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# From Jekyll to Hyde: The Grooming of Male Pornography Consumers

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## From Jekyll to Hyde

### The grooming of male pornography consumers

Rebecca Whisnant

The feminist critique [of pornography] asks a simple but devastating question of men: 'Why is this sexually pleasurable to you, and what kind of person does that make you?'

(Jensen 2002)

In contemporary mainstream pornography marketed to heterosexual men, hostile and humiliating acts against women are commonplace. Consumers of such pornography routinely see women treated in ways that most people would neither choose for themselves nor accept for those they care about. While some of these consumers may be sociopaths or utterly unregenerate misogynists, I assume that the majority are neither. Thus, many consumers must experience ethical qualms about at least some of the pornography they encounter and about themselves in so far as they enjoy such material. These qualms pose a threat to their continued enjoyment of pornography. Thus, if they are to continue consuming pornography, they must find ways to silence their ethical concerns. They must, in effect, be groomed to accept sexual dominance and sadism against women.

To groom someone for some practice or function is simply to train or prepare them for it. While this process can be benign, it becomes sinister when one is trained to accept the unacceptable. For instance, individuals who are to be used sexually on a routine basis must be groomed to regard such use as normal: the grooming process employed by pimps and molesters typically involves isolating a victim, undermining her perceptions of reality and breaking down her limits through whatever combination of manipulation and force may be needed. Not only victims require grooming, however; people of normal empathy and conscience must also be groomed to accept and enjoy abusive thoughts, emotions and actions. The abuser too must be groomed – even if he is only a vicarious abuser.

Robert Jensen has observed that 'the danger of pornography is heightened exactly because it is only one part of a sexist system and because the message it carries about sexuality is reinforced elsewhere' (2007a: 103). In a culture that normalizes male sexual aggression against females in a variety of contexts, the typical consumer is pre-groomed to accept such aggression before he ever begins using pornography. In this article, I argue that many pornography consumers

undergo further and more specific grooming as they acclimate to rougher and more openly sadistic materials. This grooming is a co-operative effort involving both the industry and the individual consumer. Both, after all, have something important at stake: for the industry, continued profits; and for the consumer, an important way in which he has come to experience sexual pleasure. In this co-operative grooming process, I will contend, the male porn user becomes both abuser and abused, consumer and consumed.<sup>1</sup>

### Content and escalation

In today's mainstream pornography, aggression against women is the rule rather than the exception. For some initial evidence supporting this claim, one need only survey lists of titles at any online porn portal, or on any website selling adult DVDs: *Border Bangers*, *Disgraced 18*, *Gangland Victims*, *Bitchcraft*, *Gag on my Cock*, *Animal Trainer 20*, *Wrecked 'em*, *Butthole Whores 2*, *Tamed Teens*. The industry further markets hostile treatment of women through publications such as *Adult Video News* (see Tyler, this volume). A content analysis of best-selling 'adult' DVDs – identified through AVN listings – confirms that this is not simply hyperbolic marketing: physical aggression appeared in 88 per cent of all scenes and verbal aggression in 48 per cent (Wosnitzer and Bridges 2007; see also Bridges, this volume).

Thus, both cursory observation and detailed research indicate that hostile, aggressive content is so prevalent in contemporary pornography that it would be hard for a regular consumer to avoid it. In addition, we can consult the consumers themselves, who presumably know better than anyone the content of what they are watching. In online forums, consumers frequently remark on the normality of aggressive, 'over the top' content in today's pornography. Some celebrate this trend and others decry it, but virtually all agree that the trend exists and is unlikely to reverse itself.

Thus, each pornography consumer must somehow come to terms with aggressive content, and consumers no doubt embark on their porn use with varying ethical boundaries. Some may regard any aggression (like slapping or name-calling) as out of bounds, while others may object only if they see obvious, unambiguous signs of non-consent. Still others may think that 'anything goes' as long as it does not involve children. Whatever a consumer's initial boundaries are, however, they are likely to erode over time due to a process of desensitization and escalation. The kinds of pornography he started out using will become boring and he will have to look for something new and different in order to continue getting the same charge.

Many consumers are acutely aware of this escalation dynamic. James, a college student interviewed by Maltz and Maltz, explains that

I need things that are a little more perverse, a little more dangerous, to get the good feeling I'm after. Even just thinking: *This is bad* or *This is really*

*bad*, can pump me up. And nowadays it's not hard to find hard-core with people slapping, choking, cutting, urinating, and even vomiting on someone. I know it's not a good idea to watch that stuff, but I keep getting pulled in for the high.

(Maltz and Maltz 2008: 89)

In an online discussion of pornography in which women are slapped, one consumer observes

I like face slapping and I'm sure many people think that crosses the line and is misogynistic. They're probably right but I am really desensitized to it and I really love to watch the rough aggressive sex.

(Taylor Von Bailey on <adultdvdtalk.com>, posted 1 June 2009)

And in a discussion of torture porn sites associated with kink.com, another writes:

I've skimmed through Whipped Ass and Hogtied and some of Water Bondage and I'm almost blown away. For some reason I've been digging on this kind of stuff lately ... Maybe I'm just jaded to standard porn fare.

