

Does Pornography Presuppose Rape Myths?*

Richard Kimberly Heck

Department of Philosophy, Brown University

Abstract

Rae Langton and Caroline West argue that pornography silences women by presupposing misogynistic attitudes, such as that women enjoy being raped. More precisely, they claim that a somewhat infamous pictorial, “Dirty Pool”, makes such presuppositions, and that it is typical in this respect. I argue for four claims. (1) There are empirical reasons to doubt that women are silenced in the way that Langton and West claim they are. (2) There is no evidence that very much pornography makes the sorts of presuppositions that Langton and West’s explanation of silencing requires it to make. (3) Even “Dirty Pool”, for all its other problems, does not make such presuppositions. (4) Langton and West misread “Dirty Pool” because they do not take proper account of the fact that pornography often traffics in sexual fantasy. The broader lesson is that we need to read pornography more sensitively if we are to understand its capacity to shape socio-sexual norms (for good or for ill).

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Pornography, it is sometimes said, tells lies about women (Longino, 1980, p. 32; Stoltenberg, 1989, p. 106). Indeed, the anti-pornography ordinance championed by Andrea Dworkin and Catharine A. MacKinnon (1988, p. 101) defines pornography as sexually explicit media that, among other things, encodes such messages as that women “experience sexual pleasure in being raped”.¹ These messages are then supposed to be internalized by viewers of pornography, much to the detriment of women. As Rae Langton and Caroline West (1999, p. 306) note, however, little (if any) pornography makes such pronouncements explicitly. We need to be told, therefore, just how pornography encodes the lies it tells.

Answering this question is one central purpose of Langton and West’s “Scorekeeping in a Pornographic Language Game”. L&W, as I shall call them, suggest that the mechanism is what philosophers and linguists call *presupposition*. Someone who asks “Does Jean regret voting for Smith?” does not explicitly say that Jean voted for Smith. But one can only regret what one actually did, so even raising the question whether Jean regrets voting for Smith presupposes that Jean did in fact vote for Smith. Similarly, L&W claim, the sorts of stories told by pornography presuppose such ‘facts’ as that “. . . ‘Gang rape is enjoyable for women’ or ‘Sexual violence is legitimate’ . . .”. Those stories would make no sense, they tell us, if one were instead to presume that women do not enjoy being raped (Langton and West, 1999, p. 312). Moreover, ordinary “public and private sexual conversations” between men and women are alleged to incorporate “the presupposition, introduced and reinforced by pornography, that a woman’s no sometimes means yes” (Langton and West, 1999, p. 314). As a result, some real-world women who attempt to refuse sex by saying “No” are interpreted as saying Yes and so are date-raped (Langton, 1993, pp. 320–1).

It is essential to this argument that (a good deal of) pornography does presuppose that a woman’s “No” does not always mean No. What evidence do L&W offer for this claim? Perhaps surprisingly, they discuss just one actual example of pornography, a somewhat infamous pictorial, “Dirty Pool”, that was published in *Hustler* in January 1983. The

¹Dworkin and MacKinnon famously use the term “pornography” in a ‘thick’ sense, but I shall use it in a morally and politically neutral way (as seems common nowadays): as applying, roughly, to sexually explicit media that, in some sense, and to some significant extent, is intended to facilitate sexual arousal in those who engage with it. That said, I’ll not be particularly careful in what follows about when I’m talking about pornography quite generally and when I’m talking just about what we might call “misogynistic pornography”. Context should make that clear enough.

previously mentioned claims about gang rape and sexual violence are specifically made only about it. But L&W insist, in a footnote, that “Dirty Pool” is “in many ways typical” (Langton and West, 1999, p. 311, fn. 20)—typical, presumably, in the respects just mentioned. The question in which I’m interested here is: Are any of these claims true?

Here, then, is the plan. I’ll argue in section 2 that the empirical evidence contradicts L&W’s claim that heterosexual date rape is often due to men’s failure to recognize women’s attempts to refuse sex. It will turn out, however, that there is a different way that pornography might silence women—if it presupposes what L&W claim it does. I’ll argue in section 3, however, that little pornography does make those sorts of presuppositions. Even “Dirty Pool” doesn’t, or so I’ll argue in section 4. The crucial point will turn out to be one that (other) feminists have been making since the dawn of the anti-pornography movement: that the sort of flat-footed, literal reading of pornography that we find in L&W is at best unimaginative and, more importantly, rests upon a misunderstanding of the nature of sexual fantasy and its relation to pornography (see e.g. Webster, 1981; Rubin, 1984; Butler, 1990; Segal, 1998). Still, one might wonder whether some men might read “Dirty Pool” as L&W do, with potentially catastrophic consequences. I’ll argue in section 5 that this is less likely than one might have thought, but that the people who publish such sexual fantasies nonetheless have a responsibility to make it clear that that is what they are.

We’ll begin by recalling some basic points about presupposition.

1 Presupposition

Contemporary interest in the notion of presupposition is largely due to Sir Peter Strawson. As against Bertrand Russell (1905), who had argued that “The King of France is bald” logically implies that France has a king, Strawson (1950) argued that the sentence instead *presupposes* that France has a king—as does its negation, “The King of France is not bald”. If France has no king, then utterances of “The King of France is [not] bald” do not even express a proposition, or so Strawson claims. A sentence’s presuppositions thus came to be regarded as ‘felicity conditions’ on its utterance: Generally speaking, one ought not to utter a sentence whose presuppositions are not satisfied, since one will, in such circumstances, not actually manage to say anything.

For Strawson, then, presupposition is a ‘logical’ relation between a sentence and a proposition. Robert Stalnaker (1974), by contrast, argued that the more fundamental notion is what a *person* presupposes. It would be better, on Stalnaker’s account, to say that, if someone asks “Is the King of France is bald?” then they make it manifest that *they* are presupposing that France has a king. And, in so far as utterances of that sentence have a ‘felicity condition’, it is not that France should have a king, but rather that it should be mutually presupposed, among the parties to whatever conversation is under way, that France has a king. These mutual presuppositions constitute what is now called the “common ground” of the conversation.²

It is important to appreciate that presuppositions, in Stalnaker’s sense, are not necessarily beliefs, although it is not uncommon for philosophers to operate with what Stalnaker (2002, p. 704) describes as a “simple picture” according to which the common ground does just consist of mutual beliefs. In general, however, presuppositions need not be believed. The most obvious counterexample is explicit supposition. “Suppose Drew is home”, I might say. Then, assuming you are willing to play along, we now mutually presuppose that Drew is home. Thus, you could now say, “Then Sam must be home, too”. The word “too” is a so-called presupposition trigger: Use of that word, in this case, is felicitous only if it is being presupposed that some other conversationally relevant person is at home. That this utterance is now felicitous shows that it really is being presupposed that Drew is home.

