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## Pornography as an Imaginary World of Female and Male Sexuality

In reality, pornography is but the paradoxical limit of the sexual.  
A “realistic” exacerbation, a maniacal obsession with the real.  
J. Baudrillard

There are many publications discussing the threats of pornography, such as doctor of psychology Victor Cline’s book *Pornography Effects: Empirical and Clinical Evidence* or Jerry Kirk’s *The Power of the Picture: How Pornography Harms*. These works talk about addiction to pornography, about the fact that it leads to deviation, aggression, and violence, that it distorts the image of the sexual act and can destroy interpersonal relations. This is all true, but why is this so? The current paper is a reflection on the phenomenon of pornography. It is worth mediating on its gist. Is pornography a phantasmagorical film created to seduce the audience and introduce it to an unreal, imagined world? Or is it simply art showing various types of sexual intimacies that are varied in many different ways? It is also worthwhile to have a look at types of pornography. One of the best known classifications was developed by David Alexander Scott. He divides pornography into:

- soft-core (or soft) pornography – materials showing heterosexual erotic scenes without violence, e.g. scenes of nudity with sexual expression, deviation marked by a small degree of sophistication, or sex between two consenting adults (Scott 1985);
- hard-core (or hard) pornography – with deviant behaviours, violence, paedophilia, zoophilia, perversions: materials displaying non-typical sexual behaviours, such as orgies, rapes, or sadomasochism (Scott 1985).

This paper concerns the pornography presenting solely heterosexual intercourse, categorized as soft pornography.

Although pornography has been known for ages and today everyone knows what it is, it is very difficult to construct its precise scholarly definition. From the etymological point of view, the word “pornography” is tantamount to “indecent drawings” (from the Greek: *porne* – indecent, *graphos* – to draw, a drawing) (Krawulska-Ptaszyńska 2003: 14).

Today, a popular type of pornography is short videos shown on websites. However, it is worth remembering that this form of pornography is relatively new.

In the past, for obvious reasons, there were only the abovementioned “indecent drawings”. Scholars interested in the phenomenon of pornography undertake attempts at defining it, but so far they have not managed to arrive at a single universal definition. Anna Krawulska-Ptaszyńska understands pornography as “all productions focusing on displaying sexual activity and/or the genital sphere, presumably made to stir sexual excitement in a specific circle of recipients, and actually stirring such excitement” (Krawulska-Ptaszyńska 2003: 15). Here, we may question the consideration of the sexual excitement as a determinant of pornography, since not all the productions designed to stir sexual excitement do stir it, and sometimes excitement can be aroused by something which was not meant to do so, for example a scene from a non-pornographic film or a work of art (sculpture, painting, etc.). Wendy McElroy offers a more concise definition: “explicit artistic depiction of men and/or women as sexual beings” (McElroy 1995: 51). This definition can also be questioned, since every man and every woman can be considered explicitly sexual beings at any moment. What is more, the category of art is very subjective – according to one person, such a presentation of women and men may be artistic, while another person will not see it as such. Another definition was authored by Władysław Bernard Skrzydlewski, who claims that “pornography is all the productions which are believed to sexually excite a normal human being” (Skrzydlewski 2003: 83). Here, in turn, we have a suggestion that if sexual excitement is present, then a given phenomenon is pornography, while after all such an assumption is imprecise. I think that it is so difficult to define pornography because it is related to one’s sensitivity. The obscenity of a given image, film, or advertisement is subjective – what some see as pornography, is perfectly natural for others. The following statement seems to be true:

Pornography is defined in the first instance by its function – which is to turn the user on, leading to sexual activity such as intercourse or masturbation. This is not to say that images which are not pornographic cannot be erotic (sexually arousing), or that all pornography arouses (McNair 2002: 40).

In my opinion, the above is the most accurate attempt at defining this equivocal phenomenon.