(ChodeMasterJ on <adultdvdtalk.com>, posted 18 January 2009)

The pattern of desensitization and escalation is familiar enough to have inspired a joke e-card: a man sitting at his computer says to a woman standing nearby, 'My spring cleaning involves deleting pornography links that are no longer deranged enough to titillate me.'<sup>2</sup>

Thus, as a man's pornography use continues, he will likely be drawn to harsher material that crosses his own initial boundaries. He will encounter portrayals of acts that *he himself* regards – or would have once regarded – as abusive and unethical. In many cases, particularly if he is already aroused, he will respond sexually and masturbate to these new materials. For some consumers, this pattern of arousal and behaviour is disturbing: as one puts it, 'I couldn't believe what was turning me on' (Maltz and Maltz 2008: 17). At stake for such a consumer are questions of identity, values and self-image. If I am aroused by this material and let myself masturbate to it, he may think, then I can't be the kind of person that I thought I was, or that I want to be.

My aim in what follows is to explore some ways in which some consumers deal with these questions. I base much of my analysis on sites such as adultdvdtalk.com, where an outsider can listen in on consumers discussing the material they are using and how they feel about it.<sup>3</sup> This methodology has both advantages and limitations. The main advantage is that, because the discussions are anonymous and occur in a context that is broadly supportive of pornography, it is reasonable to think that consumers will be relatively honest about their thoughts and preferences – more so, at least, than they might be in speaking to a

researcher (particularly a female one). Granted, these are also spaces where the consumers perform for each other and so there may be reason to doubt the absolute truth of all their statements; even so, the discussions reveal common ways in which men relate to one another through pornography and how essential the group dynamic is to the grooming process. The method's main disadvantage is that it is hard to know how representative forum participants are of porn consumers generally. It seems likely that most participants are more than occasional porn users, and men who feel ashamed of their porn use and/or are trying to quit may be less likely to participate. With these caveats in mind, however, the online forums provide a rich vein of material for analysis.

I will also discuss some of the ways that the pornography industry itself encourages men to disregard their own ethical concerns about the treatment of women. These two aspects of the grooming process – how the industry grooms consumers and how consumers groom themselves and each other – are deeply intertwined. It is easy to see how profoundly consumers' thinking about pornography (as expressed in online forums) has been shaped by pornography itself, and the very sites on which these discussions take place are not independent spaces free of industry influence. For instance, the owners of adultdvdtalk.com describe it as 'both a community site and a shopping portal' that aims to 'save you money and make you proud of your love of porn – 'cause, hey, we all like porn and there's nothing wrong with that'.<sup>4</sup> The site makes its money from banner advertising (mostly for online porn stores) and affiliate commissions on links to porn sites.

In what follows, all consumer quotes are taken from the forums at adultdvdtalk.com unless otherwise noted and are identified by the author's screen name and date of posting. All posts are reproduced as written, unless clarity requires the correction of mechanical errors.

### Criticisms and moral ambivalence

While some consumers are engaged in moral thinking about aspects of pornography's content and/or production, it is abundantly clear that some are not. Indeed, some users appear studiously determined to avoid any moral connotation to their criticisms of certain pornography. For instance, a user initiating a discussion of slapping women's breasts frames his query in non-moral terms:

I am not sure where most people (watchers or performers) stand on the use of tit slapping, some think it spoils a scene while some think it enhances a scene.

(Jettyman, 13 May 2009)

The ensuing discussion includes numerous negative comments about breast slapping, but most are non-moral, such as 'It's stupid,' 'Not my cup of tea,'

'Annoying,' and 'Does nothing for me.' Other striking examples of non-moral criticisms occur in a discussion of Max Hardcore, one of the industry's more extreme producers:

Max's early stuff was awesome, but when he started using gynocology tools and using 5th rate girls I had to bail. Any of the Anal Visions and original Cherry Poppers are great ...

(DreadZep, 27 October 2003)

another thing I really hate is how [he] puts those big metal traps jamming the girls mouths open. What a huge turn off. It looks soo stupid.

(DukeAbercrombie, 27 October 2003)

The first commenter above does not articulate why he 'had to bail' from Max Hardcore's later work, but his hearty endorsement of the *Cherry Poppers* series (which portrays a paedophile grooming young girls for sexual abuse) does not inspire confidence. The second commenter is clearer about his reasons, explaining that his objection to jamming women's mouths open with metal traps is simply that it looks stupid.

Some commenters have no compunctions expressing their enjoyment of non-consensual activities. In a discussion of 'A2P' ('ass to pussy,' an unhygienic and dangerous practice that is just what it sounds like), one user enthuses:

One of the cool things about a2p is that quite often the guy will do it and the girl will flinch and seem surprised like she wasn't expecting it ... but by then it's too late!

(Andy2, 2 April 2009)

Other users raise moral questions, but not of the kind we might have anticipated. For instance, the initiator of the breast-slapping discussion winds up his query by asking,

Am I being selfish by wanting a genre of breast slapping ... or should I just carry on buying and hoping that the movie contains some of my fetish. If only I could buy 'Titslapped MILFs' or 'Titslapped Teens' I would know what I was buying.

(Jettyman, 13 May 2009)

His ethical worry does not concern his arousal to seeing men slap women, but rather whether it is unreasonable to want this act specifically advertised so that he can access it more efficiently. Similarly, in a discussion of 'quagging' (fellatio in which women are gagged to the point of making audible noises in their throats), one user relates his own experience:

Just to be fair, I tried it out by throat fucking a girlfriend until she started quagging. It didn't feel very good to me and she never requested it in the future.

(Walter, 20 June 2007)

It is unclear to whom this user is concerned about being unfair, but it does not appear to be his girlfriend.

Some consumers express ambivalence, indicating that they like a certain kind of scene but feel guilty about liking it. One writes directly to producer/performer Jake Malone, enthusing about a particular scene in one of his movies:

[The female performer] hadn't cleaned out her ass sufficiently and the toys got all dirty ... you then asked her to suck it and she did! It was totally crazy and I sort of felt bad for liking it but it was pretty hot in a S&M domination sort of way. Have you ever done any other scenes like that ... ?

