



Excerpt from the book:

Fondation Scelles, Charpenel Y. (under the direction of), *Sexual Exploitation: New Challenges, New Answers (5th Global Report)*, Paris, 2019.

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PORNOGRAPHY: STILL NOT A LOVE STORY

Towards an understanding of pornography as a particularly violent form of prostitution

Pornography has become omnipresent thanks to the internet, and its codes have pervaded our daily lives through fashion, advertising, the media, etc. By staging violence without strict limits, pornography modifies the behaviour of men towards women and promotes what is commonly known as ‘rape culture.’ It is at this juncture that pornography and prostitution coincide: both are instruments of domination that exacerbate relationships of inequality and are complicit in legitimizing violence. Pornography is a specific form of prostitution where sexual acts, performed in exchange for money, are captured on film; that is, filmed prostitution.

Pornography’s reach is global. It’s there, taking up space, money, time – and yet nobody talks about it. It overwhelms our advertisements, our television screens, our clothes, and all that we consume – and yet we pretend not to see it.

We can trace the roots of the mainstream porn industry back to the 1953 publication of the first issue of *Playboy* magazine (Poulin, 2000). In 2006, the company’s sales revenue had reached 97.06 billion US dollars (USD), of which USD 13.33 billion were generated in the US alone. To give a little perspective, the first figure is equivalent to the combined sales revenue of the Big Five tech companies (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft), and the second is considerably larger than the USD 9 billion recorded by Hollywood’s film industry (Poulin, 2009). Pornography is not self-contained, a point exemplified by the greater likelihood these days of finding the Playboy bunny on pencil cases and clothes for little girls rather than on websites ‘for

adults.’ In fact, products derived from the Playboy brand reportedly generate USD 350 million every year (Poulin, 2009); pornography, as such, is only one branch on the sex industry tree (Waltman, 2014). What this particular branch truly entails is the financial remuneration of a person or persons in exchange for sexual acts. It is, fundamentally, a form of prostitution. As a result of modifications in taste and preference manufactured amongst users, the industry’s real growth engine, pornography has contrived considerable growth. Just as with cigarettes, harmful not only to smokers but also those around them, women who are not consumers of pornography are subjected to its logic of violence and hatred towards women (MacKinnon, 2017). Attempts to alter content are incapable of subverting this logic; they are drowned by it.

For several reasons, this text makes a conscious decision not to consider those women who themselves use pornography. Not only do they remain a considerable

minority, but amongst them a significant number do so in the company of a male partner (Waltman, 2014). Lastly, just as with traditional prostitution, pornography is made by men, for men, and using women. Heterosexual pornography is the industry's original form; it is preponderant and essential for an understanding of male–female dynamics. While child pornography is commonplace on the internet, it is already illegal; pornography between 'adults' (even if sometimes they are posing as teenagers or little children) is a form of abuse, just as it seems obvious that underage pornography is a form of violence.

Pornography or Filmed Prostitution

Pornography is inextricably linked to prostitution, if only through its etymology. The word 'pornography' is a combination of the ancient Greek words *gráphos* (drawing, depiction) and *pórnē* (prostituted person). In ancient Greece, the *pórnē* was a sexual slave trapped in brothels and suffered particularly degrading treatment. These women were the lowest social class in ancient Greek society, inferior to married women (who generally benefited from few rights) and so-called 'independent' prostituted persons (freed slaves, migrants, poor widows etc). They were also inferior to male sex slaves, who were not exploited beyond childhood and adolescence (because Greeks preferred adolescents) and who could accordingly visit brothels of these *pórnē* women, who were perceived as sexual objects. As Andrea Dworkin would say, pornography is "the graphic depiction of vile whores" (Dworkin, 1981). In any case, it cannot be dismissed as mere representation; the act is real contrary to scenes in films which are acted. Does one pretend to have sexual intercourse in a pornographic 'film'? Does one simulate urinating on another person? And what about

choking someone? The overwhelming number of close-up shots show that the answer is "no."

In pornography, women and men perform sexual acts in exchange for money. Both producers and/or consumers demand those involved to engage in sexual activity while being filmed, sexual activity that would not have taken place in the absence of material compensation (*Women's Studies International Forum*, January-February 2015). How do we define prostitution? "Engaging in sexual activity for payment" (*Dictionary of the French Academy*). Where it happens, how it happens, whether there are cameras present or not – these alter neither the definition of prostitution nor the reality of the act. "To distinguish pornography from prostitution... is to deny the obvious: when you make pornography of a woman, you make a prostituted person of her" (*Michigan Journal of International Law*, 2005). The only true difference with traditional prostitution is a question of proximity: the sex buyer no longer experiences the sex acts directly, but remotely.