Today, pornography is a problem of a huge scale due to the availability of the Internet. Just a dozen or so years ago, not many people had such a free access to pornographic materials, and to acquire them they often had to exercise an effort, or even risk embarrassment – when borrowing a VHS tape with a pornographic film or buying a pornographic magazine at a kiosk, we were not as anonymous as we are now, sitting in the comfort of our own homes and reviewing a broad range of pornographic sites (McNair 2002). According to Stanisław Kozak’s research, more than 40 million people globally regularly visit pornographic websites, with 20% of men and 12% of women doing so in their business hours. The research has also demonstrated that the largest group of persons watching pornography is very young people between ten and seventeen years of age (Kozak 2007: 85). The

Internet is so “pornified” that there are more websites under the entry “sex” or “porn” than under the entry “God” (Piłśniak 2005: 41). This constitutes a particular danger to young persons who are curious about the world and become easily excited about things that are “banned”. Children are a very easy target for people disseminating pornography – Anna Wrona’s study demonstrated that in 2008, 80% of children were exposed to pornographic materials on the internet, and 50% of children received links to pornographic sites in their email messages. A large share of the subjects reported that the above were not single incidents (a couple of times – 36%, many times – 29%). Almost a half of the subjects (49%) who received a link to a pornographic website once or many times in their email messages, actually used the link (29% – many times) (Wrona 2009: 315). Young people, only just shaping and becoming familiar with their sexuality, should not watch scenes, in which sex and human sexuality are distorted and deformed to a maximum extent. Today, however, it is impossible not to come in contact with pornography, since it is present in the mass media – there are many advertisements, video clips and TV series oscillating around pornography, and the border keeps being moved further on. Hence, it is worth talking about it with young people. However, such a conversation should not consist in imposing bans, but on distancing the minors to what popular culture has to offer.

It is worth looking into the image of the woman in pornographic materials. First, we need to point out that in the heterosexual, soft pornography, it is most often the woman who provokes the sexual activity. It is she who squirms and wriggles in front of the man, asking and encouraging him to have sex with her. At the same time, she shows that she is ready to succumb to any practices and ideas that may come into the man’s head. Pornography

is sexual pleasure, not in fact of the male, but of the female, and usually presented in a very particular way. These are tales of women ecstatic in their sexuality, but always under the sway of the phallus. Women whimper, pant, and quiver, but the men are silent, orchestrating the events which come to pass (Giddens 1993).

Female sexuality is therefore totally objectified and subordinate to the man. In heterosexual, soft pornography, women play the role of toys in men’s hands. Anna Krawulska-Ptaszyńska writes that in pornography, the female figures are deprived of humanity and presented as worse than men (Krawulska-Ptaszyńska 2003: 24). In this type of pornographic materials one may easily notice the women’s passivity. Activity is the men’s domain, while women are only objects on which the activity is focused, to which they are entirely subdued. “The pornographic show is however marked with the man, leaving just a narrow margin to the woman and her role” (Hajkowski 2012: 3). This is so since pornography is by assumption targeted at men and it is usually one of them who dominates during the intense sex, stripped of any feelings or emotions, while the woman is shown extremely stereotypically – as a person designed to satisfy the male desire and all the man’s profligate fancies (Giddens 2006: 154).

In the category of pornography in question, the image of men is created in an opposite way. The man is the main protagonist, the master of the situation, who decides about what the sexual act will be like. This is an unusually strong, overbearing, well-built and sexually-fit figure, one deprived of emotions and any scruples. For him, women are attractions, something that can be used and discarded without a problem or consequences. Additionally, the presentation of his bodyliness is also very special. Classical male protagonists of pornographic films have extremely extensive and muscled chests, legs, and arms. They are embodiments of strength and power. Their unnaturally large genitals play a very important role, since it is the main attribute of the man. They are their owners' pride and an object of desire for women. The size of the male privy parts decides about the man's masculinity and value and the female admiration and fascination. Such a male representation may have a negative influence on young boys' thinking about their bodies. This is normally manifested in an excessive care for the outward appearance – a fixation on musculature (bigorexia), an addiction to steroids or other chemical substances stimulating the growth of the muscle tissue, and the complex of a "small penis" are only some of the problems of the contemporary teenagers. Where does such a strong drive towards having a perfect body come from?