(mediasmarts2, 30 December 2008)

In this case, although the consumer 'feels bad' about his enjoyment of a degrading and dangerous practice, he evidently does not feel bad enough not to continue seeking it out. It is also common for commenters to follow a confession of guilt feelings with an immediate rationalization, as here:

I love to watch girls do this atp thing, but I do feel a little guilty. Has the analogy ever been made to NFL football, or wrestling? These are dangerous jobs ... But we all allow it, and we enjoy watching others do it.

(Peter1, 9 December 2007)

Sometimes, however, even a consumer who admits enjoying certain content nonetheless registers an unqualified moral objection to it:

ATP should be outlawed. As much as the little head in my pants loves to see this when he is horny the intellectual brain in my head knows how bad and wrong this act is and the impact that it has on making antibiotics not powerful enough to sustain fighting infections.

(Watcher, 27 March 2005)

And occasionally a commenter expresses a global moral objection to much of pornography's content. For instance, one man complains that most male performers 'behave as if they're capable of posting high scores on the PCL-R [a tool for diagnosing psychopathy]' (spectreman, 29 June 2007). Another agrees:

adult film has gone dreadfully, horribly wrong. It's almost all about aggression and being over the top these days. Honestly, I don't think too many folks actually enjoy watching warp-speed slam-fucking, spitting, quagging,

slapping, choking, every scene ending with the girl rushing to her knees so a dick can be pointed down her gullet, and the like, but that the segment of the public who does, REALLY does.

(bps, 15 February 2008)

Interestingly, this user follows up his own observation that ‘over the top’ content is overwhelmingly prevalent with the puzzling claim that few consumers enjoy such content. His failure to connect the dots is striking: if so few people enjoy this material, then who is buying and using it in such massive quantities?

### Drawing the line

Albert Bandura has described several ‘psychosocial maneuvers by which moral self-sanctions are selectively disengaged from inhumane conduct’ (1999: 193) – that is, ways that people adjust their beliefs and perceptions in order to rationalize behaving in ways that they would otherwise reject as wrong. According to Bandura, one must adopt legitimizing perceptions of the conduct itself (‘it’s not wrong; it’s good and necessary’), of the conduct’s harmful consequences (‘it’s not really hurting anyone’), of one’s own connection to those consequences (‘it’s not my fault’), and/or of the victims who suffer them (‘they don’t matter, they like it, they deserve it’).

One specific ‘mechanism of moral disengagement’ is palliative comparison, in which one contrasts one’s own behaviour with something else thought to be worse. In this way, Bandura says, ‘injurious conduct can be rendered benign or made to appear to be of little consequence’ (1996: 365). Lundy Bancroft, who has spent decades working with men who abuse the women in their lives, observes that such men routinely employ palliative comparison:

An abuser minimizes his behavior by comparing himself to men who are worse than he is, whom he thinks of as ‘real’ abusers. If he never threatens his partner, then to him threats define real abuse. If he only threatens but never actually hits, then real abusers are those who hit. ... If he hits her but never punches her with a closed fist ... If he punches her but she has never had broken bones or been hospitalized ... In the abuser’s mind, *his* behavior is never truly violent.

(Bancroft 2002: 159)

A similar manoeuvre is endemic to the thought processes of many porn consumers. In my review of consumer forums, I came to call it ‘drawing the line’: the consumer defines as abusive, misogynist or otherwise objectionable some kind(s) of pornography that he does not like or use, and what he does use therefore appears (to him) benign in comparison.

Terms such as ‘misogyny,’ ‘abuse’ and ‘brutality’ are used to describe acts that the consumer regards as beyond the pale, while acts that he enjoys are

described as ‘hard-core,’ ‘rough sex’ or, as in the following comment, ‘pushing boundaries’:

[Jake Malone] makes porn that we want to see – porn that is unique in that it pushes boundaries, explores new paths and is harder without being unacceptably brutal.

(bigfoot, 27 April 2009)

Line-drawing becomes essential for many consumers when they assess material as extreme as Max Hardcore’s, but it often proceeds on mysterious grounds. In one discussion of Max’s *oeuvre*, one user draws the line as follows:

Some things of his I love like gaping, speculums, but I have no idea why he would shoot one girl puking into another girls mouth which is being forced open, and piss in a girls mouth. Stuff like that has forced me to look for other material, such as Jules Jordans which is hardcore without being so male dominant.

(Jules\_Jordan\_Saviour, 28 October 2003)

Why forcing a woman’s orifices open with a speculum is merely ‘hardcore’ whereas urinating in her mouth is objectionably ‘male dominant’ remains unexplained.

Using pornography online may lend itself especially easily to palliative comparisons. Once immersed in the world of internet pornography, the user is regularly exposed to a wide range of materials, including many that (at least for now) do not appeal to him. If he is on a portal site with tens or even hundreds of thumbnails and links, and he opts for those that are comparatively innocuous, then he can feel morally superior to those who click on more extreme links. The same goes if he ignores spam or pop-up ads for more extreme material.<sup>5</sup> In short, the online pornography consumer is constantly reminded that, no matter what he is using, there is always something worse out there. (And once the desensitization process kicks in, he will know just where and how to find it.)