The fluidity of the boundary between filmed and unfilmed prostitution should alert. First of all, women used in unfilmed, traditional prostitution might also be used in filmed prostitution. In a study by Melissa Farley of 854 prostituted women in nine countries, 49% of those surveyed had been used in pornography (*Journal of Trauma Practice*, 2004). Another study carried out with 200 prostituted persons in San Francisco found 10% as having been used in pornography before the age of thirteen, and 38% before sixteen (*Sex Roles*, 1984).

An Increasingly Blurred Line Between Pornography and Prostitution

Procurers and producers of pornography regularly cross the line that separates traditional prostitution and filmed prostitution, and the 1981 documentary *Not a Love Story* demonstrates this. In one scene,

a crowd of men watches an act of prostitution in a theatre. Those engaged in the act are paid, and the club's proprietor pockets the spectators' money, just as a procurer who pays to prostitute someone would. Here, the transaction inherent to prostitution is simply displaced, and this remains true whether it's in front of a stage or behind a screen; the consumer is thus an indirect stakeholder. Catharine MacKinnon notes this circular relationship between pornography and traditional prostitution: the first circulates the idea of a dominant masculine sexuality, and the second allows it to be put into practice (*Michigan Journal of International Law*, 2005).

All it takes is one click to leap from virtual reality to the real world. Porn sites, for example, display geo-localised adverts offering prostituted women in the area (*Poulin*, 2009). "It'll often happen that one minute I'm watching some porn and the next I'm in my car looking for the real thing" explained one sex buyer (*Malarek*, 2009). For men who use pornography, there is a very real incentive to go out in search of prostitution. These men may be led to reproduce the acts they have seen on the people whose sexual acts they buy.

Pornography would not exist if prostitution did not. The very term could not have been created. Filmed prostitution and traditional prostitution form a vicious circle whereby the one cannot survive without the other. Without prostitution, there would be no pornography, and as long as there is pornography, there will be prostitution. On the internet, it is an advertisement; on the street, a motivation; and in a brothel, a reference guide.

Pornographic Violence...

Filmed prostitution presents specific and additional acts of violence with considerable impact, well beyond that of traditional prostitution. "Consuming pornography is like drinking salt water...; the more you drink, the

thirstier you become" (*Michigan Journal of International Law*, 2005). What could once satiate one's desires ends up tame and bland in the same way that watching the same things over and over gets boring. The only solution for the consumer is to increase the frequency or intensity of use.

One study on the effects of using pornography was conducted on 160 people divided into two groups. Group A was exposed to non-violent pornography for one hour a week for a period of six weeks; Group B to non-pornographic material in the same manner and over the same period of time. Two weeks after the end of this first period, Group A willingly watched increasingly violent pornographic films, while Group B would stop playback of these films after approximately two minutes. Following this, employees in pornography stores were interviewed by the researchers; they confirmed a noticeable change in preference amongst their regular customers from 'common' pornography to less common or 'atypical' material (*Waltman*, 2014). Over time, use of pornography considered to be non-violent ends up modifying the sexual preferences of users and directing them towards increasingly violent and degrading content.

Scenes of violence in pornography are hardly uncommon. In 2010, a sample of 55 best-selling films on *Adult Video News* was studied over the course of seven months. After an analysis of 304 pornographic scenes, the results were unequivocal: 89.8% of scenes contained acts of violence. Almost half of the scenes (48.7%) presented verbal aggression, the vast majority of which were insults ('slut' and 'whore') and the rest consisting of threats. Verbal violence is the beginning of quasi-ubiquitous physical violence.

Testimonies confirm the reality portrayed on screen. Many women have told of the abuse they suffered under Khan Tusion, who

made a fortune with the series *Rough Sex*. Regan Starr said the following: “I was told before the video – and they said this very proudly, mind you – that at this level most of the girls start crying because they’re hurting so bad... I couldn’t breathe. I was being hit and choked. I was really upset, and they didn’t stop. [...]You can hear me say, ‘Turn the fucking camera off,’ and they kept going.” Nicki Hunter spoke similarly: “They want you to have an emotional breakdown right there. They want to see it all and then they want to fuck you while you’re crying. They will literally beat you up in the process. (*Women’s Studies International Forum*, January-February 2015). Faced with the filming and widespread distribution of such violence, it is hardly shocking to discover that prostituted women in pornography have systematically higher level of post-traumatic stress than those in unfiled prostitution (*Journal of Trauma Practice*, 2004). This trauma is the result of repeated acts of violence and humiliation. Indeed, pornography, in contrast with traditional prostitution, is used by hundreds of thousands of men; as Melissa Farley puts it, “Pornography is infinite prostitution” (Farley, 2011).

