

Professing porn or obscene browsing? On proper distance in the university classroom

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How should pornography be taught? When two English literature academics, Mark Jones and Gerry Carlin, at the University of Wolverhampton, UK, recently showed their students video pornography as part of an English literature course entitled 'Unpopular Texts', the case made the front page of one British Sunday tabloid newspaper. 'What the Dickens Are They Teaching?' intoned the headline, after a student had, apparently, boycotted the lecture in which a pornographic video was being shown and had gone to the local press (Jones and Carlin, 2004: 19). According to the academics, who teach video pornography in the context of a range of 'eclectically offensive' texts ranging from the white supremacist novel, *The Turner Diaries*, to the video nasty *Cannibal Holocaust*:

Watching pornography in a classroom becomes a Brechtian experience, causing discomfort and alienation . . . to debate sexual objectification without examining a specific instance of it seems, in retrospect, ludicrous. (2004: 6)

Their case raises several questions of importance for media and cultural studies. First, should academics show pornographic material to adults in a university classroom? Second, what is the significance of the University of Wolverhampton's English literature's students' old-fashioned choice of video as the medium for examining the genre of pornography? Surely, as Roger Silverstone has pointed out, it is new media that 'are challenging what it means to be human' (2004: 474) and thus, I'd suggest, even more so new media pornography. Third, what are the implications for media studies of video pornography now being taught on an English literature course?

On showing pornography

The current rumbling of a debate within the UK on the showing and teaching of pornography in the university classroom is not new. Pornography, as Jones and Carlin acknowledge, is now a subject for scrutiny within many undergraduate degrees, including law, gender studies, the history of art, women's studies and

cultural studies. In the United States, the teaching and showing of pornographic texts by academics has been an area of contestation for some years. Organizations such as 'Accuracy in Academia' argue, for example, that, 'watching pornographic films, viewing pornographic magazine images, reading pornographic writing, and even making homemade porn flicks, appears to be a growing trend in American academia' (Jablonski, 2001). Dubbed en masse as 'Porn Profs', these academics are said by critics to be eroding the morality of 'our children' (Jarrard, 1998). The area is something of a minefield, as Henry Jenkins, who found himself in the middle of media circus when he taught about pornography at MIT, concludes in 'So You Want to Teach Pornography?':

Good for ya. Go in with your mind open. Make responsible and ethical decisions. Be ready to promote an intellectual rationale for your decisions. And watch your back. (1994: 7)

The question of whether one should show pornographic texts in a classroom as part of a way of critically engaging with the material is, arguably, located within one of the central problematics of pornography: how do we define the pornographic? What one person might view as erotic another might view as downright perversity, so the argument goes. All genres, of course, are notoriously difficult to define, but the boundaries of what constitutes pornography are said to be so porous and differentiated over time and between people and places that actually showing students a specific text can serve to clarify exactly what it is one is critiquing. Indeed, the intellectuals who have often taken the more radical journeys in relation to scrutinizing the ethics of pornography are those who have shocked audiences by actually making us read or watch it. Instead of then wasting time arguing over definitions, we address the text before us. Thus, Andrea Dworkin on her academic tours of universities in the US and UK, promoting *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1989), in the 1980s, read from writing that described women as sexual slaves. Her lectures shocked, disgusted and dismayed student audiences, generating a new wave of women and some men to become involved in questioning the ideology of pornography. Similarly, John Stoltenberg devised workshops that encouraged students to strike up poses that resembled photographs in sexually explicit magazines such as *Penthouse*, *Playboy* or *Hustler*. Participants then talked about how it felt to do the pose and how it felt to watch it (Stoltenberg, 1994). Stoltenberg argued that by having the magazines in the room, it meant he could refer directly to them rather than becoming caught up in speculative and distracting arguments over defining the text. As he argues in *What Makes Pornography Sexy?*:

During a Pose Workshop the word 'pornography' was functionally unnecessary, because the facilitator's words did not have to carry an opinion, speculate on a definition, or imply a valuation; for all practical purposes the facilitator needed to do no more than refer participants' attention to the actual pictures and magazines that had already been shown in the room . . . (Stoltenberg, 1994: 32)

What scrutiny of actual texts or artefacts by academics reveals, argue Jensen and Dines, is that sexuality is represented in pornography through a hierarchical gendered discourses that include elements of objectification, submission and violence, even within mainstream pornography (1998: 99). This, after all, remains embedded in the etymology of the word 'pornography' itself meaning 'writing about sexual slavery'.

