and subjugation has always existed between men and women, and the egalitarian view of sex, with its utopian pretensions, offers little insight into the typical male psyche. Internet porn, on the other hand, shows us an unvarnished (albeit partial) view of male sexuality as an often dark force streaked with aggression. The Internet has created a perfect market of buyers and sellers (with the sellers increasingly proffering their goods gratis) that provides what people—overwhelmingly males (who make up two-thirds of all porn viewers)—want to see or do.

THE HEATED ACT of sex often expunges judgment, pushing the participants into territory they hadn’t previously contemplated. The speed at which one transgresses, the urge to reach oblivion, the glamour

of violence, the arbitrary and shifting distinction between acts repulsive and attractive—all these aspects that existed only in sex are now re-created through Internet porn. You could be poking around for some no-frills Web clips of amateur couples doing it missionary style, but easily and rapidly you slide into footage of two women simultaneously working their crotches on opposing ends of a double-sided dildo, and then all of a sudden you're at a teenage-fisting Web site. All of this happens maybe by accident—those pop-ups can be misleading—or maybe, and more likely, it happens because in that moment it's arousing, whether you like it or not. Consuming Internet porn, then, mimics many of the sensations found in sex. It's overpowering and immediate; it is the brute force of male sexuality, unmasked and untethered. Martin Amis, in his fragmented fictional meditation on male depravity, *Yellow Dog*, depicts the delirious and uncontrollable effects of viewing porn. Amis writes:

He slithered around in his chair and made a noise intended to drown something out—my God: pornography turned the world upside down. You gave your head away, and what your mind liked no longer mattered; now the animal parts were in the driving seat—and tall in the saddle.

Hard-core porn, which is what Internet porn largely traffics in, is undoubtedly extreme. But how is sex, as a human experience, anything less than extreme? Not the kind of sex (or lack thereof) that occurs in marriages that double as domestic gulags. Or what 30-somethings do to each other in the second year of their “serious relationship.” But the sex that occurs in between relationships—or overlaps with relationships—where the buffers of intimacy or familiarity do not exist: the raw, unpracticed sort. If a woman thinks of the best sex she's had in her life, she's often thinking of this kind of sex, and while it may be the best sex in her life, it's not the sex she wants to have throughout her life—or more accurately, it's not the sex she'd have with the man with whom she'd like to spend her life. The manner in which one physically, and emotionally, contorts oneself for sex simply takes sex outside the realm of ordinary human experiences and places it in the extreme, often beyond our control. “Tamed as it may be, sexuality remains one of the demonic forces in human consciousness,” Susan Sontag wrote in *Styles of Radical Will*. Yes, it's a natural, human function, and one from which both partners can derive enormous pleasure, but it is also one largely driven by brute male desire and therefore not at all free of violent, even cruel, urges.

At the heart of human sexuality, at least human sexuality involving men, lies what Freud identified in *Totem and Taboo* as “emotional ambivalence”—the simultaneous love and hate of the object of one's sexual affection. From that ambivalence springs the aggressive, hostile, and humiliating components of male sexual arousal.

Never was this made plainer to me than during a one-night stand with a man I had actually known for quite a while. A polite, educated fellow with a beautiful Lower East Side apartment invited me to a perfunctory dinner right after his long-term girlfriend had left him. We quickly progressed to his bed, and things did not go well. He couldn't stay aroused. Over the course of the tryst, I trotted out every parlor trick and sexual persona I knew. I was coquettish then submissive, vocal then silent, aggressive then downright commandeering; in a moment of exasperation, he asked if we could have anal sex. I asked why, seeing as how any straight man who has had experience with anal sex knows that it's a big production and usually has a lot of false starts and abrupt stops. He answered, almost without thought, “Because that's the only thing that will make you uncomfortable.” This was, perhaps, the greatest

moment of sexual honesty I've ever experienced—and without hesitation, I complied. This encounter proves an unpleasant fact that does not fit the feminist script on sexuality: pleasure and displeasure wrap around each other like two snakes.

Pornography, with its garish view of male sexual desire, bares an uncomfortable truth that the women's-liberation movement has successfully suppressed: men and women have conflicting sexual agendas.

Pornography neatly resolves the contradictions—in favor of men. They fuck with impunity. Women never *dream* of staying. And if, God forbid, the women get pregnant, well, they can be used in pregnant pornos and then in an episode of *Exploited Moms*. What a marvelous means of delving into the heads of men. And for women peeping in on the Web, an important lesson—one that can't be gleaned in a sex-ed class where condoms are placed over bananas, nor from poring over the umpteenth edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*—is that sex can be a bitter, crushing experience, no matter how much power you think you have.