This is critical in the present context. L&W propose to use what David Lewis (1979) called “accommodation” to explain how pornography inculcates its misogynistic presuppositions in its viewers: If one is watching a pornographic film that presupposes that women enjoy being raped, then one has no choice but to ‘accept’ that presupposition while watching the film, since otherwise the film would make no sense. L&W, however, speak as if one must *believe* that women enjoy being raped in order to engage with the film. If so, then it would be clear how pornography can “alter beliefs rather directly”, all but forcing its viewers to believe what it presupposes (Langton, 2012, p. 84). But that is just a mistake. The only sense in which one must ‘accept’ such presuppositions is very weak: What you presuppose is just what you are prepared to take

²Stalnaker (1974, p. 49) uses this phrase in his first paper on the topic, but only once, and not in any technical sense. I do not know how or when it became standard terminology. But see Stalnaker (2002).

for granted *for the purposes of the conversation in which you are then engaged* (Stalnaker, 2002, p. 716). So the presupposition that women enjoy being raped, even if one must accept it while viewing a particular film, is (or at least can be) local to the context of viewing. But then it is not clear why it should persist beyond the pornographic ‘conversation’ and affect real-life sexual encounters.³

There is more to be said about this issue (see Heck, 2021b), but what matters for present purposes is just that, when I speak in what follows of viewers who ‘accept’ pornography’s misogynistic presuppositions, it is this technical notion of acceptance that I have in mind. In particular, I am neither claiming nor conceding that someone who engages pornographically with “Dirty Pool” must *believe* that women enjoy being raped, if that is indeed what it presupposes.

2 Presupposition and Silencing

L&W claim that pornography typically presupposes the rape myth that a woman’s “No” doesn’t always mean No. This claim underwrites the thesis, which Langton develops in more detail elsewhere, that pornography ‘silences’ women. She writes:

Sometimes a woman tries to use the “no” locution to refuse sex, and it does not work. It does not work for the twenty percent of undergraduate women who report that they have been date raped. . . . Saying “no” sometimes doesn’t work, but there are two ways in which it can fail to work. (Langton, 1993, p. 320)

The first way is that the rapist might recognize the woman’s intention to refuse but ignore it. That, Langton says, is “simple rape”. The case to which she wants to draw attention is a different one, in which a woman utters the word “No”, but her doing so is not even recognized as a refusal. Indeed, Langton makes an even stronger claim: Somehow, pornography has made it the case that the woman’s saying “No” does not even count as her refusing sex (Langton, 1993, p. 321). That is what Langton calls “illocutionary disablement”, and it is how pornography is supposed to

³Note that this objection has nothing special to do with pornography. It also applies to other applications of Langton’s framework, such as that in Stanley (2016). Note also that the objection has nothing to do with how long it takes for the presupposition to be accommodated, or how many encounters are required for it to take hold. The objection is that presuppositions are not, in general, beliefs, which is uncontroversial.

‘silence’ women: by preventing them from performing certain speech acts, such as refusal (Langton, 1993, p. 324).

As Daniel Jacobson (1995, pp. 76ff) notes, however, there is a serious worry that, if women really do not refuse sex in such cases, no rape has occurred: The woman has not actually declined her partner’s invitation to sex (see also Antony, 2022, p. 118). But that is too quick: The fact that the woman has not declined does not imply that she has consented (Hornsby and Langton, 1998, p. 31). As Nellie Wieland (2007, pp. 451–5) argues, however, if a woman’s saying “No” really doesn’t count as her declining, then that would still seem to reduce the responsibility of date rapists to some degree, in some cases. Ishani Maitra and Mary Kate McGowan (2010, p. 171) reply that, even if “pornography causes (some) viewers to make interpretive mistakes” (e.g., to misinterpret “No” as meaning Yes), that does not by itself show that there is diminished responsibility: There may have been other indications, even clear indications, of the woman’s intentions; surely the man ought to have been sensitive to those. But what if there were no other indications? What if a woman does just say “No” and does not resist in any other way, perhaps out of concern for her physical safety?⁴ The question is especially pressing in cases in which a woman has initially given her consent but later wishes to withdraw it. If a woman at first consents but then says “No” or “Stop”,⁵ and if pornography has made it the case that her doing so does not count as her withdrawing consent, then the man’s proceeding is not rape. But surely it is.

Still, that leaves open the possibility that date rape is often due to women’s refusals not being *recognized* as such. Moreover, if this weaker claim is true, and if pornography is (partially) responsible for men’s not recognizing women’s refusals, then pornography will still be (partially) responsible for some rapes. So we still need to consider this weaker claim.⁶

⁴In many jurisdictions, the law used to require physical resistance by the victim if a charge of rape is to be sustained. Surely we do not wish to go back to that world.

⁵As Maitra and McGowan (2010, p. 168) emphasize, saying “No” is hardly the only way to decline a sexual invitation, and, as we’ll discuss below, it is not even a particularly common one. Langton’s analysis needs, therefore, to extend beyond just “No”.

⁶Why does Langton commit herself to the stronger claim? If the refusal is made but not recognized, then we have a case not of illocutionary disablement but of what Langton (1993, p. 315) calls “perlocutionary frustration”. But if it’s just perlocutionary frustration that pornography causes, then there is no case to be made that pornography suppresses women’s *speech*, which is precisely what Langton is concerned to argue. But

It would be difficult to overstate the extent to which it is, to borrow a term, presupposed among feminist analytic philosophers that date rape is often a result of women's attempted refusals not being recognized as such. Langton obviously endorses this claim: She is attempting to explain how pornography might contribute to date rape by 'silencing' women's refusals.⁷ Jennifer Hornsby (1995) and Mary Kate McGowan (2003) offer explanations of this 'fact' that are closely related to Langton's; Miranda Fricker (2007, pp. 137–42) and Rosa Vince (2018) offer explanations that are quite different; one can only give an explanation of something one takes to be true. I have heard the claim made by many others as well, often in passing, as if it is just something we all know.⁸

This sort of view was common when Langton and her collaborators were writing the papers we have been discussing:⁹ It is known as the Miscommunication Hypothesis (see e.g. McCaw and Senn, 1998). But after more than two decades of empirical work, I think it is safe to say that the Miscommunication Hypothesis has been refuted, as much of a hold as it may still have on 'common wisdom'.¹⁰

Celia Kitzinger and Hannah Frith showed, for example, that women decline sexual invitations using the very same conversational techniques

this issue is not relevant to the present discussion. Both the weaker and stronger claims are false.

⁷Lorna Finlayson (2014, pp. 780–1) suggests that Langton intended her account only as "a *model* or *device*, employed to make a point . . .". But if Jacobson (and many others) had misunderstood Langton that badly, wouldn't she have said so? Instead, Langton and Hornsby (1998, §II) defend the claim, vigorously, against such criticisms. Finlayson's mistake is to think that taking Langton's claim seriously means regarding date rape as a "simple misunderstanding" or a "sit-com-style case of crossed wires" (Finlayson, 2014, p. 781). That is not at all what proponents of the Miscommunication Hypothesis claim.

⁸There are dissenters, such as Louise Antony (2011, p. 399) and, especially, Ginger Tate Clausen (2020), who discusses some of the same studies I will. (My work on this issue pre-dates my awareness of Clausen's.)