### ‘Not my fault’: diminished responsibility

Much social-psychological study of how ordinary people acclimate to wrongdoing has focused on behaviour such as soldiers’ killing in war, citizens’ participation in genocide and ethnic cleansing and employees’ involvement in destructive corporate behaviour (Waller 2002; Grossman 1996). Other vital insights have come from research on subjects in controlled settings, including well-known undertakings such as the Stanford Prison Experiment and the Milgram studies (Zimbardo 2007; Blass 2004). Among the most consistent findings in this body of research is the importance of diminished responsibility – that is, of seeing oneself as not connected to the harmful effects of one’s actions.

Responsibility can be either *displaced* onto some other person or entity, or *diffused* throughout a larger group or network.

Displaced responsibility can take a number of forms, some of which are not available to pornography consumers. Unlike soldiers, experimental subjects or corporate employees, porn consumers are not subject to any external authority; they cannot claim to be 'just following orders' or 'doing a job'. Similarly, there is no professional identity that countenances the behaviour in question as good or required (as in 'This is what a soldier must do'). Finally, unlike the soldier or corporate employee, the porn consumer's livelihood is not at stake. However, one compelling way to displace responsibility is easily available to the porn consumer: namely, reasoning that if a woman was hurt in the making of the material he is using, that is not *his* doing. He did not hurt her and is not hurting her now. All he is doing is masturbating to films and images. In seeking out and enjoying depictions of abuse, he is something more than a mere bystander, but less than a perpetrator. By viewing the producers and/or male performers as solely responsible for any abuse, he can ignore ethical questions not only about his own patterns of arousal but also about his economic and ideological support for an abusive industry.

When responsibility is diffused, the person sees himself as having, at most, a tiny share of responsibility within a large group or complex institution (such as an army or a corporation). As William Shaw puts it, diffused responsibility allows individuals to

see themselves simply as small players in a process or as cogs in a machine, over which they have no control and for which they are unaccountable. ... 'It's not my fault,' they think. 'This would happen anyway, with or without me.'

(Shaw 2008: 26)

For the online porn consumer, responsibility is diffused through the entire vast network of other such consumers, many of whom he encounters in chat rooms, discussion forums and the like. The importance of this network cannot be overstated, since it not only reminds the consumer constantly that he is only one of a huge number of men doing the same thing, but also provides him with support and reinforcement for his particular preferences. The initiator of the breast-slapping discussion provides a clear illustration of this dynamic, chiming back in toward the discussion's end with this comment: 'It's nice to see some replies that are positive ... I was starting to think something was wrong with me for admitting I like it' (Jettyman, 31 May 2009).

The anonymity of the online environment also contributes to a sense of diminished responsibility. As Phillip Zimbardo puts it, 'Anything that makes a person feel anonymous, as if no one knows who he or she is, creates the potential for that person to act in evil ways – if the situation gives permission for violence' (2004: 29). In one study, for example, subjects in a 'deindividuated'

condition – with their appearance concealed, identified by numbers rather than names – delivered twice as much shock to 'victims' as did subjects in the individuated condition (*ibid.*). In this respect, clicking on a link to whoredestroyers.com while sitting alone in one's apartment is easier than checking out a similarly titled film from one's local movie rental shop. And no doubt it is easier to discuss one's appreciation of aggressive porn content as 'Jettyman' or 'Cumwhipper' rather than as Fred or Tom.

Both anonymity and diffused responsibility are powerfully suggested by the icon for another porn user discussion board, forum.yobt.com. It shows three white male figures grouped together, pictured from the shoulders up. All three faces, however, are blank and featureless. The men are anonymous and indistinguishable, but they are all in this together.

### 'I felt she was into it': consumers' thinking about the women in pornography

As briefly noted earlier, another key mechanism of moral disengagement is to blame and dehumanize the individuals who are being harmed (for instance, the enemy population in war, or the targets of racial discrimination). Pornography's dehumanization of women has appropriately been the target of sustained and passionate feminist criticism. Because this dynamic so powerfully shapes consumers' thinking about the women in pornography, and thus about their own responses to material in which these women are degraded and harmed, I will begin this section by briefly discussing some of pornography's most common messages about the women who are in it.

The power of dehumanizing labels to disinhibit aggression is well established. In one study (Bandura *et al.* 1975), subjects were given a plausible cover story and told to shock other individuals. In some trials, subjects 'overheard' the experimenter referring to those to be shocked (students from another college) as 'animals'. In other trials, the subjects heard the experimenter saying that the other students 'seem nice', and in still others no labelling occurred. Even this single, overheard instance of labelling had an enormous effect on the subjects' willingness to aggress, with those labelled as 'animals' being shocked the most, those labelled 'nice' shocked least. As feminists have long observed, pornography labels women in degrading and dehumanizing ways: as animals, worthless whores, cum dumpsters, fucktubes, pathetic bitches and much more. A typical consumer would encounter a number of such labels within a single session of using pornography, let alone over weeks, months and years of use.

Pornographers also shape consumers' perceptions by what I call 'interpreting the images' – that is, explaining in accompanying text (or DVD commentary) that a woman who appears not to be enjoying something actually loves it. For example, a photo of performer Jaclyn Case shows a man's hand behind her head and a penis pushing into the side of her mouth, distending her cheek. She looks sideways at the camera with an expression that is at best bored and jaundiced; to

this observer she appears worried and sad.<sup>6</sup> The text just under the photo reads, 'Jaclyn Case looks like she loves that juicy cock!' On the site fuckherthroat.com, the text accompanying one set of promotional images reads:

Amber Rayne almost does a good job of pretending to be a cute and innocent girl. That is until she suddenly has a cock shoved down her throat and her hunger for cock is too hard to resist. Watch her eyes light up as her throat is brutally pounded by his hard piece of meat!

