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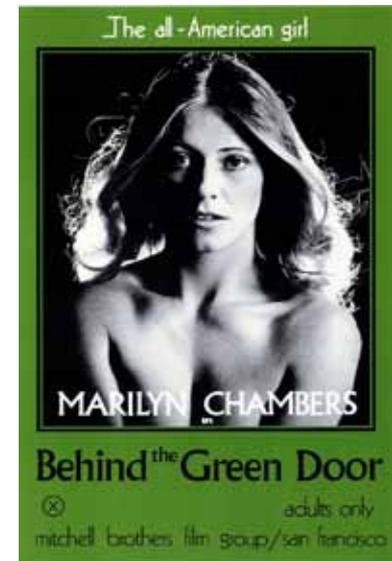
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Porn, Pedagogy, and the Passing of an Icon

Three days after my students and I discussed the hardcore pornographic film *Behind the Green Door* (Mitchell and Mitchell, 1972), its enigmatic star, Marilyn Chambers, passed away. Chambers' passing garnered brief nods from news media, but for the most part, her death faded quickly from national attention. For me, however, Chambers' death seemed to linger, and in some ways, still does. Her death served as a summons for me to think anew, as a scholar whose work often overlaps with the field of porn studies and

as a teacher, about where pornography has been, where it is, and where it's going. Given that I was teaching a course on pornography, this summons could not have been timelier.

The course, "Pornography in Contemporary U.S. Culture," was offered as a senior capstone seminar by the Department of Women's Studies. As the instructor, I approached the course with the explicit purpose of offering Women's Studies students a perspective on pornography that they rarely encounter in our curriculum at UCLA, a perspective firmly rooted in both media studies and sexuality



studies, but also contextualized within the field of Women's Studies itself.

Pornography in the classroom is nothing new—it has been taught by instructors across a wide range of fields, including Women's Studies, and within a variety of universities for quite some time. Despite this, there is still a great deal of concern surrounding discussing pornography in the classroom, particularly if those discussions involve actually viewing pornographic images. As a graduate student instructor, I was cautioned by quite a few of my colleagues against treading this path. "Not until you have a job and tenure," I heard on several occasions, a warning also quite common within the field of porn studies itself. This is probably good advice to heed but, then again, Women's Studies graduate students aren't exactly known for following the path of least resistance. Nonetheless, these cautions prompted me to think carefully about the design and content of the course. How will undergraduate students respond to explicit images? Do the potential pedagogical benefits of showing pornographic images in a class about pornography outweigh the risks? Is it worth it?

On one hand, pornography is discussed as if it were an unstoppable behemoth, always threatening to take over the cultural landscape, described as unavoidable and overwhelming. Print and television news media paint a grim picture—our inboxes are overflowing with porn spam, the Internet is a veritable minefield of sexually explicit content, Cable programming is increasingly more salacious, and companies such as Playboy, Wicked, and Vivid have made porn actors into household names. On the other hand, when it comes to students viewing pornographic images in the classroom, the general consensus seems to be that they can't handle it—undergraduates are simply not emotionally and intellectually ready to encounter such images. These two notions, often simultaneously held, seem to me wholly incompatible.

If pornography is as ubiquitous as many make it out to be, then undergraduates are already handling it; it is already part of the fabric of their lives in some way or another. The argument that undergraduates are not emotionally or intellectually ready to view these images seems more an argument *for* pornography in the classroom than against it.

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If porn's takeover has been greatly exaggerated, then students may be forming opinions regarding a mode of representation, one with significant legal, political, and cultural stakes, without direct engagement with the media in question. This may be especially true for Women's Studies students, many of whom

are presented with arguments regarding pornography in their coursework, with little to no direct engagement with examples of the representations discussed. Students typically have to rely on descriptions of images and these descriptions tend to vary widely according to the viewpoints of the authors.