⁹While important work had been done on the topic previously, date rape enters the public consciousness only in the mid-1980s, with the publication of the article "Date Rape: A Campus Epidemic" in *Ms.* magazine. A more complete report was published in 1988 as *I Never Called It Rape* (Warshaw, 1988). Date rape was still something of a new idea, then, when Langton was doing her early work on pornography.

¹⁰The miscommunication hypothesis seems to enter the popular discourse through such works as *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*, by the sociolinguist Deborah Tannen (1991). The idea that women and men are so fundamentally different that they are doomed to misunderstand one another surfaces in many other places, as well, both in popular culture (e.g. Gray, 1992) and in academic feminism (as discussed by Echols, 1984).

that they use to decline other sorts of invitations. Women do not normally decline invitations by directly saying “No” in either case:

... [Y]oung women find it difficult to say ‘no’ to sex at least partly because saying immediate clear and direct ‘no’s (to anything) is not a normal conversational activity. Young women who do not use the word ‘no’, but who refuse sex [in other, less direct ways] are using conversational patterns which are normatively recognized as refusals in everyday life. (Kitzinger and Frith, 1999, p. 310)

One might think that refusing sex indirectly would encourage misunderstanding. But, in a much cited passage, Kitzinger and Frith draw a very different conclusion:¹¹

If there is an organized and normative way of doing indirect refusal, which provides for culturally understood ways in which (for example) ‘maybe later’ means ‘no’, then men who claim not to have understood an indirect refusal (as in, ‘she didn’t actually say no’) are claiming to be cultural dopes, and playing rather disingenuously on how refusals are usually done and understood to be done. They are claiming not to understand perfectly normal conversational interaction, and to be ignorant of ways of expressing refusal which they themselves routinely use in other areas of their lives. (Kitzinger and Frith, 1999, p. 310)

That does not yet contradict what Langton is proposing. Her view is that, in a *sexual* context, (some) men’s ability to recognize refusals fails.

But Langton offers no evidence for this claim, and follow-up studies contradict it. For example, Rachel O’Byrne, Mark Rapley, and Susan Hansen used focus groups to explore how men talk about sexual consent and refusal and conclude that “men not only do have a refined ability to hear verbal refusals . . . but also—and importantly—an equally refined ability to ‘hear’ the subtlest of non-verbal sexual refusals” (O’Byrne et al., 2006, p. 133). Melanie Beres found that men and women tend to talk

¹¹Philosophers of language call the phenomenon Kitzinger and Frith describe an ‘indirect speech act’, comparable to implicature. It is a common observation nowadays that much ordinary communication proceeds via implicature rather than via literal meaning, and the same goes for indirect speech acts. Such observations might be used to strengthen the claim in the quote that follows.

about sexual refusals in the same way,¹² focusing on such things as body language and the sorts of indirect refusals identified by Kitzinger and Frith, concluding:

The men I spoke with provide further evidence to support previous arguments . . . that women and men's demonstrated literacy in social refusals generally should also apply to accepting or refusing sexual invitations. (Beres, 2010, p. 12)

There is simply no evidence that the difference between sexual and non-sexual contexts has the significance Langton needs it to have.

None of that yet shows, of course, that men do not sometimes misunderstand women as meaning Yes by "No". But that is also an empirical question, and it too has been studied extensively. Research done in the 1980s seemed at first to show that women frequently offer so-called 'token resistance' to sex, so as not to seem too 'easy' (e.g. Muehlenhard and Hollabaugh, 1988). But there were methodological problems with those studies (see e.g. Muehlenhard and Rodgers, 1998),¹³ and, over the last several years, there has emerged a more refined understanding of just what "No" can and does mean in sexual contexts.¹⁴

In one study, for example, Melanie Beres, Charlene Y. Senn, and Jodee McCaw (2014, p. 768) asked subjects who had some experience with heterosexual relationships to imagine themselves having had a pleasant date, including "a really enjoyable dinner", after which they went back to the man's home to continue the "terrific" conversation.¹⁵ They are "both feeling close" when the man "makes a sexual advance". The woman declines, but they later engage in sex anyway, including intercourse. The question Beres, Senn, and McCaw asked their subjects was: What happened in between? The subjects were invited actively to imagine what their own experience might have been and then to answer the question free-form, at whatever length they desired. (This methodology is known as 'story completion'.)

¹²Muehlenhard *et al.* (2016) note, in a comprehensive literature review, that several studies have converged on this point. Gender differences tend to be small. This leads them to suggest that men's self-reported confusion about women's consent signals is either self-deceived or motivated (Muehlenhard *et al.*, 2016, pp. 476–7).

¹³See note 16 for what those problems were. Note also that the first author of the later paper was also the first author of the earlier one.

¹⁴Note that what is at issue here is *both* what women who say "No" in such situations mean *and* how they are understood by their partners.

¹⁵It's his home in the version of the story given to women. It's not said whose home it is in the men's version, though my sense is that it is also his home.

Nearly 80% of subjects—and about the same percentage of men and women—wrote stories that reflected an initial ambivalence on the woman’s part, one eventually resolved in favor of sex with her new partner (Beres et al., 2014, p. 769). Crucially, for our purposes, none of this 80% thought that the woman’s initial “No” did not mean No. Rather, these subjects recognized that the woman’s not consenting to sex *now* does not preclude her consenting to sex *later*:

In the ambivalence stories, the male characters recognized the possibility of ambivalence and either left it up to the female character to initiate any further sexual activity, or they addressed the source of the ambivalence by engaging in conversation with the female character. (Beres et al., 2014, p. 773)

Stories that involved some sort of coercion were much less common, but, in those stories, the male character did still recognize the woman’s refusal. He just ignored it.

Even in the stories in which the female character fully intended to engage in sex when she first declined—the handful of stories in which she might seem to have been offering ‘token resistance’—what her “No” typically meant was *Not now* or *Not yet*:

... [T]he refusal is directed toward the specific timing of the behavior refused. The refusal is very situational and reflects that the woman is changing things to fit her idea of how she would like the evening and the sex to progress. (Beres et al., 2014, p. 772)

Only 4 of the 252 stories collected—that is, 1.6% of them—featured a token “No” that did not mean No (Beres et al., 2014, pp. 772–3). The authors conclude that “... there is little evidence to support the miscommunication hypothesis, despite its widespread acceptance” (Beres et al., 2014, p. 774).