Young people, looking at such unnatural portrayals of women and men, receive a distorted image of femininity and masculinity. Boys may interpret pornographic scenes in such a way that all the women and girls feel like having sex all the time and one may do anything with them – whatever the imagination suggests. Here, there is no respect for the partner, her needs or preferences. At the same time, the girls may think that in an intimate situation, they need to consent to everything – whatever the partner wants – and that they should always be ready and willing to have sex. Moreover, they may arrive at a conviction that during the sexual act, the partner has the right to do anything with them, even humiliate and rape them, since the image of men in pornography promotes the ensuring of pleasure without respect for the other person's feelings, using power and aggression. Men are shown as tyrants who are extremely ruthless when sexually excited.

The very sexual act is presented in a very unnatural, staged and often vulgar way. There is no space for feelings or care for the partner during sex. What is important is solely the satisfaction of one's own desire. Skrzydlewski wrote that:

[...] people's naturally intimate sexual behaviour is deprived of the intimacy – often brutally – by pornography. In pornography, love virtually does not exist, or at least it does not have any significance. Every person who is a partner is treated as an object – as an object satisfying one's sexual desires rather than a person having dignity. This is very often combined with aggressive, brutal, and vulgar sexual behaviour. Pornography also shows changes of sexual partners as something normal, and does not show the frequent and tragic real effects of the presented sexual behaviours (Skrzydlewski 2003: 85).

The inconsistency Skrzydlewski mentioned is very characteristic for pornography. Pornography is a single-dimension, single-thread phenomenon – it shows only the very sexual act, and is silent about its consequences for one's life. Young

people are often unaware that such behaviour carries the risk of the loss of one's value, dignity, and respect for oneself, the contraction of various sexually-transmittable diseases, and, finally, an unwanted pregnancy. Pornography keeps absolutely quiet about such things.

Brian McNair, the author of the book *Striptease Culture. Sex, Media and the Democritisation of Desire*, points out that in pornographic materials:

desire is always seen to be present ('no' usually means 'yes'). In pornography the constraints, commitments and responsibilities which structure real-life sexual relationships – the demands of marriage and child-bearing, for example – are nearly always absent. The pornographic world is an ideal one in which – while the user is immersed in it, at least – life is reduced to the mechanics of the sex act (McNair 2002: 40).

Just like McNair maintains, pornography is cut off from reality, because it presents sex only and does not contain more threads than the sexual act itself. This is probably what most attracts and interests the recipients of such materials. But this is also a danger, as this "ideal world" about which McNair writes above very often addicts and covers the picture of the real world. Young people should know that the sex in pornography is not realistic – that it is only a vision of the director or producer, and that in reality it may be totally different. This is about the building of a distance to pornographic scenes, so that they do not affect teenagers' real lives.

An extremely interesting publication consistent with the topic of this article is Lech Nijakowski's *Ciało w zwierciadle pornografii* [The Body in the Mirror of Pornography]. The author describes ways in which the human body is shown in different types of pornography and discusses the consequences of this phenomenon. "Pornography affects its recipients at a deeper level. By presenting bodies that seem to be healthy and well-groomed, it shows consistency with the discourse of biopower, demanding constant self-care" (Nijakowski 2015: 31). Additionally, Nijakowski busts myths related to the issue of pornography. One of such myths consists in the disregard of pornography as research material for the academic world and considering it as a topic which is not very serious or valuable for social life researchers.

However, pornography is a full-on phenomenon – it refers to many spheres of life, representing the conscious and the unconscious social trends. It readily reacts to changes in lifestyles, transformations of norms, values, and attitudes to social taboos, and the appearance of new forms of economy. It is not an ideal mirror – it distorts and overstates many phenomena – but when looking at it with an eye armed with a scholarly magnifying glass, we may notice many truths about the society producing and consuming a given pornography (Nijakowski 2015: 32).