A Significant Effect of Pornography: the Modification of Sexual Relations

Pornography, by staging degrading treatment specifically reserved for women, disseminates a perception of female inferiority that has serious repercussions for behaviour towards women in general. The average age for a person’s first contact with pornography is, in the US, 11 (Dines, 2014), and in France, 14, an age that has not stopped decreasing over the years (IFOP, 15 March 2017). Pornography has harmful effects on male consumers and indirectly on their partners (MacKinnon, 2017), who become test subjects for the enactment of recently viewed pornographic scenes. In Australia, doctors have witnessed an increase

in injuries to young girls because of their partner’s attempts to simulate acts seen in filmed prostitution (*News.com.au*, 2 June 2015), and one in four young Australian men consider it normal to force women into sexual acts (ABC, 29 May 2015). Social services have noted resurgence in rapes within partner relationships, in torture, drug administration, and filming and video sharing without prior consent (ABC, 29 May 2015). One 23-year-old woman explains: “He said, jokingly, that he’d ejaculate on my face while I was asleep. He wasn’t joking - I woke up with him wanking over me ... I was bullied into trying anal. It hurt so much I begged him to stop. [...] Constant requests to let him film it ... Every single straight girl I know has had similar experiences. [...] Some have experienced far worse” (ABC, 29 May 2015). According to a study requested by the European Commission, one third of adolescents in England admitted to watching pornography and held negative attitudes towards women. 20% strongly agreed with statements such as “It is sometimes acceptable for a man to hit a woman if she has been unfaithful” or “Women lead men on sexually and then complain about the attention they get.” More than 40% of English teenage girls between the ages of 13 and 17 have experienced sexual coercion, 1 in every 5 has suffered physical violence from their boyfriend, and almost half of all girls in England speak of emotional abuse (*The Independent*, 11 February 2015).

Mary Anne Layden discusses several studies and experiments that confirm pornography’s capacity to normalize these myths. In 2000, men, having watched mildly violent pornography, were then exposed to films portraying rape. Their response was to signal the apparent pleasure evident in the victim and indicate that she “got what she deserved.” Another experiment demonstrates that those who have watched filmed prostitution would advocate for the prison

sentence for a rapist to be half the length of that recommended by those who were not exposed to pornography. Finally, according to another study, frequent users had a greater tendency to accept rape culture and violence towards women, and to refuse gender equality (Layden, 2010). This is a culture that permeates every stratum of our society.

Pornography and Rape Culture

There is but a small step separating thought and act. Though all consumers are not rapists, rapists all love pornography. As a general rule, children who bully other children have often themselves suffered abuse. With easy access to pornography, any child can witness sexual violence. A study carried out in the US shows that juvenile sex offenders are more likely to have been exposed to sexual violence (42%) than non-sex offenders (29%) (Layden, 2010). Notorious sexual predators and murderers, such as Ted Bundy and Riccardo Viti, have attested to their addiction to pornography. It is not a question of there being a potential rapist and/or murderer in every porn consumer, but rather one of showing how such a quick, easy, and unlimited access to pornography facilitates and even legitimizes it.

Pornography is Prostitution

Whether a particular film shows sexual relations in a respectful way, a degrading way, or even a violent way, does not change in the slightest the fundamentally prostitution-based nature of pornography, just as a trick is a trick, whether on a street corner or in a fancy hotel. What implications might there then be for so-called “feminist pornography”? Well, to begin with, the term itself is an oxymoron: one cannot defend the cause of women while exploiting them. Prostitution is intrinsically violent. More than two thirds of prostituted women suffer post-

traumatic stress disorders at levels equivalent to that of war veterans or torture victims (*Journal of Trauma Practice*, 2004). Dr. Muriel Salmona tackles this very point by making clear that situations of prostitution are multi-traumatic when the violence is repeated and prolonged, this constituting a serious violation of not only psychological and physical integrity but also of fundamental human rights. What’s more, she links this to pornography, which “stages an ‘eroticization’ of hate, violence and humiliation” (Salmona, 6 December 2014).

Sexual abuse is ever-present for the duration of the life of any person in prostitution. Studies agreed in finding that 60-90% of prostituted women had been victims of sexual abuse in their childhood or adolescence (Poulin, 2005). These acts of violence are perpetuated throughout all activities within prostitution. Finally, financial difficulties trap those women in the sex industry, pornography, and traditional prostitution (Waltman, 2014). Unfortunately, what we still do not see to this day are real and effective public policies implemented to tackle this global issue (Jeffreys, 2010; Ekberg, 2004; Raymond, 2013).