Engaging directly with porn representations allows students to form their own interpretations and do so from the perspective of a viewer. The students' responses to the media presented in my class ran the gamut of reactions, including amusement, disgust, excitement, and boredom. While each student in the class took the course seriously, thinking carefully about the representations and issues under discussion, and producing solid written work, they were not dispassionate observers and didn't pretend to be. Their reactions reflected not only their individual, honest responses, but also reflected the experience of viewing these images in a group setting.

The group dynamic is perhaps the most important and underappreciated aspect of pornography in the classroom. It provides an opportunity to engage in a viewing experience that has largely come and gone.

The 1970s "porno-chic" era of *Behind the Green Door*, as well as *Boys in the Sand* (Poole, 1971), *Deep Throat* (Damiano, 1972), *The Devil in Miss Jones* (Damiano, 1973), and *The Opening of Misty Beethoven* (Metzger, 1976), was notable for the "assertive publicness of its exhibition."¹ *Deep Throat*, in particular, remains one of the most successful independent films of all time—people of all stripes went to see it, and they went to see it with partners, friends, and family. As Linda Williams suggests, what was so important about *Deep Throat* had less to do with what was going on on-screen, and more to do with the viewing experience itself and the conversations it engendered. She argues, "The most significant show offered up by *Deep Throat*...was taking place in the audience: our social presence to one another at a public screening of graphic, unsimulated sex; our willingness not only to screen sex but to be seen screening it."² With the rise of video and web-based pornography, however, viewership has, in large part, retreated back to the domain of the private.

1. Linda Williams, *Screening Sex* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2008), 127.

2. *Screening Sex*, 142.

Classroom viewership, while certainly markedly different from a public theater, is a form of "be[ing] seen screening it." Viewing pornography in the classroom requires each participant to think about themselves in relation to the other people sitting next to them, to think about themselves as part of a larger audience, and to own their presence in that audience. It requires a taking of responsibility, unlike the private viewership engaged in by so many people and shared with so few. Most importantly, shared spectatorship provokes conversation. As much as I hope my students found what I had to say and what the authors we read had to say about the issue of pornography compelling and instructive, I would speculate that the most significant work this course did was invite dialogue amongst the students themselves, and with the people in their life. As astute as many students' comments in class were, I found myself, as an instructor, more intrigued by the conversations I witnessed spilling into the hallway after class. Students also recounted a multitude of discussions they had with

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roommates, friends, and partners about what we were watching in class. I suspect there is a certain safety in engaging others in conversation about something you viewed for a class, rather than having to fess up to watching something on your own. These discussions often led to broader issues that extended beyond just the topic of sexual representation itself.

The conversation that emerged during the 1970s around pornography, an era in which Marilyn Chambers and *Behind the Green Door* were such an important part, may have come and gone, but the experience of viewing pornographic images in a collective space may be worth reinvigorating. Watching these images as part of a community encourages people to experience and express a broad range of emotions and have them validated. Students did not hesitate to laugh when they found something funny, to utter sounds of displeasure or rear back in their chairs when they found something disgusting or shocking, or yawn or sigh when the images failed to hold their attention. These vocalizations became a

part of the shared space of the classroom. One person's laughter inevitably led to others. It would be easy to dismiss this as simply a by-product of a group-think mentality, but I think it's altogether something different. Yes, pornography is meant to be, and sometimes actually is, arousing. But, it can also be quite funny; sometimes intentionally, sometimes not. Intentional humor and unintentional, laughter-inducing bad dialogue aside, there is something about sex that is... well...funny. Rather than dismissing the giggles that undergraduates occasionally emit when the subject of sex arises in the classroom, we might have to confront the fact that they may know something we've long since forgotten—that while sex can, at times, be profound, or dangerous, or even spiritual, for the most part, it's just not worth taking so seriously. We can recognize the violence, loss, heartbreak, terror, confusion, sadness, and pain that can accompany sex, and still not lose sight of this.