Given the huge impact pornography now has on the global cultural economy, with massive profits generated from mediated sexual slavery world-wide (Lane,

2000), to teach about its production, textual representation and consumption on a media studies course would seem to be axiomatic. Yet, many British media studies courses coyly skirt the subject of pornography and very few actually show the stuff. So, one could say top marks to Jones and Carlin at the English Department at the University of Wolverhampton for taking the intellectual initiative, risking censure and showing video pornography to their students. But this brings me on to the second problematic raised by their case. Given the choice, according to Jones and Carlin, between print-based, electronic or videotape pornography, or none, the 'students have always opted overwhelmingly for viewing video' (2004). Inherent in this liberal 'open choice' offered by English lit. academics Jones and Carlin is a naïve elision of media forms, as well as an overly simplistic approach to audiences and the complex body of relations involved in media consumption. This, I would suggest, is a clue to the approach taken by older academic fields, such as English, that are now routinely seeding media study into their courses: although they may include the study of aspects of the media, they do not necessarily include within it the more complex critical approaches and theoretical tools developed within the field of media studies specifically for analysing mass media artefacts. There seems to be an underlying assumption that the genre of pornography, for example, whatever the medium or form under scrutiny, whatever its historical or cultural locale – whether it be word-based or image-based as video, film, still images or electronic – can simply, with the aid of a spot of textual analysis, be reduced to a set of narratives and tableaux of power. There is also the assumption that by somehow taking pornography out of its assumed 'conventional' private context of consumption and showing it instead in the public classroom makes it radically 'Brechtian', as if the discomfort of the experience for its student audience will automatically make its underlying nastiness explicit.

What is missing from this approach, in particular, is a situated and ethical sense of the impact of new media on the body of relations between pornographic texts, and their production and consumption in relation to other media forms and texts. Increasingly, for example, pornography within the medium of video needs to be understood in relation to the impact of electronic game cultures and the Internet. Of course, pornography on the Internet, to some extent, could be understood as an extension, combination or remediation of earlier media such as video or film and photography. Linda Williams (1999) makes a case for this perspective in *Hardcore: Power, Leisure and the Frenzy of the Visible*. She maintains that cyberporn is not a radical shift from previous forms of pornography. The greater move in the history of pornography, she argues, concerned the shift from restricted private viewings exclusively for men, to a '“general public” of sexually interested adults that made possible the later proliferation of on/scenities in the electronic age'. Cyberporn 'may simply be an extension of what hard-core viewing has always offered: a place for “interacting” with non-present, virtual sexual objects. Where they differ is simply in the combination of enhanced control and phantasmatic bodily dispersal within that “interaction” ' (1999: 313).

But, it is not simply about 'enhanced control' or 'phantasmatic bodily dispersal'; neither should pornography on the Internet or in video games simply be seen as part of a continuum or a remediation of the analogue. People's differing relationships to pornography through computer-mediated communications, I would argue, are part of the reconfiguration of something far more fundamental, which requires a rethinking of the ethics of how, within media studies, we approach teaching it. This is evidenced by the obvious mainstreaming of pornography within post-industrial Western societies and the growing impact on the cultural industries in economies entering the global market through information technologies, such as

India. There is now developing a new body of relations between the producers of pornography, the pornographic text and its consumers. In short, the production and consumption of Internet pornography is changing how sexuality is articulated within and between private and public space. Likewise, its production and consumption via the fractured global hypertext of the computer and the world-wide web is changing the relationship of sexuality with time and space, and the place of sexuality and desire within narrative and memory. Emergent technologies are shifting and dispersing our sense of embodied sexuality.

Changing sexual space

How then is the production and use of pornography via new media reconfiguring the articulation of sexuality via time-space distanciation and time-space compression? First, it is changing the body of relations between text and user in shifting the dialectic between how sexuality is articulated within private and public spaces. Archived digitally, for example, Internet pornography takes up much less physical space for its storage: there are no furtive visits to sex shops or explanations to give to partners or children for brown paper packages of videos that arrive through the post. There is no need for magazines to be kept down the back of the sock drawer, or videos in the garden shed. Instead the on-line user has access to a vast public global archive and library of pornographic material, that covers the whole of the 20th century, and includes photos from the 19th century, 'classic' films from the 1970s, and more recently, silent stag films from the 1920s that are now being digitally remastered (see for example, French, 2004; Johnson, 2003). Although much of this must be paid for, much is also free to the user: one recent study revealed that there are 98 million visits in the UK per month to the top five free adult pornography sites (Aitkenhead, 2003: 1).

Internet pornography requires no physical journeys to sex cinemas, or sex shops located within particular geographical spaces demarcated through patriarchal social knowledge and signified by the blacked-out frontage of Adults Only. In contrast, in the global on-line library, there are no separate shelves, highways or 'bad' zones; adult pornographic web sites have parity with others. On the world-wide web, from the perspective of pornography users at least, all web addresses are equal from www.bbc.co.uk to www.playboy.com. Thus the Lycos search engine lists 'Adult' along with the weather. Type in 'skin' to google.com to enquire about dermatitis and you'll get a variety of hits from helpful advice on skin care to sites for rubberwear fetishists. Like a 24-hour supermarket or fast-food store, the Internet can provide the pornographically hungry with a sexual snack 24 hours a day.

