



Trigger warnings and the porn studies classroom

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FORUM

Trigger warnings and the porn studies classroom

Journalists, administrators, scholars, and activists have debated whether trigger warnings (or content warnings) – short disclaimers used to make online spaces more accessible to users managing trauma – should be used in college classrooms. Scholars who teach pornography should be central to this debate, because we teach and study material that some view as uniquely traumatic. Yet the discussion so far has marginalized porn studies by lamenting how trigger warnings throw the non-pornographic status of canonized texts into question. In this piece, I propose three ways in which porn studies might reframe the trigger warning debate in order to open up discussion among porn scholars and the larger academic community.

1. Porn professors already use trigger warnings, whether they want to or not

The suggestion that professors issue disclaimers for classroom materials may seem like a new imposition to those teaching canonized literature, but it is an issue almost all porn professors have been asked to consider. Because pornography has been defined in popular discourse through references to danger, regulation, and trauma, students come to porn classrooms prepared to see something shocking, and porn professors must work within this structure. Most academic porn scholars challenge the societal de-contextualization of pornography, studiously re-contextualizing it as part of filmmaking, popular culture, labour, and sex education.

Constance Penley, whose pioneering class on pornography as film and popular culture intentionally avoids making an exception of pornography through the use of warnings and disclaimers, nevertheless writes: ‘it helps that “porn” is in the title of my class – no one can say “I wasn’t expecting it!”’ (2013, 197). Indeed, under the University of California, Santa Barbara’s Associated Students Senate (2014) proposal, which provided sample trigger warnings as a list of terms – ‘Rape, Sexual Assault, Abuse, Self-Injurious Behavior, Suicide, Graphic Violence, Pornography, Kidnapping, and Graphic Depictions of Gore’ – Penley’s course title counts as a trigger warning.

Anti-porn feminists, however, trade on porn’s association with discourses of triggering and trauma by designing presentations to ‘have “impact”, especially for women who “haven’t seen much if any pornography”’, using decontextualized images to provoke trigger-like emotional responses that Clarissa Smith and Feona Attwood call a ‘sex panic style’ (2013, 48). When used in an anti-porn context, trigger warnings may actually prime viewers to be traumatized, as they remind viewers that pornography is societally sanctioned as damaging, and ask them to look out for trauma in themselves as they view decontextualized porn images.

Because all porn scholars must work within the existing preconception of porn as a potential trigger, the study of pornography presents a test case for the uses and

meanings of academic trigger warnings. If trigger warnings' ultimate goal is to give students the proper context to approach difficult material, academic porn scholars are trigger warning experts. However, if the goal of the trigger warning is to help students identify certain material as traumatizing, anti-porn feminists are its most experienced practitioners.

2. Trigger warnings are a strategy of self-regulation similar to those used by commercial media industries

In the United States, media industries have often self-regulated to avoid government regulation, creating the boundaries of 'mainstream' and 'adult' media production in the process. Porn scholars often study histories of self-regulation, within and outside the adult industry. The University of California, Santa Barbara proposal compares trigger warnings with the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) ratings system, which is apt because online trigger warnings can be seen as a form of self-regulation undertaken by bloggers to appear respectable and evade outside regulation. However, while the MPAA ratings system was one of several strategies used by Hollywood film studios to avoid US government regulation, independent bloggers on Tumblr and other sites use trigger warnings to evade corporate regulation in the form of outright bans on explicit content. Online writers who deal with controversial content are accustomed to being suddenly regulated by the owners of their blogging services, who in turn regulate their bloggers to avoid government and consumer attention; LiveJournal and Tumblr have both been the subject of blogger panics due to changes in corporate ownership and self-regulation practices (Bley 2009; Daniels 2013). Within this system, the application of trigger warnings to classrooms frames academic knowledge production as a form of commercial media production that must be voluntarily self-regulated to avoid outside scrutiny and liability. This framing of classrooms as sites for litigation may account for trigger warnings' more bureaucratic incarnations, such as the now-redacted advice from Oberlin College's Office of Equity Concerns that suggested the use of trigger warnings as an appropriate response to the high incidence of sexual assault on college campuses. However, as Penley argues, disclaimers may target, not protect, a class (2013, 197). Adopting the self-regulation model of commercial media industries, moreover, frames secondary education as a commercial enterprise, with students as its consumers as many have argued.

3. Like 'pornography', trigger warnings reorganize texts in response to new media

Walter Kendrick argues that pornography is 'not a thing but a concept [...] an imaginary scenario of danger and rescue' (1996, xiii), which served to justify excluding certain audiences from certain forms of information, 'for their own good', when the democratizing effects of print culture's 'promiscuous representation' (1996, 33) threatened to destabilize Victorian social hierarchies. Like the discourse of 'pornography' in the Victorian era, online trigger warnings describe not a set of prohibited texts or subjects, but a practice of organizing texts in a new media culture of promiscuous representation. Rather than dividing and classifying allowed and controlled texts, as 'pornography' did, online trigger warnings argue for a particular relationship between authors and readers.

Trigger warnings are an understandable response to the notoriously exclusionary organizing principle for online texts, popular on message boards like 4chan's random image board /b/. In these spaces, the story goes, anonymous users can post any text or image without responsibility, while consumers of online texts are considered responsible for controlling their reactions. A binary of consumers emerges: those who remain stoic escape notice by the community, while those who complained face the judgment that they clearly do not belong 'on the Internets', and attract further abuse for 'feeding the trolls'. Trigger warnings use an imaginary scenario of danger and rescue to argue for a change to these terms: authors who employ them imagine themselves benevolently protecting readers, who are imagined as potentially traumatized by online or offline abuse. In this system, authors take partial responsibility for their readers' experience, although users are also held responsible for deciding whether or not to consume a text, and calls to manage online emotions continue.

Offline trigger warnings present an argument about the new organization of texts in the age of the internet, as well as a new scenario of danger and rescue. Polemics against student oversensitivity in the wake of trigger warning proposals present an academy in need of rescue from students, activists, affects, and identities that originated online. If medium-specific activist strategies like the trigger warning would just stay online, and out of the realm of print culture that academia has long called home, maybe other digital threats to scholarly tradition – including massive open online courses (MOOCs), low student attention spans, and the destabilization of academic hierarchy – would also go away. This is an unintuitive scenario of danger and rescue. While women, young people, and the lower classes were in need of protection from disturbing material in Kendrick's model, now young people, feminized 'Social Justice Warriors', and less-educated online masses must be kept from contaminating the protected academy with online cultural norms.

Just as pornography became a symbol of utopian and dystopian visions of print culture, panics over trigger warnings contribute to debates over the meanings of digital discourse. Now, as in the Victorian era, danger and rescue justify keeping elite knowledge inaccessible to the masses, serving to uphold old hierarchies in the face of new media. Debates over the status of trigger warnings that exclude pornography threaten to do the same.

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