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Pornography, Contemporary-Mainstream

Once a relatively small-niche market, pornography in recent years has become a mainstream, technologically sophisticated multi-billion-dollar industry, one that plays a significant role in shaping our ideas about gender and sexuality. Like many complex and politically contested concepts, pornography can be defined in a number of different ways. While some define *pornography* simply as any sexually explicit written or graphic material, others include additional criteria, such as that the material be produced for the purpose of sexually arousing its audience or that the material convey certain (typically sexist and degrading) ideas and attitudes about women, men, and sexuality. While these varying approaches to defining pornography raise questions worth exploring, for most practical purposes, it is sufficient to delimit the boundaries of the concept by pointing to the products of a specific and identifiable industry. This entry discusses the production and content of contemporary mainstream pornography, the effects of pornography consumption, and contemporary legal issues concerning pornography.

The Contemporary Pornography Industry

While sexual images in some form have long been a part of human experience, the existence of pornography as a mainstream commercial industry dates back only

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to the 1950s. The advent of *Playboy* magazine in 1953 was followed in the late 1960s and 1970s by *Penthouse* and *Hustler*. These three magazines and their many imitators constituted the mainstream of the industry into the early 1980s. Since then, continual technological innovations combined with changes in social norms have produced enormous changes in the pornography industry's content, structure, and delivery methods.

Perhaps the most notable change is in the sheer size and reach of the industry. According to the adult industry's trade magazine, fewer than 2,000 hard-core titles were released in 1988; by contrast, in 2005, the number of such titles had reached 12,971. The annual revenues of the pornography industry are estimated to be \$13 billion in the United States and \$97 billion globally. Pornographic content is now delivered via multiple avenues, from print magazines to videos, DVDs, Web sites, game systems, and mobile phones. As each technological innovation, from the camera to the video camera to the Internet, has brought pornography closer to the consumer—privatizing the experience of consuming pornography, making it cheaper, more directly and constantly accessible, and more anonymous—the levels of pornography consumption have drastically increased.

Contemporary pornography is deeply intertwined with mainstream media corporations, many of which heavily cross-promote pornographic content across their media holdings, including books, network and cable television programs, and mainstream men's and women's magazines. A number of major multinational corporations, such as General Motors and AT&T, make significant profits from pornography via venues such as satellite TV, broadband cable channels, and hotel pay-per-view. Given these profits, mainstream media outlets often convey

a legitimizing and glamorizing set of messages about the pornography industry.

Mainstream Pornography: Content and Themes

While there are numerous pornography niche markets, including films and sites aimed at gay and lesbian audiences, those marketed as “alternative,” and those explicitly marketed as sadomasochistic, this entry focuses on the content and themes common in contemporary mainstream pornography aimed at a heterosexual, predominantly male audience. Such pornography is divided into two main genres: features and gonzo.

Features have relatively high production values and bear some resemblance to mainstream Hollywood movies, with characters, dialogue, and plotline providing some context for the explicit sex scenes. The performers in features are typically better paid than those in gonzo, and some of the women performers can make additional money on the strip bar circuit. The content of features is typically less aggressive and extreme than the content of gonzo, although as gonzo increasingly defines the industry, its more aggressive content starts to spill over into features as well.

Gonzo films, also called “wall-to-wall,” are simply a succession of recorded sex scenes, without characters or plot and with an emphasis on more extreme activities. Because of its appeal to consumers and its relatively low production costs, gonzo is extremely profitable and is the fastest-growing sector of the pornography industry. Gonzo films are typically marketed as “reality” porn; that is, the consumer is meant to believe that the individuals depicted are not paid performers. Often the male performers or the cameraman will interview the woman about her putative sexual desires before the sexual activity begins, and in many gonzo films, there is continued audible comment and instruction from cameramen. Most gonzo films include a standard sequence of sex acts, including vaginal, oral, and anal penetration of one woman by one or more men, ending with what is known as the “money shot” of male ejaculation in the woman's face or on her body.

