



Pornography and the End of Masculinity

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In his new book, Robert Jensen forces the reader to face the music about the effects of a porn industry gone gonzo and the need to reassess the trappings of masculinity as the source of increased violence against and degradation of women.

I have always been part of the collective liberal progressive libertarian value system that accepts pornography as a legitimate expression of the First Amendment. Part of that thinking is that women participate in porn films of their own free will and that porn often represents fantasies -- though sometimes quasiviolent or degrading -- that people actually have. So as long as people are merely *acting* in porn films and there is no coercion, or law-breaking, it is acceptable.

But I've changed my mind. No, I'm not a prude, or anti-sex. Nor do I think there should be a national campaign to snuff out all porn. In fact, I sometimes watch certain kinds of porn. But what has become clear to me is that, under the guise of the First Amendment, a huge and powerful porn industrial complex has grown out of control. And a big part of its growth is fueled, not just by the internet, but by continually upping the ante, increasing the extremes of degradation for the women in tens of thousands of films made every year. I am convinced, although it is, of course, difficult to document, that the huge audiences for porn and the pervasiveness of the themes and behaviors of degradation are having a negative impact on the way men behave and the way society treats women.

Sexism and attitudes toward women were supposed to have gotten better after the 1960s and the feminist movement. The sons of boomers were going to be different. And while perhaps that is true in some cases, what we have instead is more violence against women and more social acceptance of demeaning male attitudes and behaviors that would have been considered out of bounds 20 or 30 years ago. As a society, we've gone backwards.

Part of my thinking on pornography has been shaped by seeing what is on the internet myself, and part, by reading Robert Jensen's powerful and provocative book, excerpted below: *Getting Off: Pornography and the End of Masculinity*. Jensen has convinced me that something as powerful as the porn industry and its sexual extremism must not be kept under the rug due to liberal shoulder-shrugging about the First Amendment. The porn industry should not enjoy our collective denial in terms of its real-world impact on women -- and men -- simply because we might be

berated by First Amendment purists or be uncomfortable grappling with complex issues of sexual expression.

The debate must be pushed, and the consciousness raised. Many will say, don't mess with the issue because it's a slippery slope and could lead to the repression of other freedoms. I've concluded we need to take that chance. Male attitudes are potentially being shaped by ugly and sometimes disgusting abuse toward women. And tens of thousands of young women are being seduced and intimidated into lives of extreme public humiliation on-screen. The impact on their lives over the long run could be devastating.

The advent of Gonzo

One phenomenon in porn is the ascension of Gonzo films. There are two styles of films -- one are features that mimic, however badly, the Hollywood model of plot and characters. But the other, Gonzo, has no pretensions, and is simply the filming of sex acts, which, Jensen writes, while also occurring in features, are "performed in rougher fashion, often with more than one man involved, and more explicitly degrading language, which marks women as sluts, whores, cunts, nasty bitches and so on."

The Gonzo films, which have come to dominate the industry, also emphasize the newer trend of sexual acts, which include: double penetration -- anal and vaginal -- and ass to mouth, or ATM, where anal sex is followed by sticking the penis in the women's mouth. In addition, many of these films include men, often in multiple numbers, ejaculating into the faces and mouths of the women performers. The women usually swallow the semen, but also can share it mouth-to-mouth with a female partner. For Jensen, the most plausible explanation of the popularity of these acts is that women in the world, outside of pornography, don't engage in these acts unless forced. "Men know that -- and they find it sexually arousing to watch them in part because of that knowledge."

As Jerome Tanner, porn film maker, explains, "One of the things about today's porn and the extreme market, the gonzo market, is so many fans want to see much more extreme stuff that I'm always trying to figure out ways to do something different. But it seems that everybody wants to see a girl doing a double penetration or a gang bang. ... It's definitely brought porn somewhere, but I don't know where it is headed from there."

Mitchell Spinelli, interviewed while filming *Give me Gape*, adds: "People want more. They want to know how many dicks you can shove up an ass. It's like 'Fear Factor meets Jackass.' Make it more hard, make it more nasty, make it more relentless."

Jensen clearly decided in writing his book that the often overwhelming reality of the

behavior and values of the porn industry must be experienced by the reader, at least in written form, to understand what the issues are. Thus, in the book, he describes porn scenes, quotes dialogue in the porn films, and includes interviews with porn actors to help capture what they are thinking. Some of this is a little hard to take. Here is one example:

Jessica Darlin tells the camera she has performed in 200 films, and she is submissive. "I like guys to just take over and fuck me and have a good time with me. I'm just here for pleasure." The man who enters the room grabs her hair and tells her to beg the other man. She crawls over on her hands and knees, and he spanks her hard. When he grabs her by the throat, she seems surprised. During oral sex, he says, "Choke on that dick." She gags. He grabs her head and slaps her face then forces his penis in her mouth quickly. She gags again. The other man duplicates the action, calling her a "little bitch." Jessica is drooling and gagging; she looks as if she might pass out. The men slap her breasts, then grab her by the hair and pull her up. Later in the scene, "One man enters her anally from the rear as she is pushed up against the couch. The other man enters her anally while his partner puts his foot on her head. Finally one grabs her hair and asks her what she wants. 'I want your cum in my mouth,' she says. 'Give me all that cum. I want to taste it.'"