There is an important but underappreciated distinction at work here. When the women in these stories say “No”, what they mean is “I do not *consent* to sex”. They do not necessarily mean “I do not *want* to have sex”. One can want to have sex but not consent to do so, and one can consent to sex one does not want to have.¹⁶ Having sex with someone who wants

¹⁶There is now a fair bit of work on this distinction. Some of the earliest is by Charlene L. Muehlenhard and Zoë D. Peterson (2005). It was largely failure to respect this distinction that invalidated the early studies on token resistance.

to do so but does not consent is rape. Having sex with someone who does not want to do so but does consent is more complicated, and its ethical status (as opposed to its legal status) would seem to depend upon the person's reasons for consenting.¹⁷ In an established relationship, for example, one might consent to sex as an act of generosity, even when one is not 'in the mood'. In other cases, by contrast, one might want to speak of 'acquiescence' rather than generosity, and the resulting sex, though consensual, can nonetheless be experienced as hurtful and even traumatic (Gavey, 1992). For our purposes, what's most important is that the participants in the studies we have been discussing are quite capable of tracking this difference: In the ambivalence stories, the male character clearly recognizes that the female character does not *consent* to sex while simultaneously recognizing that she might be ambivalent about *wanting* it.¹⁸ The subtlety and complexity of this response is what is most strikingly inconsistent, it seems to me, with the Miscommunication Hypothesis.¹⁹

Presumably, there must be some cases in which refusals aren't recognized as such, but there is scant evidence that this is a significant factor in date rape. As Kitzinger and Frith (1999, p. 310) put it, "... the

¹⁷Jonathan Jenkins Ichikawa (2020) has recently argued that asking whether someone has 'consented' to something "presupposes that the contemplated action is or would be at someone else's behest". That is not quite right: Consenting to surgery is a paradigmatic case, as the term "consent" is now used (especially in a legal sense), and surgery is not always at the doctor's "behest". (Indeed, while working on this paper, I was asked to consent to electronic delivery of certain tax forms, which was at my behest.) What is true is that, in ordinary discourse, 'consent' talk tends to presuppose that the one consenting is the object of a certain form of treatment that would otherwise be impermissible (e.g., a search of one's person or vehicle). But even if that is right, we need some term to describe what I am here calling "consent", and that term is now commonly used in this technical sense. (As so often, ordinary usage is just irrelevant.) Nonetheless, I agree with Ichikawa and many others that use of the term "consent" has tended to distort discussions of sexual ethics by building a gendered asymmetry into it, since the person asking for consent is typically a man and the person giving consent is typically a woman.

¹⁸There are complex issues here about when it is permissible to keep trying to interest someone in sex and when doing so starts to become coercive. Such themes surface in some of the coercion stories that Beres *et al.* received. But none of that suggests that men have difficulty recognizing refusals. (There is interesting research, too, about the ways in which both men *and* women—and, presumably, people of other gender identities—coerce their sexual partners (e.g. Muehlenhard and Schrag, 1991; Struckman-Johnson et al., 2003).)

¹⁹This point also bears upon some other evidence that is often cited in this connection: that men tend to over-estimate women's interest in sex (see e.g. Abbey and Melby, 1986; Abbey, 1991). I'll leave it to the reader to think about how.

root of the problem is not that [some] men do not understand sexual refusals, but that they do not like them". That is, women are date-raped not because 'refusal has become unspeakable for them' but because their refusals are recognized and ignored. Date rape just is 'simple' rape. If so, however, then pornography does not silence women in the particular way that Langton claims it does, because women just aren't silenced in that way.

Pornography might silence women in a different way, however. The Miscommunication Hypothesis clearly has some cultural currency. So, even though it is actually quite rare for men to miss women's refusals, rapists might still be able to exploit people's (false) *belief* that such misunderstandings are common to excuse their behavior. Indeed, there is evidence that some men do just that (O'Byrne et al., 2008). There is even evidence that women sometimes appeal to this same myth to avoid blaming men they know and like for hurting them (Frith and Kitzinger, 1997). None of that is illocutionary disablement in Langton's sense. But if people's readiness to believe that 'consent is complicated' makes it difficult for women to convince others that they were date-raped, then perhaps that would count as illocutionary disablement.²⁰

I conclude that the Miscommunication Hypothesis is itself a rape myth: a falsehood that helps make it more difficult for us to hold rapists responsible for their actions. So, if pornography helps to propagate that myth, then that is a problem.²¹

3 Does (Very Much) Pornography Presuppose Rape Myths?

There is, then, a way in which pornography might 'silence' women *if* it presupposes what L&W claim it does: that a woman's "No" doesn't always mean No. But if pornography is to be responsible, in any significant way, for the prevalence of this myth, then pornography that makes such presuppositions needs to be fairly common. If it were only very obscure and rarely viewed pornography that made such presuppositions, then it would be hard to see how it could contribute very much to the popularity

²⁰Langton (1993, p. 326) makes a suggestion close in spirit, though she does not develop it.

²¹It seems unlikely that pornography is especially responsible for this myth. As Frith and Kitzinger (1997) make clear, what drives it is the idea that men and women are so utterly different that they can't help but misunderstand one another, and that idea surfaces in all sorts of places. (See note 10.) None of that, however, that would excuse pornography's contribution to propagating or sustaining the myth.

of such myths. That, I take it, is why L&W insist that the story “Dirty Pool” tells is “in many ways typical” (Langton and West, 1999, p. 311, fn. 20). What they mean, presumably, is that “Dirty Pool” is typical in how it bears upon the issue of silencing and so in what it presupposes: that a woman’s saying “No” doesn’t always mean No. Indeed, the way that Langton (1993, pp. 307–8) talks about pornography elsewhere suggests that she believes that it often features non-consensual sex. Does it?

There are some pornographic films that, at least arguably, fit this description. One example is *Behind the Green Door*, which was directed by the Mitchell Brothers and released in 1972. Gloria (played by Marilyn Chambers) is taken against her will to a sort of sex club. A mime warms up the crowd while Gloria is prepared for what is to happen to her. As six women lead her through the eponymous green door and onto the stage, an announcement is made:²²

Ladies and gentlemen, you are about to witness the ravishment of a woman who has been abducted. A woman whose initial fear and anxiety has mellowed into curious expectation. Although at first her reactions may lead you to believe that she is being tortured, quite the contrary is true. For no harm will come to those being ravished. In the morning, she will be set free, unaware of anything except that she has been loved as never before.

In fact, Gloria is still frightened and anxious when her “ravishment” begins, but she is soon overcome by her own arousal and before long is participating enthusiastically.

In her groundbreaking study of pornography as film, Linda Williams (1989, p. 157) concludes, unsurprisingly, that *Green Door* is “regressive and misogynist”.²³ But she situates that observation in a complex analysis of *Green Door* and its place in the development of hardcore cinematic pornography. Williams (1989, p. 164) ultimately concludes that *Green Door*’s “celebration of ravishment” is a feature of its ‘separated utopianism’, which she regards as a particularly escapist and misogynistic

²²My attention was drawn to *Green Door* by Linda Williams’s discussion of it, to be mentioned shortly. Williams does not get the announcement quite right. I had to listen to it several times. It is not easy to understand.

²³Darren Kerr (2012) has argued for a more progressive reading of *Green Door*, but I’ll not interrogate the more common reading here.

form of pornography.²⁴ Moreover, Williams emphasizes not just how diverse pornography already was in 1972—the very different films *Deep Throat* and *The Devil in Miss Jones* (both directed by Gerard Damiano) were released the same year—but also how significantly pornography changed over the next couple decades.