Further, the parity between sexual and non-sexual websites, according to Lane (2001: 140–1), also exists between the big pornography businesses and the small, DIY amateur sites. Although many purportedly amateur sites, are of course, not amateur at all, but run by the bigger pornography companies, just as apparently independent music labels are set up by major music corporations (Macdonald, 1999; Negus, 1992). The ease with which digital media technologies allow for the production and distribution of any kind of sexual material has shifted the boundaries of public acceptability. Where before a man may have been too shy to pursue a secret longing to say, defecate on a woman and then strangle her almost to death at the point of orgasm, having beaten her previously with various blunt instruments, the global archive and library can provide, without shame or social embarrassment, fodder for the masturbatory imagination that includes violent rapes and the most extreme and bizarre fetishes, normalizing them within individual and societal sexual and cultural imaginations. Indeed, as Decca Aitkenhead (2003) has

pointed out, this moral rearrangement now means that, because what is seen as 'not normal' now solely seems to concern child pornography and paedophilia, obsessive users of pornography will often cite their use of adult sites on the Internet and their interest in the adult pornography market, no matter how extreme, to evidence their healthy heterosexual sexual interest in adult women. Thus the hegemonic argument concerning pornography is that if it's pornographic and on the Net, it's therefore allowed in the public sphere: therefore, it's OK.

People's use of computer-mediated pornography is also changing the boundaries between public and private spaces, between the sexual private and sexual public. At the beginning of the 20th century, early stag movies were watched in private clubs; later, pornography in the age of the sex cinema was kept to certain urban districts, accompanied by other aspects of the sex trade, prostitution and sex shops. Meanwhile, pornographic magazines, home movies and later videos were consumed in a private sexual space at home. But now, although pornography is arguably less present in public spaces in the form of sex films in specialist cinemas, it is instead more prevalent and accessible in other kinds of public spaces: through fast broadband connections to the desktop computer in the workplace, for example. Around 70 percent of pornographic Internet traffic occurs between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. and, increasingly, the use of pornography by, mostly men, at work, is the cause of disciplinary action, with one in four British companies now sacking people for the use of inappropriate material (Aitkenhead, 2003). Pornography, it would seem, has become, in the public sphere, a weapon of mass distraction.

Changing desire in time

The Internet is also changing the discourse of desire within time and memory. Although instant access is now available to a vast on-line pornography library and archive, it is usually only stored on users' local hard-drives in a temporary memory cache ready to be instantly erased from the memory of the machine, yet remembered within the imagination of the user. Internet pornography is the ghost not in the machine but in the person. Sure, with the right computer know-how it's possible to check the hard drive material that has been erased. But, symbolically, if the user erases the day's pornographic 'history' from the web browser menu, they also erase the possibility of easy discovery by partner, children or flat mate. The official record of browsing history and favourites is gone. Thus, the computer, while allowing easy access for the consumption of pornography within the private domestic environment, simultaneously allows the user to forget their own engagement with mediated sexual slavery, enabling them to keep it separate from themselves within a virtual public space they need not own. In this respect, the Internet makes the use of pornography the most easily kept secret. Perhaps it is this that is also the corollary of the mainstreaming of pornography. A secret that is easy to keep is, after all, barely worth keeping.

Then there are the perceived changes Internet pornography brings in time, in terms of the speed and ease of production and distribution. With a handycam, some willing subject-objects, and a quick-build website, theoretically, a new global porn magazine may be born. While some might argue this allows for a democratization of the production of pornography, it is also, according to others, having an impact on the content in terms of the placing of sexual acts within a narrative. Ironically, it is often the established pornographers of the 1960s and 1970s who are critiquing this aspect of internet porn. Bruce LaBruce notorious director of 'classic' porn films such as *Skin Flick* and *No Skin off My Ass* argues for example:

When pornography was being produced exclusively on film in the 60s and 70s, the emphasis on camera style and narrative and formal mediation of content – the artistic considerations – were as important as capturing the sexual moment, which today has become the singular, all-consuming focus. (2000: 12)

There is also the impact on narrative and content in terms of the speed with which the consumer can download pornography into their living room, theoretically, moving seamlessly, endlessly, from image to image, site to site, in a way that users cannot with film or video or magazines. On the Internet, the consumer can endlessly browse and click, browse and click, from anonymous sexual object to anonymous sexual object, while the contradictions of production are less material and less evident, and the provenance of the images unknown. With the Internet, especially with the speed of broadband connections, the re-enactment of pornographic desire is endless. In terms of narrative, a magazine has a beginning, a middle and an end; and a video likewise, however flimsy the pornographic plot. But, unlike a book, or a film, the overall narrative of the Internet is unknowable: there is only a seemingly infinite number of possible openings and choices: you don't like what you see? Click, browse, discard and start again. With Internet pornography, the user must keep seeking through the screen the ultimate two-dimensional image in an endless enactment of desire, a fractured and dispersed hypertextual sexual narrative.