Jensen writes, "In researching the porn industry, one of the most difficult parts is writing about the women who perform. Men see women in porn films as objects of desire (to be fucked) or ridicule (to be made fun of.) When porn performers speak in public, they typically repeat a script that emphasizes that they have freely chosen this career because of their love of sex and lack of inhibition." Nina Hartley is one former porn star who frames her experience in the porn industry as empowering -- a feminist act of a woman taking control of her own life. But Jensen notes that while "we should listen to and respect those voices, we also know from the testimony of women who leave the sex industry that often they are desperate and unhappy in prostitution and pornography but feel the need to validate it as their choice to avoid thinking of themselves as victims."

Robert Jensen -- radical man

So that you understand, Robert Jensen is a true radical. His positions on masculinity, race and pornography are way out of the mainstream. He thinks that concepts of masculinity make men less than human and should be junked. "Men are assumed to be naturally competitive and aggressive, and being a "real man" is therefore marked by the struggle for control, conquest and domination. A man looks at the world, sees what he wants and takes it."

In writing his book, he turns to one of the most vilified feminists, Andrea Dworkin, as his guide. One of Dworkin's books, *Intercourse*, enraged many readers. "In it, Dworkin argues that in a male supremacist society, sex between men and women constitutes a central part of women's subordination to men. (This argument was

quickly and falsely simplified to "all sex is rape" in the public arena, adding fire to Dworkin's already radical persona.)" But Jensen embraces Dworkin for best understanding pornography and notes that "her love for men was so evident."

Like many stubbornly pure radicals who in the end have provoked change, Jensen, by sheer dint of the power of his arguments, forces one to examine the contradictions and the consequences of our acts, assumptions and opinions. And, by the way, Jensen has a different definition for radical, preferring the Latin "root" for its meaning. "Radical solutions are the ones that get to the root of the problem." For Jensen, the question becomes: "How do we explain the fact that most people's stated philosophy and theological systems are rooted in concepts of justice, equality and inherent dignity of all people, yet we allow violence, exploitation and oppression to flourish."

Jensen's book is a serious effort to deconstruct pornography and connect it to the society in which it grows and, in some ways, dominates. He addresses in detail the arguments that justify porn and the research that may connect porn to violence. His narrative, interwoven in the book, is about a lonely journey to shed the straight jacket of masculinity, and the pain and lack of acceptance that goes with the territory as he relentlessly pushes his ideas into the public domain.

In the end, the book grapples with a fundamental question. "If pornography is increasingly cruel and degrading, why is it increasingly commonplace instead of more marginalized? In a society that purports to be civilized, wouldn't we expect most people to reject sexual material that becomes ever more dismissive of the humanity of women? How do we explain ... increasingly more intense ways to humiliate women sexually and the rising popularity of the films that present those activities?" Jensen concludes: "... this paradox can be resolved by recognizing that one of the assumptions is wrong. Here it is the assumption that the U.S. society routinely rejects cruelty and degradation. In fact the U.S. is a nation that has no serious objection to cruelty and degradation."

Robert Jensen is on a quest. And he has taken a major step forward in his journey in producing a book that the reader can't run away from or casually dismiss. It is filled with facts, data, intelligent observation and analysis, as well as examples of the raw product of an industry gone gonzo. I know this may sound like a cliché, but I guarantee that after reading this book, almost no one will think about pornography in the same way again.

Excerpt

This essay is excerpted from Robert Jensen's new book, Getting Off: Pornography and the End of Masculinity, published by South End Press. Jensen also has helped

produce a slide show in PowerPoint with a script about the feminist critique of pornography. For information on how to get a copy, email stoppornculture.

After an intense three hours, the workshop on pornography I have been leading 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 men's 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 in 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 feel. 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 pornographic reality. It is one thing to deal with acts, even extremely violent acts. It is another to know the thoughts, ideas, and fantasies that lie behind those acts.

People routinely assume that pornography is such a difficult and divisive issue because it's about sex. In fact, 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.

Why it hurts

This doesn't mean that all men take sexual pleasure in cruelty. It doesn't mean that all women reject pornography. There is great individual variation in the human species, but there also are patterns in any society. And when those patterns tell us things about ourselves and the world in which we live that are difficult, we often want to look away.

Mirrors can be dangerous, and pornography is a mirror.

Pornography as a mirror shows us how men see women. Not all men, of course -- but the ways in which many men who accept the conventional conception of masculinity see women. It is unsettling to look into that mirror.

A story about that: I am out with two heterosexual women friends. Both are feminists in their 30s, and both are successful in their careers. Both are smart and strong, and both have had trouble finding male partners who aren't scared by their intelligence and strength. We are talking about men and women, about relationships. As is often the case, I am told that I am too hard on men. The implication is that after so many years of working in the radical feminist critique of the sex industry and sexual violence, I have become jaded, too mired in the dark side of male sexuality. I contend that I am simply trying to be honest. We go back and forth, in a friendly discussion.