Nothing illustrates those changes better than the (truly awful) sequel to *Green Door*, which was released in 1986 (also directed by the Mitchell Brothers), and which revisits many of the themes of the original. Williams (1989, p. 239) remarks that “. . . the revisions of the original film’s narrative quite explicitly aim at modifying its misogyny, making it more acceptable to women and thus to viewing couples”. Williams is here alluding to an important consequence of the domestication of pornography in the intervening years. The emergence of technologies that allowed people to watch pornography at home²⁵ helped to make possible the ‘couples market’, since women were far more reluctant than men to enter the seedy theaters and ‘arcades’ to which pornography was consigned after the early 1970s (Williams, 1989, pp. 171–2). This new market encouraged a softening of pornography throughout the 1980s, as such technologies became widely available (Juffer, 1998). I know of no evidence that very many films from that era—i.e., from when Langton and her collaborators were writing—feature any sort of non-consensual sex. I have seen quite a few such films, and I cannot recall any that involved a woman saying “No” but being understood as saying Yes.

Nor is there any evidence that much contemporary pornography features such scenes. In an effort to document the allegedly ‘violent’ character of much mainstream pornography, Ana J. Bridges and her colleagues examined 304 scenes from the top-selling videos of 2005. Their oft-cited conclusion was that 88% of these scenes included some form of physical aggression, with the perpetrator almost always a man and the victim almost always a woman (Bridges et al., 2010, p. 1079).

²⁴Following Richard Dyer (1981), Williams compares pornography to certain forms of musical, especially ones from the Great Depression. Williams (1989, pp. 156–66) suggests that the ‘green door’ represents a portal to a sexual wonderland beyond the dreary lives of the truckers whose memories the film recounts. It’s the way that this wonderland is presented as an almost magical solution to the problems of ordinary life that marks the film as ‘separated uptopian’.

²⁵The original such technology was the the video cassette recorder, or VCR. These would later be replaced by DVD players and, later still, by the internet.

Their definition of ‘aggression’ has proven controversial.²⁶ But what’s important for our purposes is that, despite their focus on sexual violence (and a broadly anti-pornography orientation), Bridges *et al.* (2010, p. 1080) explicitly note that they “did not observe depictions of rape or scenes that perpetuated the ‘rape myth’ . . .”. Not even one.²⁷

There is surely some pornography that makes the sorts of presuppositions that L&W claim pornography typically makes. But there is no evidence that there is enough of it for pornography to make an especially significant contribution to the propagation of rape myths.

4 What Does “Dirty Pool” Presuppose?

I turn now to “Dirty Pool” itself. I am going to argue that even it does not presuppose rape myths. What this particular pictorial presupposes may not, in itself, seem a particularly interesting question. But “Dirty Pool” has assumed mythological status in philosophical discussions of pornography, in large part because of an actual rape that occurred a few months after it was published, one that was strikingly similar to what “Dirty Pool” depicts.²⁸ It is worth getting clear about what it does and does not portray. My real point, though, will concern *why* L&W are wrong about the pictorial: There are important lessons to be learned from they how misread it.

“Dirty Pool” comprises nine photographs over six double pages.²⁹ It features one woman, a waitress in what appears to be a working-class

²⁶The main difficulty is that they do not distinguish consensual from non-consensual spanking, for example, counting all ‘rough sex’ as aggressive (Weitzer, 2015). See also Tibbals (2010).

²⁷They additionally remark: “This finding mirrors findings in the literature on pornography effects: recent studies have *failed to uncover* a previously robust finding that aggressive pornography increases acceptance of rape and endorsement of the rape myth” (Bridges et al., 2010, p. 1080, my emphasis). This ‘robust finding’ was always controversial, mostly for methodological reasons (MacCormack, 1985; Weitzer, 2015).

²⁸It is often implied that there was some connection between the pictorial and the crime—L&W mention most of that (Langton and West, 1999, p. 311)—but, so far I have been able to determine, no actual connection has ever been established. Even if there was one, it needs argument that its significance is different from that between *A Catcher in the Rye* and the murder of John Lennon. But see note 53.

²⁹As of this writing, the pictorial is readily available online for those interested in studying it. A reasonably obvious web search will suffice. (That almost no-one who writes about the pictorial seems to have seen it is its own problem.)

bar, and four leather-clad men gathered around a pool table. At the lower right on the fifth page are five sentences of text:³⁰

Watching the muscular men at play is too much for the excitable young waitress. Though she pretends to ignore them, these men know when they see an easy lay. She is thrown on the felt table, and one manly hand after another probes her most private areas. Completely vulnerable, she feels one after another enter her fiercely. As the three³¹ violators explode in a shower of climaxes, she comes in a shuddering orgasm of her own and quickly passes out from the ordeal.

L&W (pp. 311–2) claim that the pictorial and associated story presuppose, among other things, “that the female waitress says ‘no’ when she really means ‘yes’”, “that raping a woman is sexy and erotic for man and woman alike”, and that “Gang rape is enjoyable for women”.³²

L&W are reading “Dirty Pool”, then, somewhat as Williams reads *Behind the Green Door*. Although the story begins with coercion and violence, the waitress has a “shuddering orgasm” in the end. One might think, then, that the pictorial doesn’t just presuppose but explicitly says that women sometimes “experience sexual pleasure in being raped” (Dworkin and MacKinnon, 1988, p. 101). And that pleasure is supposed, or so one might think, to be significant: to *excuse* the violence done to the waitress. What her orgasm is meant to reveal, on this reading, is that what looked like coercion was really just brusque seduction.

Such a myth is sadly familiar (see e.g. Littleton and Axsom, 2003). Even victims are vulnerable to its effects. As tragic as this fact is, victims

³⁰L&W (p. 311) misdescribe the text as “captions [plural] to the series of sexually graphic pictures”. They also misquote the text, omitting the final ten words (which, as we shall see, are important). They seem to be relying upon a paper by Catherine Itzin that they cite in this connection: Itzin (1992, p. 30) also omits the last ten words (though she does at least replace them with ellipses).

³¹One of the four men is never shown undressed, though he seems like the ring-leader.

³²L&W’s claims about the pictorial echo those made by Itzin (1992, p. 30), who writes: “The message is that while [the woman] says ‘no’ at first, she really means ‘yes’ for once the men touch her, she immediately gives way to the ‘ecstasy’ [*sic*] of gang-rape”. It is unclear whether L&W regard their characterization of “Dirty Pool” as borrowed from Itzin or as their own. As it happens, Itzin’s characterization is itself borrowed from a slideshow presentation developed by the activist group Organizing Against Pornography, which “was actively involved in the passage by the Minneapolis City Council of an anti-pornography ordinance, which had been prepared by Catharine MacKinnon in 1983” (Minnesota Historical Society, 2019) and which was the publisher of Dworkin and MacKinnon (1988). It seems dangerous to rely, for scholarly purposes, on such a source.

do sometimes experience sexual arousal and even orgasm during rape. Such experiences can be especially traumatic, because the occurrence of these sexual feelings can lead the victim to wonder whether they ‘really wanted it’, something their assailant may be only too happy to suggest (Levin and van Berlo, 2004, p. 85).³³ Now, neither arousal nor orgasm implies consent, but maybe *Hustler* disagrees. Perhaps that, then, is what L&W (p. 311) have in mind when they say that “Dirty Pool” presupposes that the waitress “wanted to be raped and dominated all along”: The pictorial invites us to slide from “She had an orgasm” to “She enjoyed it” to “She wanted it” to “It wasn’t rape”. Every one of those steps is objectionable, but maybe *Hustler* disagrees.