So, how to teach porn?

Thus, to return to the issues raised by the English literature academics, Jones and Carlin at the University of Wolverhampton, in teaching video pornography, their case is an illustration of the mainstreaming not only of pornography, but also of media studies. Media and cultural studies have come of age to the extent that English literature professors are teaching what we teach. So what is the next step for media and cultural studies? Do we copy them? No.

A key component of approaches taken within media studies is a concern with the contemporary world. Thus the key to thinking ethically about how and why we teach about pornography within media studies, I would argue, lies not in screening extracts of hardcore video in a lecture theatre, however well chosen and contextualized, but rather in enabling media students to think critically about the contemporary impact that pornography has now it is produced, mediated and consumed via the computer. By placing new technologies at the centre of how we teach pornography, we begin to unravel how pornography is articulated through and by old and new technologies, and how the latter are fundamentally and irrevocably changing the body of relations between text, producer and consumer. Further, to enable students to think critically about this, we and they need to think about how to browse computer-mediated pornography in the university classroom.

So, is the next step, the truly Brechtian act, to take pornography out of the private domain and project 'Adult' sites from the world-wide web with the aid of a laptop and data projector in the university lecture theatre and try to critically browse with 180 students, complete with Microsoft Windows and the faint purring of the hard-drive? Or, should we teach them pornography in a multi-media lab, each clicking on the images on screen with their own mouse? Anyone who has taught any element of multi-media in a lab setting where computer terminals are present knows how students interact with the computer, not the teacher. They go their own distracted way, tuning in from time to time to pick up clues, before getting hopelessly lost and having to be rescued. I doubt if collectively accessing pornography in this way would elicit any kind of critical judgement.

One important key, I would suggest, in terms of how we teach computer-mediated pornography in the university classroom, is that these changes to sexual spaces, and time and memory, are understood not only as geographical or social affairs. Roger Silverstone, drawing on Luc Boltanski's (1999) discussion of the moral implications of distance, argues for a moral understanding of the broader changes wrought by new technologies in terms of time-space distancing and time-space compression. What is created through computer-mediated pornography is perhaps what Silverstone and Boltanski have observed and conceptualized in relation to the mediations of people in other cultures through electronic communications more generally: this is improper distance. With this 'the other(s)' engaged in mediated sexual acts via the web are without real proximity or provenance. Subsequently, to critically understand this and its moral implications, what we require is proper distance:

. . . [this] implies and involves a search for enough knowledge and understanding of the other person or culture to enable responsibility and care, as well as to enable the kind of action that, informed by that understanding, is in turn enabling. We need to be close but not too close, distant, but not too distant. (Silverstone, 2004; see also Silverstone, 2003)

But how does this actually apply to an understanding of the teaching of computer-mediated pornography in the classroom?

In practice, it means making explicit the moral implications of time-space distancing in terms of some of the effects on the public and private domains of sexuality described here. It means developing in students an awareness of the content of the web, as well as an awareness of its production and contexts of consumption. On the course I teach, Ethical Media, in which students develop their own studies considering the ethics of censoring race-hate sites, the morals of displaying atrocity and the ethics of pornography, I make explicit to students the various ethical arguments for showing or not showing pornography to adults in the university classroom. How, I ask them, should we do this within the university? Would it be right to do this? Our server won't let them access certain sites and, as a learning community with a rich mix of students and staff from different cultural and religious backgrounds, we aim to provide an environment that feels safe to both students and staff; also, it could be in breach of our equal opportunities code. If we frame the discussion of Internet pornography in terms of proper and improper distance, considering deeply the implications, choices and impact of accessing pornography, then what, I ask, is the proper distance for addressing the improper distances that computer-mediated pornography creates? For the moment, I suggest that they begin by having the choice to find and access web pornography somewhere else, such as at home, where, should they wish to, they can find examples of extreme adult pornography. They can consider whether they wish to bring in examples and why. Then, we'll critically discuss their choices and their study and research in the seminar. This I would suggest is 'close but not too close, distant but not too distant'. Perhaps this is as it used to be in English Literature – didn't we first have to read Dickens and Joyce on our own, in the privacy of our own homes?

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