Therefore, it is worth looking at the changes and phenomena taking place in this area, and examining social opinions concerning the perception, consequences, and manifestations of pornography in today's world.

I undertook such research in April 2015. I conducted it among MA students of pedagogy, of both sexes, studying at the University of Gdansk. It was a qualitative

study – the students were to answer one open question, which provided a wide field for reflection and an extensive statement. The question I asked the students was: “What in your opinion is the image of men and women in pornographic materials/films?” The respondents wrote their answers on sheets of paper I had prepared beforehand. The study was aimed at checking the students’ perception of women and men starring in pornography.

111 persons participated in my study, with nine failing to provide their answers, explaining that they had never had anything to do with pornography. This is puzzling: is it possible for a person of more than 20 years of age to never see, be it for a short moment or accidentally, pornography in today’s world? Perhaps it was only an excuse behind their unwillingness to talk about the topic. Other respondents unanimously claimed that the images of both women and men are artificial and untrue. Many answers described the external appearance of the people starring in pornography:

In pornographic films, I always notice a great artificialness and untruthfulness: huge penises, the artificial faking of orgasms by women. In both the female and male images, we may see something like an “animality” understood as animal copulation, sometimes brutal, since the women are most often humiliated and treated like objects, like objects that can be used. I think that the bodies of both sexes are very artificial and untrue, for film purposes. As I said earlier, this reminds me of an orgiastic ritual, always finalized with men’s ejaculation.

A new type of an ideal female is created. Women should be slim, and have huge (artificial), impossibly firm breasts and buttocks. As we know, such a body cannot be acquired through genes or physical exercise – this leads to increasingly frequent visits of women to plastic surgeons, since “normal” women develop complexes, and sometimes even depression.

Women are (usually) shown as enslaved to men. They subordinate all their actions to the men. Such women most often have surgically enlarged breasts, are depilated, liberated, able to engage in all sorts of sexual “plays” and ready to be humiliated. Men are shown as mighty individuals having control over women. Male bodies are muscled, their genitals are substantial and they are amazingly fit.

The respondents turned attention to the illusory outward appearance of the protagonists – visible at the first glance. What is more, the second statement highlights the problem of the cult of the beautiful, young body. This phenomenon is present not only in pornography, but also in broadly understood media, which promote the struggle for a very slim figure, ideal shape, and flawless body.

Here, we are dealing with a problem that was earlier noticed by the already mentioned sociologist – Lech Nijakowski, who spoke about the “discourse of bio-power” in pornography. The respondent pointed out that the above leads to often dangerous and risky surgeries and depression caused by the constant attempts to achieve the unachievable ideal.

Another important issue noticed by the respondents was the different treatment of female and male actors starring in pornographic films:

Female intimate body parts are shown more often and in full, while male ones are hidden, invisible. There is more permission to show naked women than men.

Men in pornography do not have to be handsome, they may be fat and ugly, but will take any woman like an object anyway.

Perhaps this is because most pornographic materials are targeted at men – that is why they mainly focus on female bodies (which must be attractive and encouraging).

We can see that the respondents – just like Lech Nijakowski – notice the tendency to show human physicality as a “candy body” creating a “fairy tale representation”:

Men are shown as muscled dominators with huge privy parts. Women are humiliated, treated as objects, and look very artificial – with an artificial suntan, breasts, nails, hair, strong makeup, and not resembling people we meet on the streets at all – they have ideal bodies without any fat, cellulite, or stretch marks, firm bodies...

I believe that men in pornographic materials are created as dominators, while women are shown as submissive beings who are to satisfy men’s whims. The women are often after many plastic surgeries. One can see that they fake orgasm even if they do not really feel all the activities are pleasant.

In my opinion, the images of women and men in pornographic films are artificial. Men are always muscled machos, while women are helpless, huge-breasted chicks ready for everything. They are humiliated.

The respondents very clearly specified (although they were not asked to) what frequent use of pornography may lead to:

When watching such films, men may have huge expectations of women in the bedroom. They expect too much of women, sometimes not giving anything in return.