If that were the right reading of “Dirty Pool”, then L&W’s remarks about it might be defensible. But the text that accompanies the pictorial flatly contradicts this reading. The last sentence, recall, reads:³⁴

As the three *violators* explode in a shower of climaxes, [the waitress] comes in a shuddering orgasm of her own and *quickly passes out* from the *ordeal*. (emphasis added)

That is not a description that invites the conclusion that it wasn’t really rape because the waitress enjoyed herself.³⁵ Is the presupposition, then, that the waitress really did want to be *raped*?

³³In one study, for example, 21% of female victims reported having a “physical response” during a sexual assault, even though, in almost all of those cases, violence was used to coerce the victim (Levin and van Berlo, 2004, p. 86). That orgasm during rape is not uncommon seems to be well-known to clinicians and rape crisis workers (see e.g. Atkinson, 2008, pp. 185–8). In response to an inquiry about this heart-breaking phenomenon, one nurse-therapist wrote:

Approximately 1 in 20 women who come to the clinic... for treatment because of sexual abuse report that they have had an orgasm from previous unsolicited sexual arousal. It is not detailed in the (professional) literature because the victims usually do not want to tell/talk about it because they feel guilty, as people will think that if it happened they must have enjoyed it. The victims often say, “My body let me down”. Some however, cannot summon the courage to say even that. (Levin and van Berlo, 2004, p. 85)

It is easy to understand why such experiences might be under-reported.

³⁴Note now the importance of the last ten words (beginning with “of”), but especially the last seven (beginning with “and”). Why were they omitted from the slideshow—or from Itzin’s report of it, if the slideshow included them? (It is not clear from Itzin’s paper whose ellipses elide the relevant words.)

³⁵So I disagree with Cooke (2012, p. 239), who is prepared to concede that “an implied fictional truth of the story is that gang rape is enjoyable for men and women, or at least these particular people”.

There is a *de re–de dicto* ambiguity in L&W’s formulations of what “Dirty Pool” presupposes: Is the presupposition that women sometimes enjoy what they themselves experience as rape? Or is it that women sometimes enjoy what the pictorial does not present as rape (or as having been experienced as rape) but which really is rape (and would be so experienced)? Probably what L&W mean is the latter. One central function of rape myths, after all, is to excuse certain acts that actually are rape by making them seem as if they were ‘just sex’ (Gavey, 2005, esp. Ch. 2). But, again, even a cursory look at “Dirty Pool” makes it clear that it really is presenting the event in question as a rape, and as having been experienced as such by the waitress. All of the photographs imply some level of aggression, with the possible exception of the last. In one, the waitress is restrained with a pool cue pulled across her chest. Some of the photographs (especially the second) clearly convey the waitress’s fear. And yet, some of the same photographs portray the waitress as sexually aroused. So does “Dirty Pool” actually presuppose that (some) women enjoy what *they themselves experience* as rape? even when they are violently restrained? and even though they are terrified?

We’ll return to those questions. First, I want to explore a different way of reading the pictorial.³⁶

No sane person actually wants to be raped. But some people do want to be pretend-raped. What I have in mind is a form of consensual BDSM³⁷ that involves roleplaying situations in which one participant is ‘raped’ by another. People sometimes go to great lengths to make these ‘scenes’ seem as real as possible from within, because the sense of danger and fear is a powerful erotogen for them.³⁸ But no one is really raped on such occasions any more than people are really arrested when children play cops and robbers. The entire episode is not only both consensual and wanted but is also, in an important sense, collaborative (Millar, 2008; Weiss, 2011).³⁹ Moreover, the ‘victim’ is the one who is ultimately in

³⁶Special thanks here to Chris Hill, for forcing a re-think (and re-write) of what follows.

³⁷The acronym is a melange of “Bondage, Discipline, Domination, Submission, Sadism, Masochism”. BDSM is a form of consensual power exchange, typically but not always in a sexual context (Weiss, 2011).

³⁸For a fictional account of such an experience, see Brooks (2006). For a non-fictional one, see @iSlut_ (2010). Note that the latter may be disturbing to some readers.

³⁹I am assuming, of course, that consent has not been violated in some other way, which can and does happen (Stryker, 2011; Millar, 2012). Generally speaking, however, BDSM participants tend to be very explicit about consent, much more so than people not engaged in BDSM (Weiss, 2011, pp. 80ff).

control: They can bring the entire episode to a halt, at any time, and for any reason, by using their ‘safeword’ (or some similar mechanism).⁴⁰

What, then, if we thought of “Dirty Pool” as documenting a consensual roleplay? The pictorial itself would not have to change in any way. But the way we read it would. Its primary perspective would be from within the ‘scene’: A ‘waitress’ is being ‘raped’ by three ‘violators’. But, at the same time, we would know that, back in the real world, what was happening was consensual, negotiated, and wanted by all involved.⁴¹ More importantly, for our purposes, the pictorial would have none of the presuppositions that L&W claim it has. In particular, there would be no suggestion that women who were *really* raped might enjoy the experience. The pictorial might very well presuppose that consensual roleplay in which someone is ‘raped’ can be satisfying for both the ‘rapist’ and the ‘victim’. But that’s just true. It’s why people do it.

There is a long history of ‘radical’ feminist opposition to BDSM, dating at least to the publication of the collection *Against Sodomasochism* (Linden et al., 1982). Fortunately, we need not address such worries here.⁴² Our question is whether “Dirty Pool” *presupposes* that actual women sometimes actually enjoy actually being raped. Roleplayed rape scenes make no such presupposition. It is well understood by everyone involved that there is all the difference in the world—starting with consent and autonomy—between actual rape and roleplayed ‘rape’. If so, however, then it is hard to see why a visual record of such a roleplay should presuppose rape myths, either, so long as it is made clear that what it records is, indeed, a consensual roleplay.

That said, I do not actually want to suggest that “Dirty Pool” is BDSM pornography. Rather, my suggestion is that it is a photo-textual presentation of a *sexual fantasy*. Fantasies are often thought of in terms of narrative, but fantasizing frequently involves visual imagination as

⁴⁰There is a form of BDSM known as “consensual non-consent” that is an exception. That term is sometimes used in a different sense: as applying to ‘scenes’ in which non-consent is pretended. In the sense I have in mind, consent is only granted initially, with the understanding that it is non-revocable for the duration of the scene. Sometimes called ‘playing without safewords’, such activities are controversial even within the BDSM community, and they are very risky (Califia, 2001, pp. 198–200). For a vivid recollection of such an experience—a consensual non-consensual rape—see @iSlut_ (2010). Please note that her account may be disturbing.