Finally, I tell my friends that I can settle this with a description of one website. I say to them: "If you want me to, I will tell you about this site. I won't tell you if you don't want to hear this. But if you want me to continue, don't blame me." They look at each other; they hesitate. They ask me to explain.

Some months before that someone had forwarded to me an email about a pornography site that the person thought I should take a look at -- slutbus.com. It's a website to sell videos of the slutbus. Here's the slutbus concept:

A few men who appear to be in their 20s drive around in a minivan with a video camera. They ask women if they want a ride. Once in the van, the women are asked if they would be willing to have sex on camera for money. The women do. When the sex is over, the women get out of the van and one of the men hands the women a wad of bills as payment. Just as she reaches for the money, the van drives off, leaving her on the side of the road looking foolish. There are trailers for 10 videos on the website. All appear to use the same "plot" structure.

In the United States there are men who buy videos with that simple message:

Women are for sex. Women can be bought for sex. But in the end, women are not even worth paying for sex. They don't even deserve to be bought. They just deserve to be fucked, and left on the side of the road, with post-adolescent boys laughing as they drive away -- while men at home watch, become erect, masturbate, obtain sexual pleasure, and ejaculate, and then turn off the DVD player and go about their lives. There are other companies that produce similar videos. There's bangbus.com, which leaves women by the side of the road after sex in the bangbus. And on it goes.

I look at my friends and tell them: "You realize what I just described is relatively tame. There are things far more brutal and humiliating than that, you know."

We sit quietly, until one of them says, "That wasn't fair."

I know that it wasn't fair. What I had told them was true, and they had asked me to tell them. But it wasn't fair to push it. If I were them, if I were a woman, I wouldn't want to know that. Life is difficult enough without knowing things like that, without having to face that one lives in a society in which no matter who you are -- as an individual, as a person with hopes and dreams, with strengths and weaknesses -- you are something to be fucked and laughed at and left on the side of the road by men. Because you are a woman.

"I'm sorry," I said. "But you asked."

In a society in which so many men are watching so much pornography, this is why we can't bear to see it for what it is: Pornography forces women to face up to how men see them. And pornography forces men to face up to what we have become. The result is that no one wants to talk about what is in the mirror. Although few admit it, lots of people are afraid of pornography. The liberal/libertarian supporters who celebrate pornography are afraid to look honestly at what it says about our culture. The conservative opponents are afraid that pornography undermines their attempts to keep sex boxed into narrow categories.

Feminist critics are afraid, too -- but for different reasons. Feminists are afraid because of what they see in the mirror, because of what pornography tells us about the world in which we live. That fear is justified. It's a sensible fear that leads many to want to change the culture.

Pornography has become normalized, mainstreamed. The values that drive the slutbus also drive the larger culture. As a *New York Times* story put it, "Pornography isn't just for dirty old men anymore." Well, it never really was just for dirty men, or old men, or dirty old men. But now that fact is out in the open. That same story quotes a magazine writer, who also has written a pornography script: "People just take porn in stride these days. There's nothing dangerous about sex anymore." The editorial director of *Playboy*, who says that his company has "an emphasis on party," tells potential advertisers: "We're in the mainstream."

There never was anything dangerous about sex, of course. The danger isn't in sex, but in a particular conception of sex in patriarchy. And the way sex is done in pornography is becoming more and more cruel and degrading, at the same time that pornography is becoming more normalized than ever. That's the paradox.

The paradox of pornography

First, imagine what we could call the cruelty line -- the measure of the level of overt cruelty toward, and degradation of, women in contemporary mass-marketed pornography. That line is heading up, sharply.

Second, imagine the normalization line -- the measure of the acceptance of pornography in the mainstream of contemporary culture. That line also is on the way up, equally sharply.

If pornography is increasingly cruel and degrading, why is it increasingly commonplace instead of more marginalized? In a society that purports to be civilized, wouldn't we expect most people to reject sexual material that becomes evermore dismissive of the humanity of women? How do we explain the simultaneous appearance of more, and increasingly more intense, ways to humiliate women sexually and the rising popularity of the films that present those activities?

As is often the case, this paradox can be resolved by recognizing that one of the assumptions is wrong. Here, it's the assumption that U.S. society routinely rejects cruelty and degradation. In fact, the United States is a nation that has no serious objection to cruelty and degradation. Think of the way we accept the use of brutal weapons in war that kill civilians, or the way we accept the death penalty, or the way we accept crushing economic inequality. There is no paradox in the steady mainstreaming of an intensely cruel pornography. This is a culture with a well-developed legal regime that generally protects individuals' rights and freedoms, and yet it also is a strikingly cruel culture in the way it accepts brutality and inequality.

The pornographers are not a deviation from the norm. Their presence in the mainstream shouldn't be surprising, because they represent mainstream values: The logic of domination and subordination that is central to patriarchy, hyper-patriotic nationalism, white supremacy, and a predatory corporate capitalism.

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