



Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America

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In a book that completely changes the terms of the pornography debate, Laura Kipnis challenges the position that porn perpetuates misogyny and sex crimes. First published in 1996, *Bound and Gagged* opens with the chilling case of Daniel DePew, a man convicted—in the first computer bulletin board entrapment case—of conspiring to make a snuff film and sentenced to thirty-three years in prison for merely trading kinky fantasies with two undercover cops.

Using this textbook example of social hysteria as a springboard, Kipnis argues that criminalizing fantasy—even perverse and unacceptable fantasy—has dire social consequences. Exploring the entire spectrum of pornography, she declares that porn isn't just about gender and that fantasy doesn't necessarily constitute intent. She reveals Larry Flynt's *Hustler* to be one of the most politically outspoken and class-antagonistic magazine in the country and shows how fetishes such as fat admiration challenge our aesthetic prejudices and socially sanctioned disgust. Kipnis demonstrates that the porn industry—whose multibillion-dollar annual revenues rival those of the three major television networks combined—know precisely how to tap into our culture's deepest anxieties and desires, and that this knowledge, more than all the naked bodies, is what guarantees its vast popularity.

Bound and Gagged challenges our most basic assumptions about America's relationship with pornography and questions what the calls to eliminate it are really attempting to protect.

Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America Details

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From Reader Review Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America for online ebook

Annemarie Donahue says

Fantastic grouping of literary criticism! My favourite is On Reading Hustler! The essay On Reading Hustler, is a very interesting and helpful insight on the development of pornography as a language in our culture. The use of the image of a naked woman goes far beyond the obvious mastrabratourial stereotype. What Laura Kipnis argues is that, thanks to publications like Hustler, pornography has evolved from a simple skin-rag and into a critical force within our own culture. Hustler, as it mixes well-paid, well-endowed models with pictures volunteered by readers (and the women in their lives) makes a Marxist critique on sex. Read it! Don't worry, there are no pictures.

Jamey says

Excellent argumentation.

Ann says

After my disappointing experiences with Against Love and How to Become a Scandal, I was about ready to give up on Laura Kipnis. As you may recall, those were both freakin' awesome ideas for a book that, in Kipnis' capable hands, turned into interesting first chapters followed by hundreds of pages of pretty obvious observations delivered in prose that was annoyingly clever. This book, in contrast, is freakin' awesome start to finish. Long story short, she considers porn as a cultural production and interprets it in that light. Turns out there's quite a bit to say. Highly recommended.

MM says

Excellent book – very accessible and engaging. Kipnis wants us to think about pornography not in terms of good/bad; instead she wants us to think about the larger questions and implications that pornography and taboos inspire. Instead of looking at culturally-sanctioned fantasies (examples: heterosexual rape fantasies, Playboy magazine ilk, straight porn), she analyzes the non-sanctioned varieties, which become taboo, highly regulated, and generally despised (examples include fat porn, transvestite porn, low-class porn like Hustler magazine). She argues that by looking carefully at how we police, legislate, and regulate sex we can learn quite a bit about our culture – our power structures, gender designations, and so forth. Interesting stuff.

Angela says

Fantastic and fascinating so far

Matt says

Though it seems like many authors and academics are critically focusing on pornography nowadays, Laura Kipnis' work is one of the most interesting and influential: Rather than look at media technologies in relation to pornography (like Patchen Barss), or the symbolism behind particular codes of pornography (Berkeley Kaite), Kipnis considers the role pornography has in society in terms of its relation to culture. Kipnis' collection of essays are hardly disjointed: as she skips from S&M to cross-dressing to Hustler Magazine, she underscores her arguments with enough consistencies that makes this a great read from start to finish. My personal favorite chapters are chapters One (The Politics of Fantasy) and Four (Disgust and Desire: Reading Hustler Magazine). This is a great read for those who enjoy a case study analysis in the realm of cultural studies and psychoanalysis. Highly recommended.

Corey says

People seem to like this book. Kipnis has some interesting insights into the semiotics of pornography, but the problem is that in order for her semiotic analysis to matter, Catherine Mackinnon and Andrea Dworkin have to be wrong. I'm not convinced they are, despite some brief arguments against those two in this book.

Tate says

A really interesting look at the politics of pornography. The class analysis of Hustler and the section on fat porn were particularly insightful.