⁴¹It is a common observation that participating in BDSM involves simultaneously occupying these different points of view (Weille, 2002; Weiss, 2011).

⁴²For an early response, see Rubin (1984). For more recent philosophical discussions, see Hopkins (1994), Vadas (1995), and Stear (2009).

well. As I read it, then, “Dirty Pool” combines these two elements: It presents a (very short) narrative sexual fantasy, and it depicts the kind of thing that someone who was entertaining such a fantasy might ‘see’ in their own mind. In effect, the photographs serve to prompt, or substitute for, visual imagination.

It’s absolutely crucial here that “Dirty Pool” should present a sexual fantasy and not just a fictional story.⁴³ The difference between these lies not in their content—a fantasy can have any content—but in how we relate to them. A study conducted by Susan B. Bond and Donald L. Mosher (1986) makes this point vivid. Bond and Mosher guided 104 undergraduate women through an imaginative exercise: The subjects were asked to imagine being pursued and raped after leaving the campus library at night.⁴⁴ But there were differences in how the exercise was framed. One group was given a version of the story that emphasized its fantastical nature; another group was given a version that presented it as ‘realistic’. So the one group, in effect, fantasized about being raped while the other group imagined actually being raped. Women in the first group reported experiencing moderate sexual arousal, whereas women in the second group did not. The women in the fantasy condition also reported significantly fewer negative emotions, and many even reported enjoying the exercise. By contrast, the women who were in the realistic condition tended to find the entire experience unpleasant and even disturbing.

It’s a good question just what explains this difference. But remarks that Shen-yi Liao and Sara Protasi make about BDSM pornography are helpful here. When we engage with ‘realistic’ fiction, our emotional responses often mirror our responses to analogous real-life events, even though we know that the fictional events are not real; conversely, our emotional responses to real-life events can be transformed by how we respond to their fictional analogues.⁴⁵ That, indeed, is the so-called ‘paradox of fiction’: We can be deeply moved by the fate of a fictional character and changed because of it (Radford, 1975). Liao and Protasi call fiction that invites this kind of reaction “response-realistic”. They then observe that BDSM pornography is not response-realistic: We are not expected to respond to it “in the same way that we respond to analogous persons and situations in reality”; nor are we expected

⁴³Cooke (2012) attempts to defend “Dirty Pool” without making this distinction.

⁴⁴Bond and Mosher do discuss the ethical concerns one might have about the study.

⁴⁵L&W suggest that this fact is what allows the fictional story told in “Dirty Pool” nonetheless to affect our real-life attitudes (Langton and West, 1999, § IV). That is why it is not enough for “Dirty Pool” to be fictional.

to ‘export’ our reactions to the scenarios portrayed in BDSM porn to analogous real-world situations (Liao and Protasi, 2013, pp. 109–10).⁴⁶

As Nancy Friday (1973, esp. ch. 1) pointed out half a century ago, however, this point applies to sexual fantasies quite generally. Rape fantasies, in fact, are Friday’s stock example: The women who shared their rape fantasies with her are just as horrified by real rapes as anyone else is (Friday, 1973, pp. 116–23). But, for whatever reason, *in the context of fantasy*, they find the idea of being raped arousing.

Many people have a strong reaction, understandably, to fantasies like the one presented in “Dirty Pool”. But I am not arguing (here) that cinematic, photographic, or literary presentations of rape fantasies are or even can be ethically unproblematic. I am not even arguing (here) that privately fantasizing about rape can be ethically unproblematic. Those questions will have to wait for other occasion (see Heck, 2023). My point here is more modest: Neither rape fantasies nor sexually explicit presentations of them *presuppose*, or in any other way imply, that real women might really enjoy really being raped, any more than roleplayed enactments of such fantasies do.⁴⁷ To think otherwise is to conflate fantasy with ‘realistic’ fiction, and that is the fundamental mistake that L&W make in their discussion of “Dirty Pool”.

What can seem so worrying about “Dirty Pool” is its apparent implication that the waitress was not “hurt, terrorised, and psychologically traumatised as a consequence of what her violators did to her” (Langton and West, 1999, p. 312),⁴⁸ so that the pictorial advertises rape as harmless fun. But if we read the pictorial as I am suggesting, then this train of thought can be derailed. True enough: If someone is raped in a ‘realistic’ fiction, then it will be true in the story, even if nothing specific is said about the matter, that the victim was hurt and traumatized. Roughly speaking, it will be true in the story because it would be true in real life (Lewis, 1978). Hence, anything in the story that suggests that the victim was not hurt and traumatized will, other things being equal, partake of and thereby promote rape myths. But, to extend Liao and Protasi’s

⁴⁶Presumably, Liao and Protasi mean situations in which, say, someone is being whipped against their will, rather than situations in which someone is freely participating in BDSM.

⁴⁷It should be no surprise that there are parallels between roleplay and fantasy, since roleplaying is often described as ‘acting out a fantasy’. That, indeed, is why I started this discussion by talking about erotic roleplay. In some ways, roleplay is easier to think about than sexual fantasy.

⁴⁸In fact, as we’ve seen, it’s not so clear that the waitress isn’t portrayed as “terrorised”, but I am now setting that point aside to make a different one.

point, such ‘principles of incorporation’ don’t apply to sexual fantasies: What would be true in real life is irrelevant. The fact that the waitress is not portrayed as hurt and traumatized does not, therefore, show that the pictorial embodies rape myths. Rather, it just reflects the fact that the whole thing is intentionally, unapologetically, and overtly unrealistic, in a way that is not atypical of sexual fantasies. The pictorial contains no messages about real-world rape.

None of that means that “Dirty Pool” is not misogynistic, and I am not claiming that its being fantastical insulates it from criticism. What I have been arguing is just that “Dirty Pool” does not presuppose (or otherwise encode) rape myths. And, to be clear, “Dirty Pool” *is* misogynistic. But that has little to do with the story it tells. Although all of the philosophical discussions of “Dirty Pool” known to me focus entirely on the associated text, it is primarily a *pictorial*.⁴⁹ And what is sexist about it lies very much in the photography: in how the pictorial *visually* presents the fantasy it does. Something similar is true, I would argue, of much visual pornography: What is sexist about it lies, very often, and to a significant extent, in characteristics of the photography. If so, however, then understanding what is sexist about (far too much) visual pornography—indeed, understanding it at all—will require us to analyze it *as photography* or *as film* and not just to focus exclusively on its narrative elements (Bauer, 2015, pp. 85–6; Heck, 2021a).

5 Closing Caveats

So, should we read “Dirty Pool” as a sexual fantasy or as a realistic fiction? There are three reasons to prefer the former reading. The first is that, as we saw above, the pictorial is otherwise hard to make sense of: The men’s attention is said to be “too much for the exciteable young waitress”, who in the end has “a shuddering orgasm”, and yet the men are described as “violators” and the entire episode as an “ordeal”. Such tensions would be problematic in realistic fiction, but they are nothing to fantasy, “where excitement and danger, pleasure and pain, adoration and disgust, power and powerlessness, . . . smoothly fuse and separate out again without damage or distress . . .” (Segal, 1992, p. 70). Even physical impossibility is no obstacle in fantasy.