ONE OF THE most punishing realities women face when they reach sexual maturity is that their maturity is (at least to many men) unsexy. Indeed, we now have an entire genre of online smut politely called “Lolita Porn.” This is not actual child pornography, a genre still blessedly beyond the reach of the casual Web browser. But nor is it porn in the *Barely Legal* tradition of women in their early 20s, tan and taut in pigtails, playing babysitters or high-school cheerleaders. (They might toss off a “Gee, mister!” to reinforce the fantasy, but only a desperate fool would accept this as truth.) Instead, Lolita Porn features girls who are 18 or older but look like 14-year-olds. They're pale, long-limbed girls, with pearls for breasts, small pink flecks for nipples (in itself a sub-genre of online porn: Tiny Titties), and a hairless, nearly invisible pubic slit.

The mass distribution of such genres of Internet porn and their hard-core depictions of sex with the steady theme of humiliation have thrown current-day feminists into a scramble. The new neo-feminists (it's difficult to keep track of whatever wave the current “movement” is riding) argue that the primary obstacle to women's gaining greater equality in the political and economic sphere is today's “hypersexuality,” and specifically the spread of online porn. This is a somewhat new take on an old position. In the 1970s, second-wave feminists embraced an anti-porn militancy (a position closely identified with Andrea Dworkin). But that view was discredited by a new group of feminists who took up the mantra “Feminism means choice”—specifically, choice of lifestyle. Sex workers, strippers, corporate executives, and housewives, so the thinking went, all held the right to be liberated, “sex-positive,” and even enthusiastic consumers of (pre-digital) porn.

This sex-positive stance became so widely accepted that, as Natasha Walter writes in *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism*, by the 1990s, “the classic feminist critique of pornography” had “disappeared from view.” That might not have been a wholly negative development, because feminism's simplistic argument that porn objectified women was, for Walter, *too* simplistic. But the spread of Internet porn—a far cry from the Hefner-published glossies of the mid-20th century—has reignited a 40-year debate, and the new-new feminists are horrified to have found that in some way they were, albeit temporarily, in bed with the sex industry. Now they are in lockstep retreat. And in fact they've reached a new consensus: the ubiquity of pornography has brought the sex industry out of the margins and into

the mainstream, and we're all the worse off for it. Walter asserts:

In this generation a certain view of female sexuality has become celebrated throughout advertisements, music, television programmes, films and magazines. This image of female sexuality has become more than ever defined by the terms of the sex industry.

Walter is correct that beauty standards in advertising and entertainment are unattainable, but she mischaracterizes what the images coming out of the “sex industry” actually look like today—Walter and so many other women writers who didn't grow up with the Internet miss the fact that Internet porn has fundamentally changed the way sexuality is transmitted back to us. For instance, in her 2005 review of a documentary about *Deep Throat* (a movie that in today's world of porn might be rated PG-13), Northwestern University professor Laura Kipnis compared porn to science fiction: “Like sci-fi, porn replaces existing realities with wild alternative universes (against which to measure the lackluster, repressive world we've inherited).” But instead of a sexual ecosystem populated by an overheated species of Amazon women and ponytailed men, the Internet porn aesthetic verges on unvarnished realism.

It seems like almost every teenager in America—and hardly just the teenagers—has heard of or taken a dip into sites like RedTube and YouPorn, which alone account for roughly 2 percent of all daily Internet traffic. These are free, open, enormous sites, in which anybody can upload, distribute, and view whatever porn they please; even porn in which they star. It's amateur hour—and like all amateur hours, it's an honest, if often not-pretty, catalog of the desires and insecurities of regular folk.

And it's largely a grim parade of what women will do to satisfy men: young wives fingering themselves on the family couch, older wives offering themselves to their hubby's Army buddies, aging moms in shabby corsets shoving their sagging rear ends into the camera. When it comes to contemporary porn, you don't have to look like a porn star to be sexually desired. Indeed, porn stars no longer look like porn stars. The image of Jenna Jameson, America's most famous professional porn star (and a best-selling author)—with her comically huge breasts, overextended blond extensions, and artificially tanned skin—has been supplanted by the new face of pornography: a pale, naughty, 19-year-old with A-cups and a bad haircut, her face illuminated only by the bluish glow of her Mac.

This populist, utilitarian quality of homegrown porn is now obligingly mimicked by threatened professional porn productions: bald, one-off quality, whitewashed by unfiltered lights, sickly hues, and indifferent composition. This amateur aesthetic pervades porn where the viewer is put directly in the scene: always hard core, mostly close-ups, no plot or dialogue, just screwing. Some of the most popular sites of the past five years—the Bang Bus, Captain Stabbin, Mike's Apartment—all feature vignettes based on the same premise: the pornographer plays a pornographer and the actresses play eager actresses who, either willingly or with a bit of cajoling, have sex with the pornographer (without musical accompaniment). Seasoned porn stars, to succeed, must now play the role of amateur, aspiring porn stars.