When watching such things, young people create and perceive a reality which does not exist – and then they are disappointed. Relationships break up since people have too high expectations towards their partners.

Youth watching pornographic films think that this is what sexual intercourse is like in real life, that sex always ends with orgasm, that the partner is always ready, that men and women always have model-like bodies. It is an entirely false image, one that misleads young people.

I shall finally cite four further quotations, talking about what the women’s role is reduced to (most often) in pornography:

In my opinion, the image of women in pornographic films/materials is created to show them as sexual servants or slaves. Women are designed to satisfy the phantasies and needs of the “master and commander” – in this case man/men in pornographic films. Men play the role of the rulers who may do whatever they want with their female slave who is supposed to succumb to them. Men emanate their power and masculinity, while women are shown as submissive or unable to take a decision, while simultaneously profligate.

Women are treated like objects with which one may do whatever one wants: also humiliate and use violence against them, for which they will even thank the person doing it.

Men are beneficiaries of the services women are to provide to them.

Women are shown as men’s toys. Even if a woman happen to play the dominating role, this results from the man’s convention. She is a toy obediently satisfying all man’s whims and having no possibility to object (“Is he pulling my hair? I shall bear it for some time”).

Students of pedagogy can see the dangers pornography involves and notice the possible dangerous consequences such as excessive sexual expectations towards a partner, breaking of relationships, or lack of respect for women/men.

The respondents clearly state that the outward appearance of the protagonists of pornography is artificial and untrue, and are aware that porn actresses often undergo plastic surgeries. What is more, they know that the sexual act presented in pornographic films does not necessarily look like one in real life – the “sex is staged, becoming very artificial”. The statements often included threads discussing the humiliation of women and treating them like objects, like toys, like men’s property. All these reflections testify to the maturity of the respondents.

It is a positive conclusion, all the more so in that the respondents will probably work with the youth of today and it will be their duty to direct young people in such a way as to be distanced to the world presented by pornography. This is because the problem of pornography shall not vanish – it will possibly grow, since the phenomenon “represents the secrets of private sexual desire in all their taboo-breaking, transgressive exoticism. It is, by definition, a violation of public morality and taste – an affront to community standards in the sphere of sexual representation, whatever they may be” (McNair 2002: 42). The attractiveness of pornography lies in its breaking of the taboo, and it will last as long as it is broken. My study clearly demonstrates that the respondents are distanced to pornographic materials, but they are a group of students displaying high awareness and general knowledge. However, it is highly probable that when conducted on other social groups, the study would show their lower level of awareness and that the results would be unsatisfactory.

This paper can be summarised by a thought by Gail Dines, the author of the book *Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality*. She said that “Porn is now so deeply embedded in our culture that it has become synonymous with sex to such



a point that to criticize porn is to get slapped with the label anti-sex" (Dines 2012: 36). It is hard not to agree with the above; it is terrifying to think that someone may consider the images and scenes seen in pornography as the equivalent or embodiment of real sexual life. We should talk as much as possible about the fact that pornography is not synonymous with sex, and that it presents it in a different light, that it shows the sexual act in an artificial way – without any emotions, feelings or beauty, which should normally be present during sex. It is worth discussing these issues with the youth, since young people are the most sensitive group and because of this they are most exposed to the "pornographic falsehood" of the human sexuality it presents.

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### Summary

#### *Pornography as an Imaginary World of Female and Male Sexuality*

The article raises the problem of pornography as a phenomenon which distorts thinking about human relationships and sexuality. The text is an attempt to show how unnatural is the image of women and men in pornographic images. In addition, it presents its own

research concerning how pedagogy students perceive the way that shows how men and women are portrayed in pornography. This article aims to prove that the pornographic materials promote an unreal image of both male and female sexuality, which is a big social and pedagogical problem, deforming young men's thinking about the important sphere of sexuality and the creation of partnerships with another person.

### Keywords

sexual act, women, men, pornography, sexuality

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