⁴⁹L&W’s account of what makes “Dirty Pool” objectionable thus seems to have almost nothing to do with the fact that it is sexually explicit, i.e., that it is pornography. (The story is not particularly explicit.)

The second reason is that everything about the pictorial is exaggerated: how the characters are dressed, their facial expressions, and the archetypal roles they occupy. The pictorial is, in fact, almost cartoonish, which is a clear signal that the story illustrated is not just fictional but ‘unreal’ in the deeper sense that it is fantastical. The third reason is more general: It is common, maybe even typical, for pornography to traffic in sexual fantasy;⁵⁰ faithfulness to reality, or ‘response-realism’, simply isn’t a desideratum.⁵¹ That is why L&W’s mistake is so instructive: To fail to attend to the difference between fiction and fantasy is to fail to understand pornography.

But even if I am right that “Dirty Pool” should be read as fantasy, one might worry that some people might nonetheless misread it as realistic fiction. Such people might very well ‘get the message’ that L&W think that “Dirty Pool” is sending, and then “Dirty Pool” would have made some contribution to the propagation of rape myths. Now, anything can be misread. Still, given the harm that such a misreading might do, it seems to me that there is a corresponding responsibility to make it clear that the pictorial in question is, indeed, fantastical and to disclaim the potentially misunderstood ‘message’.⁵² It is at least arguable, then, that it was extremely irresponsible for the publishers of *Hustler* to present a

⁵⁰To be clear, I am not suggesting that *all* pornography is fantastical. Amateur pornography in the ‘home movie’ style and live performances on such sites as Chaturbate account for a great deal of pornography nowadays, and it’s not clear to what extent these should be regarded as fantastical, if at all (see Hardy, 2009). Another important case, because it is so often emphasized by anti-pornography feminists (e.g. Dines, 2010), is so-called ‘gonzo’ porn, a central feature of which is its documentary style (Biasin and Zecca, 2009). But, even if viewers do not interpret such pornography as fantasy, it does not follow that they regard it as indicative of how real-life sex is or should be. Whatever else gonzo may be about, for example, it is about sexual excess and the limits of the body: John Stagliano, who is widely regarded as the creator of the style, once remarked that gonzo treats sex like an extreme sport (Maina and Zecca, 2016, p. 426).

⁵¹One person present at a discussion of this paper suggested that something similar is true of slasher films: that there are generic conventions that, in effect, proscribe attention to the usual consequences of the gory acts portrayed in the film. See also Williams (1991).

⁵²One commentator suggested to me that the need to disclaim this message shows that it is, in fact, presupposed. But presuppositions cannot, in general, be canceled, as implicatures can. It makes no sense to say: “Does Jean regret voting for Smith? I don’t mean to suggest that Jean *did* vote for Smith.” Warning against a misreading does not imply that the misreading is not a misreading.

rape fantasy in that magazine without making it unavoidably obvious both that it is ‘just a fantasy’ and what that implies.⁵³

Some pornographic films do include textual disclaimers of this sort. Unfortunately, they are often similar to the one from Interpol about unauthorized copying—and probably just as effective. A better method, which the feminist pornographer Tristan Taormino uses in her film *Rough Sex 3*, is to have the performers themselves talk about the fantasy they will be enacting, and to do so in such a way as to make its fantastical character clear.⁵⁴

Producers of pornography cannot simply insist that their work is fantasy and blame their audience for not appreciating that fact, as I have heard some do. Pornography has become sex education (Pound et al., 2016), whatever the intentions of its producers, and, to use an old cliché, the freedom that pornographers exercise brings responsibility in its wake.

Still, it is disturbing what a poor opinion many authors seem to have of the critical capacities of ‘users’ of pornography—a dismissive term that I have pointedly avoided. MacKinnon (1993, pp. 16, 17) once remarked, for example, that pornography is “masturbation material” that “does not engage the conscious mind” and “is antithetical to thinking”. The idea seems to be that, by inspiring sexual arousal, pornography disables one’s critical capacities, thereby making it possible for it “to deliver messages about women that in any other form would be seen as completely unacceptable” (Dines, 2010, pp. 87–8).

Surely, however, it is an empirical question how people engage with pornography, and quite a bit of research has now been done on that question (including conceptual work by philosophers).⁵⁵ The results are more encouraging than one might have feared. For example, a 2010 study of Swedish adolescents concluded:

⁵³If there was a connection between “Dirty Pool” and the rape of Cheryl Araujo (see note 28), then we might, for these reasons, want to ascribe some moral responsibility to the publisher, even if I am right about how the pictorial should be read.

⁵⁴A similar technique is sometimes used with ‘taboo’ (incest) porn. The performers appear, out of character, before the scene and explain that they are not related and that they are not condoning real-world incest, just roleplaying a (very common) sort of fantasy.

⁵⁵Besides the papers mentioned in the text, see Loftus (2002), Atwood (2005), Stock (2012), Todd (2012), Barker (2014), Crutcher (2015), Liberman (2015), Ryberg (2015), and Smith et al. (2015).

Our findings suggest that most of our participants had acquired the necessary skills of how to navigate in the pornographic landscape in a sensible and reflective manner. The way they reasoned about the exposure and impact of pornography indicated that most of them had the ability *to distinguish between pornographic fantasies and narratives*, on the one hand, *and real sexual interaction and relationships*, on the other. (Löfgren-Mårtenson and Månsson, 2010, p. 577, my emphasis)

If one is tempted to object that, since Sweden leads the world in sex education, Swedish adolescents may not be representative, then that is very much my point. Moreover, a study of English adolescents came to similar conclusions:

The young people in our research clearly valued the media as information sources [about sex], arguing that they were often more informative, less embarrassing to access and more in touch with their needs and concerns than parents or school sex education. Yet they were not the naive or incompetent consumers children are frequently assumed to be. They used a range of critical skills and perspectives when interpreting sexual content, which developed both with age and with their media experience. (Bragg and Buckingham, 2009, pp. 144–5)

The authors of these studies do not downplay the risk that pornography poses to those who lack such skills, nor the danger that these ‘at risk’ individuals might pose to others. Nor do these studies show that pornography does not have a profound effect upon socio-sexual norms. Their lesson, it seems to me, is just that there are healthy and unhealthy, responsible and irresponsible, ways to engage with pornography, as with everything else. If we care about pornography’s effects, both on individuals and on society, then we should find ways to encourage healthy and responsible engagement (Tarrant, 2015; Lust and Dobner, 2017; Crabbe and Flood, 2021).⁵⁶

⁵⁶This paper is dedicated to the memory of Judy Thomson. Her example and teaching influenced several generations of MIT graduate students, no matter their specific field. We all got ‘Judied’ at some point or other, and none of us will ever forget it.

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