

It's Only Human: Why Humanists Should Support Pornography

By Jennifer Kalmanson

Sex. We're all hard-wired by natural selection to want it. We all fantasize about it, too. So why is there such a cultural prudishness when it comes to pornography? First, let's break down what we mean by the word "pornography," which has been notoriously hard to define. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart stated in the 1964 pornography case [Jacobellis v. Ohio](#) (1964) that, while he couldn't define it, "I know it when I see it."

So, what exactly is pornography? Is nudity pornography? Not necessarily. Culturally, most of us wouldn't consider the Venus de Milo statue to be pornographic, even though it depicts a nude woman. What about actual depictions of sex, then? Does graphic depiction of sexual intercourse make something pornography? If that were the case, then textbooks for reproductive medical science would be pornography, and that's certainly not the case.

What is it, then, that makes us "know it when [we] see it?" The answer lies in the consumer of the pornographic material: when an image, literary passage, or other medium induces arousal in the person interacting with it, then we could argue that it's pornographic. We can argue that it's especially pornographic if it's designed to induce arousal despite cultural inhibitions or even downright disgust at the sexual idea being presented. We can refer to this last category as "weird porn." (It's interesting to note that the biggest consumers of porn are cultures considered the most sexually repressive. [Pakistan is the world's largest porn consumer; in the USA, it's Utah.](#)) Ultimately, porn is about a fantasy of sex, as opposed to actual sex.

Porn goes back a long way in human history. The ancient Greek god Priapus--admittedly a fertility figure--sporting such an outsize erection that he was often portrayed in less than fertility-oriented contexts as well. The erotic connotation of the Priapus imagery continued to be exploited through the Roman Empire in bath-house imagery right alongside frescoes [graphically depicting oral sex](#). As esoteric as is its imagery, the Old Testament's "[Song of Solomon](#)" has often been accused of being pornographic in nature. The Enlightenment French had their "engravings." In our modern era, we have girly magazines, video porn, bodice-ripper romances, and even [slash fiction](#) to titillate our arousal.

It's exactly this diversity in what subject matter someone finds arousing which makes defining (and hence banning) pornography so tricky from a point of law. Leo Tolstoy or F. Scott Fitzgerald likely would have considered a shoe catalog to be porn. This is the backbone of the free-speech argument against banning porn: since it can't be so easily defined, we'd end up banning every type of speech as pornographic.

Legal considerations aside, why are we, as a progressive society, so *squeamish* about sexual fantasy, about porn? We raise issues of female disempowerment, of exploitation. True, there are plenty of underground porn producers who engage in the traffic and abuse of women, but we have laws against trafficking and abuse, so we can prosecute them on those grounds. The legal porn industry is very female-friendly, with most of its big-dollar stars being women, and most of its industry practices (drug testing, registry logs, adequate lubrication, etc.) being dictated by its female stars. The [AVN Adult Entertainment Expo](#) is the porn industry's biggest trade show, held in Las Vegas each January. This year's expo seminar schedule included talks on identifying the safety of sex toys, Adult Protection Health & Safety Services, and even how to counter the misconception that the porn industry is "run by men." If any porn operation is run by men, it would be in the making of gay porn--for these flicks, it's nearly guaranteed that no women are exploited. So, if there exists pornography which isn't exploitative of women, then why are we as feminists often still so uncomfortable with it?

One common feminist fear is that by objectifying women in any sexual way, it makes it easier for men as a group to see women as a group as less than human. While there is some merit to this argument in the sense that male behavior in groups can be dehumanizing of women, especially when there's alcohol involved. However, it's the male behavior here that's offensive, not that they may have in the past viewed porn. Let's go ahead and condemn offensive behavior simply for what it is: jerks behaving like jerks.

Another, deeper fear is that somehow successful female porn stars might actually enjoy their work. It's worth remembering that a porn flick is much more marketable if the orgasms it depicts are genuine. Does a woman who makes a career on her back take unfair advantage of her sexuality for monetary gain? For one thing, working in the sex industry is significantly different from, say, a woman who sleeps around to get ahead at the office because everyone else in her industry is playing by the same rules. A porn star who sleeps with a director to get a role can still be sued for *quid pro quo* sexual harassment by her peer actresses--unfair advantage is still unethical, and still just as illegal in the porn industry as in any other business.

It is perhaps the other side of the "know it when I see it" coin: what turns other people on may be wildly disgusting to ourselves. Who, exactly, is the target audience of E.L. James' [Fifty Shades of Grey](#)? Is it the same audience the Marquis de Sade had in mind when he wrote [Justine](#)? Are these nonvisual fantasies any less pornographic than wondering what it would look like to see an undersized Asian woman "double-stuffed" on camera? What about animated pornography, in which the physically impossible is depicted for the viewer's gratification?

Our comfort level with pornography as a society will track with our comfort level with the full range of human sexual expression. Many people enjoy fantasizing about sexual acts they would never engage in, while others enjoy the reality of engaging in

those acts. Until we are comfortable with the latter, as a society, we'll never really be comfortable with the former.

One might also posit that fear of pornographic fantasy is ultimately a fear of female power--the power of sexual prowess with respect to other women as well as power in the utilitarian sense. Until we're comfortable, specifically, with the idea that a woman in charge of her life can still fantasize about sex with a full range of imagery available to her, we'll never be able to accept pornography as anything other than a "[poem of male desire](#)," and an often crude one at that. If we can just get over our fears long enough to take a peek, we might just find an industry in which women are very powerful and which produces media capable of enhancing eroticism between partners.

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