GAIL DINES, AUTHOR of *Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality*, frets that the overwhelming exposure to emotionless, rapacious sex on the Internet will socialize men to find degradation of women sexually arousing. She writes,

Porn is actually being encoded into a boy's sexual identity so that an authentic sexuality—one that develops organically out of life experiences, one's peer group, personality traits, family and community affiliations—is replaced by a generic porn sexuality limited in creativity and lacking any sense of love, respect or connection to another human being.

First, I have yet to see a single credible study that links proliferation of pornography to an increase in abuse of women. More important, the sort of sex that Dines envisions—where respect, love, and civic connections are merged into erotically rewarding experience—is utopian (and not perhaps all that enticing). Dines ignores the fact that men behave differently than women. It wasn't just Ward Cleaver-type stuffiness that prompted generations of dads to warn their daughters not to get into cars with boys. Dads are grown men, and they know that when it comes to sex, most men will take every inch a woman yields.

If the shadowy cabal of Internet pornographers posited by Dines were not able to use 30-second clips of porn as bread crumbs to entice men away from their true sexual personas, what sort of "authentic sexuality" would males possess? Dines seems to have in mind a Rousseauistic pygmy race of sexually neutered males; perhaps many feminists (and perhaps many fathers of daughters, and perhaps many sensible and civilized people, for that matter) would applaud this emasculated masculinity as progress—but we're never going to achieve it. While sexual aggression and the desire to debase women may not be what arouse all men, they are certainly an animating force of male sexuality. They may be unattractive and even, if taken to extremes, dangerous, but they're not, perhaps alas, deviant. Leaving aside for the moment the argument that some things that might be sordid and even ugly can also be arousing and satisfying, the main problem with the new anti-porn critics is their naive assumption that if only we could blot out Internet porn, then the utopia of sexual equality would be achieved. But equality in sex can't be achieved. Internet porn exposes that reality; it may even intensify that reality; it doesn't create it.

This isn't to argue that pornography is harmless or even that it shouldn't be censored: its pervasiveness clearly exacerbates the growing moral nihilism of our culture. But removing pornography won't alter the unlovely aspects of male sexuality that porn depicts and legitimizes. The history of civilization would seem to show that there's no hope of eradicating those qualities; they can only be contained—and checked—by strenuously enforced norms. And given our à la carte morality and our aversion to cultural authority—a societal direction made plain by porn's very omnipresence—I wouldn't put much faith in enforcement.

Even the crudest of online porn captures only a slice of the less-than-uplifting aspects of the sexual experience, because porn not only eschews but actively conceals this singular truth: the most brutalizing aspects of sex are not physical. This is made plain by the great, filthy, but far from pornographic *Last Tango in Paris*, which Pauline Kael described as the "most powerfully erotic movie ever made." In Bernardo Bertolucci's story, Paul, played by an age-ravaged but still sexually menacing Marlon Brando, decides to rent a flat in an attempt to escape his grief over his wife's recent suicide. When Paul goes to look at an empty apartment, he meets Jeanne, a petite 20-year-old bride-to-be who is also searching for an apartment. The two have sex without even knowing each other's names, and this begins their four-day encounter.

Paul insists that the two meet only at the apartment, only have sex, and say nothing about their lives. Jeanne halfheartedly accepts (she constantly comes up against Paul's rules, begging for more details about him and offering unsolicited morsels about her life). Paul works out his grief by debasing himself and her. "He demands total subservience to his sexual wishes," Kael writes. "This enslavement is for him the sexual truth, the real thing, sex without phoniness." In one scene, Paul asks Jeanne if she would be willing to eat vomit as proof of her love for him. Adoringly, she says yes. Jeanne experiences the full brunt of Paul's sexual aggression and violence when, while she attempts to resist, Paul pulls down her jeans, pins her to the floor, and has rough anal sex with her, using butter as a lubricant.

Jeanne accepts all of Paul's manic pronouncements, sexual roughhousing, and torment, either because of her own naïveté or, perhaps, as a response to Paul's authentic desperation. When Paul's wife's body is finally ready for burial, he gives up the apartment and tells Jeanne that he wants to know her name and he is ready to love her. As the picture of Paul comes more sharply into focus, Jeanne ultimately rejects him not because of his brutishness, but because of his banality. Paul is a morose wash-up, a widower in his 40s who runs a flophouse. His excessive masculinity quickly withers when exposed to the air outside the barren flat.

What makes *Last Tango* so devastating and resonant is not the sex acts, for which the movie is often remembered, but rather the common but annihilating emotions that fuel them: desperation and loneliness. It's the clash between vulnerability and indifference that transpires after sex that is so savage. This is what Kael called "realism with the terror of actual experience." The most frightening truths about sex rarely exist in the physical, but instead live in the intangible yet indelible wounds created in the psyche. Go try to find that on the Internet.

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