(<http://fuckherthroat.com/tr/index.php>, accessed 17 August 2009)

The images show Ms Rayne's face covered in semen and mascara, with penises shoved forcefully into her mouth and cheek. Her eyes, far from 'lighting up,' appear vacant and dead. Through such consistent reinterpretation of women's expressions and reactions, the consumer learns to distrust the evidence of his own eyes and ears. He learns that things are not as they seem in the world of pornography and that an omniscient commentator knows better than he does (perhaps even better than the woman herself does) what is really going on.<sup>7</sup>

A similar dynamic can be seen even on comparatively soft-core sites. For instance, in the summer of 2008 the owners of GodsGirls, an 'alt' pin-up site in the Suicide Girls mould, sent out this message to site members:

WARNING! Did we mention that things have gotten a little racier around the site since you last logged in? You can now see longtime favorites like Catra and Stiletto doing things that no one ever thought would be done on a site like GodsGirls. Of course, we're still keeping it classy but some girls want to push the boundaries of class now and then ... Members were surprised (in a good way!) when sets like this started going live on the site.<sup>8</sup>

Members are thus reassured that, if the site's content has become more hardcore, that is because the 'girls', wholly of their own accord, want to 'push the boundaries'. And who are the owners – still less the consumers – to question what the 'girls' have decided *they* want to do?

Thus, pornography's near constant message is that, whatever is being done to a woman, she wants it and likes it.<sup>9</sup> Among other things, this message serves to deflect the consumer's attention from his own preferences to the purported preferences of the women he is watching: instead of asking why *he* enjoys seeing women treated aggressively, he is repeatedly assured that such treatment is what *she* wants.<sup>10</sup>

The influence of this message is clearly discernible in consumers' comments. Most are convinced that at least some of the women they are watching truly enjoy what they are doing and many are confident that they can tell which ones. For instance, in an online review of *Fuck Slaves 3*, one consumer/reviewer discusses performer Jaelyn Fox:

She was flogged and verbally abused and as dirty as it made me feel, the closer I watched, the more I felt she was into it a lot more than some critics claim [is] typically the case.

(Huston 2008)

And, back on adultdvdtalk, one user responds as follows to others' criticisms of quagging:

What if gagging *is* what they enjoy? I recall Sasha Grey saying she thinks it's hot and likes doing it a lot. Judging from some scenes I've seen, I wouldn't question her sincerity.

(RandomPrecision, 26 June 2007)

Some consumers are less invested in believing that a woman really likes it, so long as she can put on a convincing act: as one puts it, 'I prefer my porn chicks to appear to enjoy what they're doing' (Mike\_Rach, 21 June 2007).

Confidence in women's acting abilities is more often expressed, however, by consumers claiming that women's expressions of pain and disgust are faked. The discussion of quagging, for example, includes repeated complaints that the gagging sounds are 'fake' (and therefore 'annoying'). And in a protracted discussion of facialabuse.com, one consumer writes:

I've seen clippets of the sight ... and its always showing the chicks crying supposedly due to the guys slamming them during anal sex. Is this site legit with that? Or is it just a big **o** fake-o crying? Cause I'm starting to suspect its fake.

(kaiser1one, 28 June 2009)

It is difficult to tell whether this user wants to hear that the crying is fake or that it is real. Other consumers are more straightforward about their preference for women's real rather than feigned discomfort: one says of quagging that 'If it seems faked, it sucks' (Cumwhipper, 17 February 2008).

A few commenters display empathy for women experiencing abusive treatment in pornography, as well as an understanding of the constraints on such women's choices. In the discussion of facialabuse.com, one responds as follows to a typical defence of violent scenes:

Now, I know rough sex fans will cry 'She could have stopped the scene if she wanted to' ... But for two seconds realize you are dealing with girls who for the most part have never done a porn before and they really need the money. They think if they refuse to do something they won't get paid. Think about it, you get throat pumped to the point of puking for 10–15 minutes, then you refuse to eat the guy's ass, and are sent home with no

paycheck. If that is what you think will happen, then most likely you are gonna eat the guy's ass even if you don't want to.

(StillHope, 7 July 2009)

Another commenter follows up:

a performer, especially a newbie ... might be mentally overwhelmed or in shock. When you're already stressed ... convulsing from being choked and puking, trying to catch your breath, etc. and you've got two pricks barking orders at you, I don't think you can be expected to make the most rational decisions. How many rape victims don't scream or call out for help even though that's sort of what you'd expect a person to do?

(MrTibbs, 7 July 2009)

This level of insight into the female performers' conditions is unusual, however, and no doubt a given consumer's dedication to enjoying the materials in question renders him less inclined to pursue such lines of thought.

Some consumers demonstrate awareness of the personal histories that underlie many women's participation in the pornography industry. In a discussion of a particular performer who has said she was gang-raped earlier in her life, one user responds to others who doubt her veracity:

I tend to believe that she was raped. Porn has been, is, and will be filled with emotionally unstable girls who have suffered some sort of sexual abuse/trauma. That's what leads them to do porn ... They get sucked into the supposed 'Porn is one big happy family' ideal and continue further down the spiral.

(Rosco Fuji, 8 April 2009)

Economic pressures, too, are sometimes mentioned as a factor motivating many women. In a discussion of the relative merits of American versus Eastern European performers, one user observes that 'American girls who look as good as those Eurobabes don't do porn, because they have better options' (elgringoviejo58, 30 May 2009). Another points out optimistically that 'if our economy goes deeper into the crapper, our Pretty Girl Desperation Index may rise to the point that more home-grown 10's will start doing porn' (Harri Patel, 30 May 2009). Despite this awareness of the conditions (both personal and economic) that drive women into pornography, all of these users remain devoted fans of the industry – as indicated by their continued presence on fan discussion forums.