Ari says

Tim tells me I need to read this.

Sharad Pandian says

Laura Kipnis's 1996 book is probably the best analysis I've encountered of sex and pornography because it takes class and psychoanalysis seriously. She taken on culturally significant events, but looks closely at the side of the traditional villains (a man in jail for conspiracy to kidnap, film and then kill a child; Hustler magazine; pornography) to show how society's strong disavowal of them can be seen as a desperate attempt to keep our shared psychic uncertainties at bay. Here are two samples:

Sample #1:

"According to Bourdieu, artistic competence and the "aesthetic disposition" get produced via what he refers to as "educational capital"-itself a mechanism for enforcing class distinctions. So, inherent in these categorical distinctions between art and pornography are the class divisions that a distinctively high art

works to maintain.

If the categorical distinctions between art and pornography come down to issues of sublimation, including the class imperatives to produce it, the problem with pornography is simply its failure to translate one set of contents into another. The problem seems to be that it produces a body of images that are too blatantly out of the unconscious, too unaesthetically written in the language of obsession, compulsion, perversion, infantile desires, rage, fear, pain, and misogyny. Too literally about sex and power rather than their aesthetically coded forms, as in the works of any number of well-respected artists and writers whose work dwells on similar themes. Too potent for art."

Sample #2:

"But the problem most women have who don't like porn is that they don't recognize the female characters in it as "like me"-either physically, or in their desires. These big-breasted porno bimbos want to have sex all the time, with any guy no matter how disgusting, will do anything, moan like they like it, and aren't repulsed by male body fluids-in fact, adore them-wherever they land. Women who dislike porn refer to this as a male fantasy, but what exactly is it a fantasy about? Well, it seems like a fantasy of a one-gender world, a world in which male and female sexuality is completely commensurable, as opposed to whatever sexual incompatibilities actually exist.

Heterosexual pornography creates a fantastical world composed of two sexes but one gender, and that one gender looks a lot more like what we think of (perhaps stereotypically) as "male." Pornography's premise is this: What would a world in which men and women were sexually alike look like? (The romance industry proposes a similar hypothesis in reverse: What would the world look like if men were emotionally and romantically compatible with women?) So pornography's fantasy is also of gender malleability, although one in which it's women who should be the malleable ones. Whereas feminism's (and romance fiction's) paradigm of gender malleability is mostly that men should change. It's possible that the women who are most offended by pornography are those most invested in the idea of femininity as something static and stable, as something inborn that inheres within us. ("Women are like this, men are like that.")

Of course one reason that women, and particularly feminists, have a hard time either enjoying pornography as an interesting gender fantasy, or dismissing it as a harmless gender fantasy, is our worry that in a world in which men have more social power than women, men have the power to force their fantasy of a one-gender world onto unwilling women, who have their own ideas about how female sexuality should feel. But is pornography proffered (and enjoyed) as a form of propaganda? And if you think so, why presume that pornography alone, among the vast range of cultural forms, works as indoctrination, whereas every other popular genre is understood as inhabiting the realm of fiction, entertainment, even ideas, not as having megalomaniacal ambitions to transform the world into itself? We don't spend a lot of time worrying that viewers of pro wrestling will suddenly be seized with some all-consuming impulse to wrestle innocent passersby to the ground. On what grounds are such megalomaniacal intentions imputed to pornography?"

Cindy says

The chapter "Clothes Make the Man" blew my mind!!covered a lot of things i had thought about from first seeing Cindy Sherman,s work.

Nicola says

This was a very interesting read. If we can acknowledge that there's no direct correlation between porn and the perpetration of violence, and also see that it is a product that operates in resistance to classism and social rules, we must agree to examine pornography through the lens of cultural expression. This book urges feminism to take a step back from entrenched but erroneous beliefs about the evils porn is said to represent and analyze more honestly the psychological and political territory which it occupies.

saizine says

"But probably here, more so than in polite culture—that is, more than in those versions of culture willing to relegate themselves to forms of 'moral etiquette'—you have to be willing to squint, appraise, discern, turn it on its side, and then not run screaming from the room when, in response, it kicks you where it hurts: in your aesthetics." (92)

Fascinating look not necessarily at pornography but at the intersection of reality/fantasy/intent. Definitely essential reading for anyone who's working on the subject or anything even tangentially related. Pornography as repository of social meaning is a fantastic concept, and one that is expertly examined here.