The Logic of Pornography: an Instrument of Domination

Pornography and sexual freedom are strictly incompatible given that the former undermines the latter by refusing the institution of gender equality, which Kathleen Barry notably identified as essential (Barry, 1984). For, as long as gender inequality is sustained, female–male relations will continue to resemble those of possession rather than mutual and equal exchange.

This power dynamic is particularly noticeable in the types of discrimination that pornography highlights and imposes. The link between male violence towards women and the obsession with women in

pornography might appear vague at first glance, but by specifying the characteristics of women studied and focusing on other groups of discriminated persons the link begins to emerge more clearly. One might first of all narrow the field of study by concentrating on the racism that certain women are subjected to. Racism can be understood as an ideology that establishes a hierarchy based upon notions of race amongst human beings and further disseminates hatred towards those who happen to be situated near the bottom of said hierarchy. For Robert Jensen, “pornography is the only media genre where flagrant racism is routine and acceptable” (Jensen, 2011). The supposed racial hierarchy is a source of sexual excitement. For consumers in the United States, recommended videos include men abusing undocumented Latin-American women (Dines, 2014). There are sites that specifically vaunt the abuse of African migrants: “[...]Life is hard for a black girl, but we don’t care. They’re here to please us how we want[...].” In France, it is notable that the fourth most searched term on PornHub is “beurette,” a derogatory term for a young Arab woman or woman of Arab descent (PornHub Insights, 12 May 2016). Inputting the term into a search engine yields numerous links to pornographic sites, amongst others. Another highly searched term is “Ebony.” It is important to note the violence of language that characterises this type of content. Pornography only worsens already present, often violent, relationships of inequality.

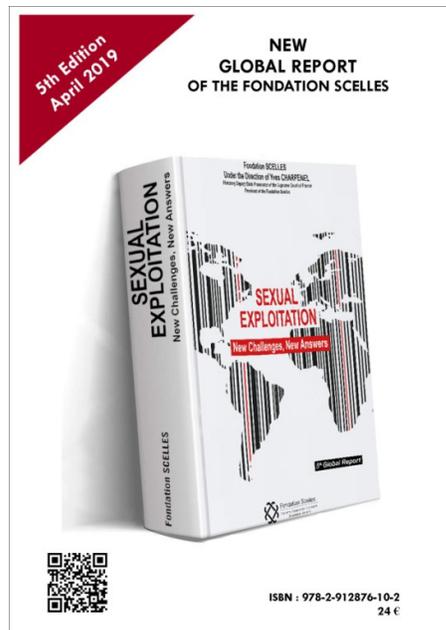
In conclusion, laws exist to preserve human dignity, to incriminate torture and protect reputation, to uphold real equality and censure the incitation of hatred, to penalize prostitution and fight against sex crimes... yet pornography appears all too often to slip through the cracks.

Pornography, or filmed prostitution, is driven by male demand and constitutes a serious violation of women’s rights, whether they are in prostitution or not. Abolitionist legislations have developed in response to the extensive evidence of intrinsic violence in prostitution which affects women and young girls. To talk of such problems without addressing pornography would be the intellectual equivalent of locking the front door but leaving the key under the mat. The women exploited in pornography are neither mere representations nor fantasy – they are real and must not be left aside.

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The **Fondation Jean et Jeanne Scelles**, recognized as a public utility since 1994 and as a consultative status with ECOSOC, is an independent, non-profit organization based in Paris (France) dedicated to fight the system of prostitution and the exploitation of prostituted persons, through information, analysis, advocacy, trainings, awareness initiatives and legal actions. The **Fondation Jean et Jeanne Scelles** is a co-founding member of the Coalition for the Abolition of Prostitution (CAP International) which was launched in 2013 and today brings together 28 abolitionist NGOs from 22 countries.

The **International Observatory on Sexual Exploitation** is a worldwide hub which allows for information exchange on the system of prostitution. The hub is regularly consulted by French and foreign experts including NGOs, institutions, journalists, lawyers, researchers and those involved in the defense of human rights. The goals of the **International Observatory on Sexual Exploitation** are:

- to analyze all the aspects of the phenomenon: prostitution, sex tourism, procurement, child pornography, sex buyers, human trafficking for the purpose of commercial sexual exploitation...
- to encourage reflection and to take a stand
- to inform the public who are interested in these issues

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