### Men, but not monsters

In addition to its constant messages about women and their desires, pornography includes a quieter backstory. Robert Jensen observes,

We pretend to listen to the barker shouting about women, but that is not the draw. What brings us back, over and over, is the voice in our ears, the soft voice that says, 'It's okay, you really are a man, you really can be a man, and if you come into my world, it will all be there, and it will all be easy.'

(2007a: 33)

The backstory, then, is not about women, but about the consumer's own identity; and its central message is that the consumer is, or at least can be, a real man. Not surprisingly, much pornography (and its promotional material) caters to anxious masculinity. The name of one porn studio, Anabolic, presumably refers to anabolic steroids (synthetic hormones derivative of testosterone). Sometimes it is suggested that enjoying or at least tolerating extreme aggression against women is an indicator of masculinity.<sup>11</sup> For instance, the text on throated.com reads, 'WARNING: Contains extreme throat fucking and deep-throating. DISCLAIMER: If you are squeamish or faint easily please LEAVE NOW' (accessed 20 July 2009). The cultural association of squeamishness and fainting with femininity is assumed, so that the text need not mention manhood explicitly.

Frequently, pornography is offered as an antidote for men who see themselves as controlled and emasculated by women. The September 2008 issue of *Adult Video News* included a review of *Fuck Slaves 3*, in which 'Nelson X' describes it as 'a misogynistic gem that will appeal to men who have survived the social castrating of their gender' (Nelson X 2008). Thus, enjoying dominance and aggression against women is cast as both a mark and an entitlement of manhood. The trick is that, despite this enjoyment, many consumers remain invested in seeing themselves as non-abusive – as men, but not monsters. Thus, for example, the above-mentioned review, which begins with a description of Jaelyn Fox 'losing her soul' as a result of her abusive and humiliating treatment (including 'having her pretty blonde head used as a toilet brush'), ends as follows:

But, don't worry. Fox did not really lose her soul. Viewers will only think so thanks to her and [performer/director Jake] Ma'one's ability to revel in abuse fantasy. Good porn makes everyone feel dirty.

(Nelson X 2008)

The reader is thus reassured: enjoying *Fuck Slaves 3* and its ilk makes him a real man, vicariously experiencing the control over women to which he is entitled;<sup>12</sup> but because this is merely 'abuse fantasy,' in which the woman herself 'revels,' he is not a monster.

Any consumer who wishes to maintain a tolerable self-image must maintain clear, insuperable boundaries between himself and those men he considers morally objectionable. In a discussion of *Jailbait 6*, several consumers go to some effort to distinguish themselves from paedophiles. One participant opens the discussion by mentioning the film's use of a standard disclaimer:

All the performers in this video are playing the roles of adults, and should not be viewed otherwise. Nothing in this video is intended by the producer, director, or any performer to depict or portray any person or character as a minor.

He goes on to describe the film's portrayal of adult female performers playing with blocks, colouring with crayons, having tea parties and the like, with 'the sound of children playing and laughing in the background.'

And then there is [the director] playing the creepy guy in the park trying to lure girls with a fishing rod and a lollipop. It's soo over the top! ... 'Nothing in this video is intended to depict or portray any person or character as a minor.' MY ASS.

(007, 30 April 2009)

Another user responds quickly, offering a ready distinction: 'Age play. As long as it is truly two consenting adults, anything goes' (LubeNLuv, 30 April 2009). Several others weigh in, expressing confidence that real paedophiles would not be interested in a film of this kind because no actual children are portrayed and because the female performers have clearly adult bodies. As one user opines,

if the women look like adults then toys, kids clothing and playgrounds aren't going to do it for a real pedophile. You might as well suggest that a guy dressing up as a girl and putting on makeup is going to get me hot for him. That's not gonna happen.

(Hardware, 30 April 2009)

Thus, a man's enjoyment of films like *Jailbait 6* shows that he is not a 'real' paedophile and, if he is not a real paedophile, his enjoyment of such films is no cause for concern. In this way, the discussion is kept revolving narrowly around the paedophile-versus-not-paedophile distinction, without considering what it means that the sexual excitement of many 'normal' adult men is intensified by the iconography of childhood.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, when a female performer joins the discussion, saying that she hated shooting such films and stopped doing so because she found them 'disgusting and inappropriate', she is shouted down by male participants.

The consumer who enjoys seeing men behaving aggressively toward women may also need to manage carefully his own identification with the men on screen. On the one hand, his enjoyment depends on identifying with the male performer(s); the whole point is to experience the action *as if* he were directly involved. However, identifying too strongly with those behaving abusively may make it more difficult for the consumer to maintain his self-image as non-abusive. He must therefore maintain a fragile balance wherein he *both* identifies and dis-identifies with the men in the pornography he is using. Some very violent sites employ a technique that may help the consumer maintain this balance. In their

content analysis of internet rape sites, Gossett and Byrne found that, on most, the perpetrator is wholly anonymous. The rapist, they observe, is

an invisible man – neither shown nor alluded to in the text [describing] the rape ... the majority of the sites do not discuss or display any particular identity, relation to the victim, or social position of the perpetrator. The ones that imply some status typically make the perpetrator anonymous in other ways, such as hiding behind masks, wearing uniforms, or using a camera angle that reveals only a body part such as a hand.