Jafar says

The poor, repressed, emasculated, frustrated American male!

Dylan Horrocks says

I want to give this 6 stars. Easily the best thing I've read so far on the politics of pornography - and it's about so much more as well. It's a smart, nuanced exploration of both the power and fear of erotic fantasy in contemporary society:

"This book means to offer a different footing for debates about pornography. Its position is that the differences between pornography and other forms of culture are less meaningful than their similarities. Pornography *is* a form of cultural expression, and though it's transgressive, disruptive, and hits below the belt - in more ways than one - it's an essential form of contemporary national culture. It's also a genre devoted to fantasy, and its fantasies traverse a range of motifs beyond the strictly sexual. Sex is pornography's vehicle, and also its mode of distraction, but coursing through pornography's dimly lit corridors are far larger issues. Abandon your prejudices about what kind of language is appropriate to serious philosophical inquiry, and you can see that within the staged, mythic world of pornography a number of philosophical questions are posed, though couched in a low idiom: questions concerning the social compact and the price of repression, questions about what men are (and aren't), what women are (and aren't), questions about how sexuality and gender roles are performed, about

class, aesthetics, utopia, rebellion, power, desire, and commodification."

Through close readings of pornographic magazines, films and texts - from *Hustler* to *Guys in Gowns*, *Jumbo Jezebel*, and *Strictly Spanking*, and regular digressions into cultural theory, anthropology, psychoanalytic theory and politics, politics, politics, Kipnis draws out some of those questions and shines a fresh light on what underlies our fascination with and fear of pornography.

The opening chapter is a harrowing account of how Daniel DePew, a young man involved in the gay S&M scene, ended up imprisoned for 33 years in a case "permeated at all levels" with fantasy. This chapter is confronting, disturbing and demonstrates how high the stakes go when considering the morality, legality and political acceptability of erotic fantasy. It also introduces certain themes and ideas that will resonate throughout the following chapters, which explore various pornographic subcultures, ideas of taste and aesthetics, body politics, gender, class and social hierarchy.

In addressing anti-porn campaigns, Kipnis sidesteps the usual pro- and anti- rhetorical strategies and instead explores the cultural, historical and political contexts in which such campaigns take place, teasing out obsessions with purity and pollution, innocence and corruption, gender identity and transgression, class hierarchies and propriety, taste and disgust that inform them. In the process, she takes such campaigns - and their rhetorical strategies - apart far more effectively than anything else I've read.

In the end, it's hard to dispute her argument that even offensive pornography can be worthy of serious (non-censorial) attention:

"Despite whatever chagrin it may induce, offended parties (male and female) might want to reconceptualize pornography's offenses as a form of social knowledge. These offenses have eloquence. They have social meaning."

Reading this book 18 years after it was first published, I found myself thinking its relevance has grown, as debates about the destructive (or not) effects of pornography have spread to encompass all of popular culture. Arguments about sexualisation, misogyny, violence, racism and offensive or upsetting content rage across social media, the news media and academia. I myself have felt and expressed deep concerns over all of these things in the context of the comics industry, and I'm sure I'll continue to be involved in those conversations. But Kipnis' analysis forces me to think more deeply about what underlies my concerns, what really bothers me about certain narratives and fantasies, and whether even deeply offensive fantasies can have social and personal value:

"Preserving an enclave for fantasy is an important political project for the following reason: pornography provides a forum to engage with a realm of contents and materials exiled from public view and from the dominant culture, and this may indeed encompass unacceptable, improper, transgressive contents, including, at times, staples of the unconscious like violence, misogyny, or racism. But at the same time, within this realm of transgression, there's the freedom, displaced from the social world of limits and proprieties, to indulge in a range of longings and desires without regard to the appropriateness and propriety of those desires, and without regard to social limits on resources, object choices, perversity, or on the anarchy of the

imagination."

It's a testament to the power of *Bound and Gagged* that it not only confirms and enriches views I already held (about the anti-porn movement, for example), it also disrupts political positions in which I had felt quite secure. I'll be thinking about this book for a long time (I read a library copy, but now I'm going to have to buy my own, so I can re-read it with plenty of underlining and marginal notes).

VERY highly recommended.