Approaching pornography with a bit more levity, even while recognizing

its potential dangers and limitations, is particularly important in a Women's Studies context. It is common to hear scholars in porn studies bemoan any rehashing of the feminist "sex wars" around the issue of pornography; this is particularly true for scholars trained in film and media studies.³ The field is urged to "move on" and it largely has. The need to "move on" is one I wholeheartedly support, and even invoke in the course description for my class—where I disagree is in regards to how to go about this. In the context of Women's Studies, as well as Gender Studies, Sexuality Studies, Feminist Studies, and their various combinations, the "sex wars" are part and parcel of the formation of our field. The development and consolidation of many Women's Studies courses and programs in the US occurred in the 1970s and 1980s, during the height of these battles; it is unreasonable to think that these debates are not woven into the fabric of our curriculums, mission

3. For an excellent discussion of the "sex wars" and this era of US. feminist theorizing and activism, see Jane F. Gerhard's *Desiring Revolution: Second-wave Feminism and the Rewriting of American Sexual Thought, 1920 to 1982* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

statements, and teaching philosophies on some level. In a Women's Studies teaching context then, it seems crucial to me that in order to "move on" from these debates, we must ultimately pass through them.

Perhaps the reason why this issue has dropped out of our classrooms is because the debates were often so ugly, so divisive. Indeed, many Women's Studies and related programs have avoided the issue altogether, resulting in the graduation of undergraduate majors and minors who are unfamiliar with this critical moment in feminist scholarly and political history. A startling number of the graduating seniors in my class had never heard of the "sex wars," the 1982 Barnard Conference, or Catherine MacKinnon. Whatever "ceasefire" was called, one of the stipulations seems to have been a tacit agreement to just not talk about it anymore.

Why the silence? Have the debates that emerged around sex and sexuality during this era been settled? Are these debates no longer interesting? Have we moved beyond "pleasure and danger" once and

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for all?⁴ Or, have we just ceded this ground to other fields, hoping that they will take care of this messy issue of sex and its representation? Women's Studies courses talk a lot about "sexuality" but, strangely, rarely talk about sex. I am always intrigued that entire weeks devoted to discussing sexuality in classrooms manage to avoid talking about sex altogether. One of the reasons why feminist discussions of pornography in the 1970s and 1980s were so divisive is because they forced frank conversations regarding sexual desires and practices, and these conversations revealed some startling assumptions and viewpoints that drove a wedge in between individuals and communities. Discussing pornography in the classroom provides a space for students and instructors to articulate these assumptions and viewpoints—and, again, to take responsibility for them. There is a strange *Seinfeldian* "not that there's anything wrong with that" mantra that sometimes

4. The anthology arising from presentations at the controversial 1982 The Scholar and the Feminist IX Conference, "Towards a Politics of Sexuality," held at Barnard College, is titled *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), edited by Carole S. Vance.

circulates amongst Women's Studies students; they view passing judgement as antithetical to gender scholarship and activism, particularly in the realm of sex and sexuality. Behind that mantra, however, often lies a different reality, one that needs to be interrogated in the rigorous manner that our curriculum engages other issues in.

The pro-porn/anti-porn dichotomy is a false one—it always was. In that sense, yes, we absolutely must move on and largely have. The issue of sexual representation, however, remains a critical one and needs to be engaged in directly. The belief that students are not ready to confront pornography in the classroom says more about those making the argument than it does about the students themselves. This argument may be merely a guise for the discomfort of faculty and administrators. Within Women's Studies, it may be a guise for the fear that if we reopen the door to pornography, the old disagreements and divisions will inevitably slink in along with it. It may also signal that we still haven't quite figured out how to address the

issue of sex in our curriculums. I certainly don't have it figured out, but this teaching experience has taught me that this conversation is one that students want to be having. If the eighteen students I had in my class last Spring Quarter are any indication, our undergraduates are not only capable of having this conversation but have much to offer it. I hope Women's Studies as a field continues to reinvigorate our commitment to discussions around sex and sexuality, including pornography; otherwise, we will only ensure that the conversation will go on without us.

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