(Gossett and Byrne 2002: 698–9)

That the perpetrator is a hidden or masked 'nobody' makes it easier for the consumer to project himself into the former's position. But it also means that, having so projected himself, the consumer too can be 'nobody' – least of all himself.

### Self-fragmentation: from Jekyll to Hyde

As we have seen, porn consumers navigate the boundary between man and monster in a variety of ways: 'drawing the line,' displacing and diffusing responsibility, believing that the women enjoy it, and so on. All of these manoeuvres, however, have their limits, and for many consumers, as their porn habits escalate and their tastes grow more extreme, the rationalizations may become difficult to sustain. For these consumers, pornography offers a different way to accept their own patterns of enjoyment – one best illustrated by the name and logo of a porn company called Jekyll and Hyde Productions.<sup>14</sup> The company's logo shows a face divided in half. The left side is a normal man's face, Caucasian, with a slightly smug expression and (significantly) eyes closed. The right side is the face of a monster, with greenish skin, jagged teeth and wild, sinister eyes. The consumer is thus encouraged to fragment himself – to distinguish between his everyday self and his scary, dangerous porn-using self. The ordinary, comparatively benign self can project the troublesome desires onto this alternate self who exists only in the world of pornography (or, as one site has it, in the 'Jerk Off Zone'<sup>15</sup>) and who indulges even very sadistic desires.

In *The Nazi Doctors*, Robert Jay Lifton argued that physicians, whose professional identity involves healing and helping, were faced with dire conflicts when called upon to do the work of Auschwitz and other concentration camps. As he explains,

The individual Nazi doctor needed his Auschwitz self to function psychologically in an environment so antithetical to his previous ethical standards. At the same time, he needed his prior self in order to continue to see himself as humane physician, husband, father.

(1986: 419)

To explain how Nazi doctors managed such conflicts, Lifton introduced the concept of doubling: ‘the division of the self into two functioning wholes, so that a part-self acts as an entire self’ (*ibid.*: 418). Doubling is ‘an active psychological process’ whose major function, he argues, is to avoid guilt by disavowing the second self that does the ‘dirty work’ (*ibid.*: 422). A Nazi doctor functioned in a ‘death-dominated’ environment by developing an ‘Auschwitz self’; indeed, Lifton claims that ‘If an environment is sufficiently extreme, and one chooses to remain in it, one may be able to do so *only* by means of doubling’ (*ibid.*)

To claim equivalence between the activities of concentration camp doctors and those of pornography consumers would be implausible. Nonetheless, Lifton’s concept of doubling can help us understand how some porn consumers manage the conflict between their self-image as decent, ethical people and their continued enjoyment of material that violates their own ethical standards. As the Jekyll and Hyde logo suggests, the consumer can create a second self, one that exists in an ‘extreme environment’ that he regards as a realm of pure fantasy. This second self, rather than denying or minimizing abuse, can name it and revel in it. Such gleeful nihilism is suggested in the names of a number of porn companies and web sites, including Mayhem, Wicked, Sin City, Evil Angel and Lethal Hardcore. (One Evil Angel site, [evilondemand.com](http://evilondemand.com), features a man yanking a woman’s head out of the toilet by her hair, with the accompanying slogan ‘Life’s too short for soft porn!’) The banner for [porn-devil.com](http://porn-devil.com) comes complete with horned devil and pitchfork, and that of [twistedzones.com](http://twistedzones.com) – advertising ‘twisted sex, extreme sex’ – features a skeletal head with hands displaying raised middle fingers. Thus, the consumer is provided with a ready-made ‘second self,’ a cartoonish and faux-rebellious alter ego on to which he can project his enjoyment of what even he recognizes as ‘twisted’ material.

### Moral damage: from consumer to consumed

Pornography use can yield significant harm and suffering in the lives of consumers themselves (Paul 2005; Maltz and Maltz 2008). For many, over time, pornography consumption leads to isolation, damaged or lost relationships and an impaired capacity to relate sexually to real partners. For some consumers, their porn habits have negative professional or even legal consequences. One man who faced such consequences discusses the fatigue, depression and intense anxiety that he suffered as a heavy pornography user: ‘I don’t think I even thought about [my symptoms] as possibly being related to porn use until I went to prison and actually experienced some relief’ (Maltz and Maltz 2008: 74).

While many factors contribute to the damaged lives and psyches of some pornography consumers, the grooming processes I have described here constitute a partial explanation for these men’s suffering. Norman Care has argued that ‘morality’s most precious good is moral personality itself – and damage to moral personality is ... unpardonable’ (1996: 25). The pornography industry damages its consumers’ moral personalities at every turn, by hooking them on material

that undermines their self-respect and integrity. According to therapists Larry and Wendy Maltz, who have worked with many men with heavy pornography habits, ‘One man shook with tears telling us porn had turned him into a “pervert” and a “visual rapist”’ (2008: 88). Another client told the Maltzes, ‘I just don’t like who I’ve become ... And my relationship with porn has become the vortex of my self-hatred’ (*ibid.*: 86).