The sexual acts most common in gonzo pornography films are of a more extreme and degrading nature than those in features. Penetration is often quite aggressive and is often accompanied by the man or men slapping, spanking, or choking the woman; pulling her hair; spitting on her; or most commonly of all, calling her abusive names. Gagging has become an increasingly prominent theme, with many scenes that feature oral penetration emphasizing the discomfort being caused to the woman. Films featuring anal sex, similarly, are often marketed as involving pain or damage to the woman's body. Some sexual acts common in contemporary gonzo pornography were essentially invented by the industry. The double penetration or “DP,” in which a woman is penetrated vaginally and anally by two men at the same time, has become very common, and as consumers become bored and desensitized, the industry has progressed to even more extreme multiple penetrations, such as double vaginal, double anal, and even triple anal.

There are numerous important subthemes within contemporary mainstream pornography. One is the sexualizing of racial and ethnic inequality, with sub-genres of pornography focusing on women (and men) of different racial and ethnic groups, emphasizing the stereotypes attached to those groups. As many as 1 in 4 new pornography

films belong to the so-called interracial genre, which depicts African American men having sex with white women. These films are often marketed with an emphasis on the damage supposedly being caused to the white woman's body by the African American man's penis, thus reinscribing racial stereotypes with a well-established history in American culture.

Another common theme in mainstream pornography is the sexualizing of children and adolescents. In addition to the vast quantities of bona fide child pornography on the Internet and elsewhere, there is an enormously popular genre of legal, mainstream pornography sometimes called "pseudo-child," in which very young-looking women are depicted in childlike ways. The iconography of childhood is deployed (pigtails, schoolgirl uniforms, teddy bears, lollipops, and the like), and the women are depicted as "innocent" but nonetheless craving sexual activity with adult men.

Finally, there is a growth market in amateur pornography, particularly given the recent advent of Web sites like YouPorn and PornoTube, in which users upload their own pornographic content. On these sites, users sometimes upload paid and copyrighted material for others' consumption, but they also create their own material, which other consumers can then access for free. The recent slight downturn in industry profits may be attributable in part to the success of these sites.

Production

As the industry itself has changed—from an underground market largely controlled by organized crime to a mainstream and hugely profitable industry intertwined with the rest of corporate America—some of the dynamics of the production of pornography also have changed. Perhaps the most significant change has been the relative ease with which young women are recruited to the industry. Because the industry is so often portrayed in mainstream media in legitimizing ways and because of the enormous cultural visibility of "crossover," porn stars, such as Jenna Jameson, many young women, especially those without college educations and with limited economic opportunities, see participation in the pornography industry as a viable, glamorous, and lucrative career option. In recent years, many new agencies have begun to specialize in recruiting young women to the pornography industry.

Partly due to this glut of available labor, women in the industry face increasing pressure to engage in more extreme and disfavored activities, so as to keep working when many other women are ready to take their place. The fact that such activities are more highly paid results in additional economic pressures driving women to agree to perform them—pressures often exacerbated by increased financial benefits for their agents and managers. The physical and psychological toll of such participation, combined with the tendency of the industry to constantly seek new faces, means that most women's careers in the pornography industry are short-lived.

While there is little reliable research on pornography performers, substantial testimonial evidence suggests that substance abuse and addiction are rampant in the industry and that many women in the industry experience major bodily damage. Furthermore, anecdotal and testimonial evidence suggests that as with women involved in prostitution, women in pornography are disproportionately survivors of sexual abuse as children and teenagers. Thus, while questions about the free choice and consent of women in these industries are complex and difficult, there is little doubt that sexist social pressures, abuse histories,

economic needs, and other factors continue to constrain and influence women's and girls' participation in pornography, as in other sectors of the sex industry.

Effects of Pornography Consumption

There is a substantial social science literature on the effects of pornography consumption. For instance, studies have indicated that after viewing pornography in laboratory conditions, men are more likely to report decreased empathy for rape victims, to report believing that a woman who dresses provocatively deserves to be raped, to report anger at women who flirt but then refuse to have sex, to report decreased sexual interest in their girlfriends or wives, and to report increased interest in coercing partners into unwanted

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sex acts. While such research has its place, its limits must also be acknowledged, given the many significant differences between laboratory conditions and real-world pornography consumption: short-term versus long-term use, quantity and intensity of use, magazine and video format versus Internet technologies, and the fact that consumers in the real world do not “just watch,” but rather masturbate to orgasm.