The pornography industry plays an active, often knowing role in undermining the moral personalities and capacities of consumers. This is not surprising, since retaining the men as paying customers depends on perpetrating a kind of moral violence against them. While many examples I have cited herein could support this point, it is perhaps best illustrated by some promotional text on the site of JM Productions, a company specializing in sadistic material. On a page advertising the *Anal Full Nelson* DVD series, the text reads:

What’s an ANAL FULL NELSON? It’s a wrestling hold in which both hands are thrust under the whore’s arms from behind and then pressed against the back of the neck while she gets ass fucked. ... It takes a special (AKA stupid) kind of whore to allow herself to be submitted to the most brutal ass fucking position ever ... Face it – this is the type of porn you enjoy. You may not like yourself for it, but so what. Now get ready to JACK OFF!<sup>16</sup>

In this text, the consumer’s guilt feelings are anticipated and, in a diabolically manipulative turn, exploited as a way to draw him further in. The consumer is urged to face how terribly women are being hurt and how sadistic his own sexuality has become – and not to care about either. The moral emotions that could provide him with a road map out of this empty, amoral world are acknowledged, only to be mocked and set aside. To maintain the pornographer’s profits, the consumer’s very humanity, his capacity for empathy and solidarity with other human beings, must be snuffed out.<sup>17</sup>

Relatedly, the consumer must be led to doubt his ability to change his behaviour – to believe that, even if his habits are disturbing, he is beyond help or hope. At the ironically named porn site [pornisevil.com](http://pornisevil.com), the consumer is told to ‘Bookmark Porn is Evil . you’ll be back soon anyways.’<sup>18</sup> Thus another aspect of moral personality, the ability to make choices according to one’s own values, is denied and undermined. Some sites make mocking reference to pornography addiction; for instance, the tag line on [searchextreme.com](http://searchextreme.com) is ‘Helping you beat your addiction since 1999.’ On the *Anal Full Nelson* page, the series’ most recent release is advertised with the following text:

When I see shit like this I have to ask myself ... ‘WHY? Why do these girls allow themselves to be treated like this? Why do the people who own porn companies finance filth like this. And why can’t I stop myself from jacking off to it? Why? Why?-Why?’<sup>19</sup>

Here, the company appropriates the consumer's own voice to reinforce his belief that he can neither control his actions nor reconnect with a self that is worthy of his own respect.

At this far end of the grooming process, and indeed at many prior points, the male pornography consumer is a target for ruthless corporate exploitation that goes much deeper than the picking of his pocket. As I have suggested throughout, however, consumers are far from passive victims in this process: if a porn user's moral personality has been damaged, he himself has played a key role in damaging it. By ignoring his qualms, tuning in to the industry's legitimizing messages and stifling his capacities for empathy and critical reflection, he has acquiesced and co-operated in his own ethical deterioration. As Lifton observes of the Nazi doctors, '[D]oubling is the psychological means by which one invokes the evil potential of the self. ... To live out the doubling and call forth the evil is a moral choice for which one is responsible, whatever the level of consciousness involved' (1986: 423-4).

The contemporary pornography industry is a wasteland of lost and damaged humanity – one for which men, both as producers and as consumers, are primarily responsible and from which primarily women and girls suffer. To recognize that many men are also steamrollered by this corporate juggernaut does not, I hope, undermine this central point. In fact, the good news is that what women and girls need from male pornography consumers – that they resist the industry's grooming and reclaim their own humanity – is also the men's own best hope for healing, connection and moral regeneration.

## Notes

- 1 I refer throughout to 'male consumers' and to 'men,' since adult men remain the industry's main constituency. As pornography use becomes more common among under-age boys, it is vital to consider how it affects their sexual and ethical development; however, I do not pursue that line of enquiry here. Similarly, while some women use pornography, the associated grooming dynamics would require a distinct analysis beyond the scope of this chapter.
- 2 <<http://www.someccards.com/card/my-spring-cleaning>> (accessed 10 August 2009).
- 3 I gathered material from these sites over a period of roughly three months during summer 2009.
- 4 <<http://www.adultdvdtalk.com/adtalk/info/about.asp>> (accessed 11 August 2009).
- 5 See Paasonen (this volume) for a discussion of porn spam.
- 6 The photo was accessed through <<http://www.clubjaclyn.com/>> (17 August 2009) but includes the logo of <[www.fuckherthroat.com](http://www.fuckherthroat.com/)>, where it presumably originally appeared.
- 7 For a vivid example of such reinterpretation in a porn DVD commentary, see Jensen (2007a: 92-4).
- 8 This e-mail was shared with me by a student. I made a record of its content but have since lost or deleted the e-mail itself.

- 9 Wosnitzer and Bridges' study (2007) confirmed this pattern, showing that in 95 per cent of all coded instances of aggression the response of the person being aggressed against was either neutral or pleasure.
- 10 This, too, is a form of displaced responsibility.
- 11 In a twist on this theme, sometimes excessive aggression is thought to indicate a deficit of masculinity. In a review of *Gangbang Auditions 18* consumer reviewer Roger Pipe advises, 'Look fellas, if the ED meds aren't working and you need to choke or hit a girl to get wood, then maybe it's time to give grad school or rocket science a closer look' <[http://www.rogreviews.com/reviews/read\\_review.asp?sku=3860](http://www.rogreviews.com/reviews/read_review.asp?sku=3860)> (accessed 22 August 2009).
- 12 See Johnson (this volume) for a more detailed discussion of male entitlement as a motivation for porn consumption.
- 13 For further discussion of how the industry uses legal material to encourage adult sexual interest in children and teens see Dines (2009a).
- 14 See <<http://www.jhp.xxx.com/aboutjhp.aspx>> (accessed 10 August 2009).
- 15 The phrase appears on the site of JM Productions, <<http://www.jerkoffzone.com/>> (accessed 15 July 2009).
- 16 <<http://www.jerkoffzone.com/jmcatalog/series.php?sid=7>> (accessed 29 August 2009).
- 17 On porn's destruction of empathy see also Jensen (this volume).
- 18 Accessed 19 July 2009.
- 19 <<http://www.jerkoffzone.com/jmcatalog/series.php?sid=7>> (accessed 29 August 2009).