As pornography has become increasingly mainstream and pervasive, some feminists and other critics have also raised concerns about its effects on people's relationships and on the culture generally, emphasizing the ways in which pornography's commodification of sexuality and intimate life breeds isolation, disconnection, and often disinterest in sex with real partners. Some psychologists have contended that for some consumers, a compulsive interest in pornography can become a form of addiction, with predictable negative consequences for the addicted individual's finances, relationships, and overall well-being. Finally, some critics have pointed to the role of pornography in constructing and sustaining a form of masculinity that is toxic not only to women, but to the boys and men whose sexuality and identity it constructs.

Contemporary Legal Issues

In the United States, as in most of the world, the production, distribution, and possession of child pornography is illegal. Pornography featuring adults is governed by obscenity law; obscene material is not protected by the First Amendment. In the 1973 case *Miller v. California*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that a work is obscene and thus may be subject to state regulation if three conditions are met: First, “the average person, applying contemporary community standards” would find that the work appeals to the prurient interest; second, the work depicts sexual conduct in a patently offensive way; and third, the work lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value. While in theory, a great deal of contemporary pornography could plausibly be prosecuted under these standards, in fact such prosecutions are rare.

Some feminists opposed to pornography have supported an alternative legal strategy that employs civil rather than criminal law to combat the industry's harms. The 1980s and early 1990s saw several local efforts to pass the Anti-Pornography Civil Rights Ordinance, which

would have allowed individuals and groups who had been harmed in one of several specified ways by the production, distribution, or consumption of pornography to sue the producer or distributor of the pornography in question for monetary damages and/or an injunction against the pornography's sale. While this particular legislation was overturned as unconstitutional, some critics of pornography believe that some version of this legal approach—emphasizing civil rather than criminal law, and harm rather than offense—still holds promise.

The powerful lobbying arm of the pornography industry, the Free Speech Coalition, tracks all state and federal legislation affecting the industry and its products and combats all attempts at increased regulation. For example, in 2002, the Free Speech Coalition successfully fought a federal law that made it a crime to display virtual child pornography—that is, computer-altered images that appear to represent actual children engaging in sexual activity. In *Ashcroft v. Free Speech Coalition* (2002), the court overturned this law, thus effectively rendering such images legal. More recently, the coalition has led the fight against tightened new regulations requiring pornography producers to maintain age records on all performers.

In recent years, the migration of much pornography to the Internet has created unprecedented legal and technological challenges for those attempting to impose controls on the industry. For instance, although the production and distribution of extremely violent pornography has long been illegal in Britain, the government found that the global accessibility of Internet pornography rendered this restriction largely meaningless, as many British consumers downloaded such material that had been produced elsewhere. Thus, partly in response to a campaign by the mother of Jane Longhurst, who was murdered by a man addicted to violent Internet porn, the British government proposed a new law banning the downloading or possession of images of extreme sexual violence. It remains to be seen whether similar legal initiatives will be undertaken elsewhere and, if so, what their consequences will be.

Conclusion

While certain themes in pornography remain relatively constant over time, contemporary pornography is in some respects unprecedented: As technological changes have yielded a multitude of delivery methods, consumers' escalating demands have led to an emphasis on more extreme content. As the industry expands and its

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cultural influence continues to grow, there is an acute need for more research on pornography's production; its central themes and messages; and its effects on individuals, relationships, and the culture at large.

Rebecca Whisnant *See also*

[Feminist Sex Wars](#)

[Gender and the Internet](#)

[Pornography, Legal and Political Perspectives](#)[Rape](#)[Rape, Statutory](#)[Sex-Radical Feminists](#)[Sex Work \(Prostitution\)](#)

Further Readings

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